

1 Peter 1:18-25
(Isaiah 40:1-8, 27-31; John 1:1-18)
“A Word that Lives and Lasts”

Introduction

Our text opens with Peter once again recounting the transforming power of the gospel. He contends that, just as the church has no solid reason to believe the gospel apart from the resurrection of Christ, so too the world has no solid reason to believe the gospel apart from the rebirth of the Christian. In other words, the apostles who had denied Jesus and fled into the night when he was arrested were radically transformed within a few days of his death by this one thing: they had seen him alive, risen from the dead. So, too, the world has no reason to believe the astonishing claims of the New Testament about the new life given to those who receive the gospel unless it can also see this new life being lived out by those of us who profess faith in Jesus Christ, who claim to have been – as Peter puts it at the beginning of this letter – “born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1:3).

In concert with the rest of the Scripture, Peter makes it quite clear that the supreme mark of this new life is the love believers have for one another. No longer is our love to be limited to family or friends, to our community or nation or ethnic group. In Christ these distinctions no longer matter. Peter describes us in these amazing words: “Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again” (1:22-23).

Sadly, we are too often not known by our love for one another, but rather by our arguments and debates with one another. In fact, the closer we are theologically, the more vigorously those differences are often debated, and the harder the feelings between those who are called by God to “love one another earnestly from a pure heart.” How can this be? Why is it often those who study God’s Word the most carefully who get caught up in this sort of thing? I suspect that at the heart of the trouble is our tendency to read the Bible more for information, for the accumulation of facts, than for a transformed heart and mind and a living, dynamic, loving relationship with God and with one another. We study to show ourselves approved by the gatekeepers of our various theological systems rather than, as Paul urged Timothy, to show ourselves approved by God.

The aim of everything God is doing in and through us is love for him and for one another. This is the heart and essence of the righteousness of the kingdom. So those who would heed Jesus’ words to “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matthew 6:33) must realize that at its heart, this is a call to self-sacrificial love. Apart from that, as Paul wrote to the Corinthian Christians, all we say and do is just a lot of noise (1 Corinthians 13:1). *The question is this: Granted that the Holy Spirit alone can plant this new life of resurrection power within us, how does God’s Spirit do that, and how is that new life to be maintained? The answer is found in the verses we have read this morning: It is “through the living and abiding word of God” (1:23).*

Body

1. It is through the living and abiding Word of God that we are born again.

Peter wants us to understand the imperishable nature and power of God's Word. In a world that is passing away, in the midst of lives that we know are hastening toward death, we have been born again through something that is imperishable. Sometimes we preachers and teachers wonder why we should keep on teaching and preaching the gospel to people who have heard us for years and seem unmoved by the message. Or as parents, we wonder why we should trouble our children with Bible teaching on top of all else they have to do. Or we wonder whether it is worth our time to study the Bible with a group of men or women who are trying to work their way through a difficult portion of the Scripture.

Here is first reason, then, that we should press on: It is "through the living and abiding word of God" that God's Spirit places the imperishable seed of new life in the hearts of those who are born again. "Since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God" (1:23). We are given new life through the Word of God. If our churches are built on exciting programs and marketing techniques, we may attract a lot of people and have an appearance of spiritual life, but it is only "the good news that was preached to you" that is able to place the imperishable seed of God within a human soul, and bring a sinner from spiritual death to eternal life.

2. It is through the living and abiding Word of God that we purify our souls.

We are not only born again through the Word of God, but we are increasingly conformed to the image of Christ through the Word of God. Note the first verse of our text: "Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart" (1:22). How are we to purify ourselves? Haven't we tried that and failed over and over again? We purify ourselves by living increasingly in conformity to the truth, which is revealed to us through the Word of God. In his prayer the night of his betrayal, a prayer that was heard by Simon Peter, the author of our text, Jesus prayed these words: "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17).

These words harken back to the words of the Psalmist, "How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word ... I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you" (Psalm 119:9,11). God's Word has life-giving power when we meditate it into our heart and unleash it to begin eating up the weeds of envy, pride, lust, anger, and all else that is contrary to God's will. Too often we approach the Word as if it were merely the object of our study. It is rather the lens through which we are to see and understand everything else. It sets the terms and establishes the parameters of our understanding, willing and doing.

3. It is through the living and abiding Word of God that we endure to the end.

It is God's Word that God's Spirit uses to keep us living and abiding unto the day of the Lord. While our bodies will grow old and die, our souls are kept by God's Word. Jesus said, "If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples" (John 15:7-8).

So Peter drives this point home with a quote from Isaiah 40. The prophet is called to comfort God's people and to prepare the way of the Lord. The prophet asks, "What shall I say? How shall I bring comfort to the people? How shall I prepare the way of the Lord?" And the answer comes, "Say this: All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever" This tremendous passage ends with the familiar words, "they who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint."

In a world that is passing away, in a culture that changes its values as quickly as people change clothing, in a climate where truth is denied and despised, God's Word is unchanged and unchanging. "Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever" (Psalm 125:1). You simply cannot trust in the Lord without trusting his Word. It is through the living and abiding Word of God that we are enabled to finish well.

Conclusion

Peter concludes our text with these words: "And this word is the good news [or "gospel"] that was preached to you" (1:25). The heart and essence of God's Word is the gospel, and the gospel is not merely a doctrine of how we are saved, such as the doctrine of regeneration or the doctrine of justification. The gospel is, rather, this great declaration: "Jesus Christ is Lord!" It is those who receive that tremendous, life-transforming truth, not as a datum to be filed away or an aspect of reality to be dealt with, but rather as the single defining truth against which every other claim, passion, desire and dream must be tested – in other words, it is those who receive him gladly as Lord – who have the promise of eternal life through the living and abiding Word of God.

God's Spirit is able to take God's Word and use it to build you up into the person God created you to be. With God's Word abiding in you and shaping your view of life, transforming your hopes and desires, and shaping your heart affections, you will have the confidence, the living hope of which we have been reading and studying. You will have the power to look at a world that is passing away and say with growing gratitude and wonder, "All flesh is grass and all its glory like the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever" (1:24-25).

© John M. Wood, all rights reserved