

THE FIRST LETTER OF PETER - PART III

CHRISTIANS AS THE FAMILY AND TEMPLE OF GOD

I. The letter then turns to analogy of the family of God and the moral implications drawn from it.

A. The letter says that, if we call God our Father, we should act as His loyal sons.

1. The idea of God as Father indicates He will be demanding and judge impartially. A poor father may tolerate poor behavior and habits, or may be lax at one time and not another. But, as Jewish literature so often emphasized, a good father is demanding to his children that they may be good and does not change his requirements according to mood. See Prov. 13:24; Sir. 30:1; Heb. 12:7-9. In the Old Testament, when God is invoked as Father, it comes with a warning that transgressions will be punished to be sure that the people remain as children, rather than be captured by the world. See, e.g., Duet. 32:5-6; 2 Sam. 7:14; Is. 63:8-10; Mal. 2:10-17.

2. The letter emphasizes again that we are journeying and therefore, should not act in a manner that belongs to the world, as though the world were our destiny.

B. The letter then emphasizes the importance and cost of being a son of God by emphasizing that we were purchased by the blood of Christ.

1. In the ancient Roman world, one could ransom a slave by purchasing him with gold or silver. Sometimes, a family would even ransom a person to adopt him, and such a ransomed slave would be worse than an ingrate if he did not act in a reverent fashion towards his adoptive parents.

2. All the more, the letter emphasizes, we were ransomed from slavery to sin by something vastly greater than gold or silver, the blood of Christ, compared to which even gold and silver are ephemeral.

3. The letter describes Jesus as the pure spotless lamb, recalling the Lamb of the Passover meal, whose blood would spare the Israelites from death, and the eating of which would mark them as God's Chosen People. See Ex. 12:1-28. St. John the Baptist introduced Christ as the Lamb of God, and the Book of Revelation elaborates on this theme. See John

1:36; Rev. 5:6-14. Isaiah had long ago said that the people sold themselves for nothing (for sin is in the end a choice of nothingness compared to God), but would be redeemed without money. See Is. 52:3. Here, however, the letter indicates that, far from meaning that the redemption would be without cost, the prophecy is fulfilled by a redemption with a cost beyond all wealth. This knowledge should give us a sense of great responsibility. See 1 Cor. 6:20.

C. The letter again refers to the planning that went into our salvation, for Christ was predestined before the foundation of the world, for even before the fall God has planned His response.

1. But the world did not know of God's love until the Son came to earth, and thus He was not revealed (perhaps not even in full to the angels) until this, "the end of times."
2. The letter also says that the readers did not really know God except through Jesus. We could have some sense of God without Jesus, but not really know Him. Even the ancient Jews received Revelation only in preparation for Jesus. Faith thus is ever based upon Christ.
3. And, therefore, it is in Christ, that we really hope in God. The pagans never really hoped that their gods could save from sin, and if they believed in an Almighty God, as Aristotle did, they would not put any hope in Him for they would not believe that He could really care about us. It is only in Christ, and to a lesser degree, in the revelation that led up to him, that we understand what God can do for us. Such is a common theme of the letters of Paul that this letter of Peter picks up on. See, e.g., Rom. 3:1-26; Gal. 3:10-22; Eph. 1:3-14.

D. Having described faith and hope, the letter now turns to love and the truth.

1. The letter described the need for obedience to the truth that leads to purity in the soul, which in turn enables one to have true love from the heart for others.
 - Once again, there is no conflict between love and truth, except that the latter is the flowering of the former. Certainly, for one who has this love, the truth is not a burden, but is still obeyed.
 - The truth purifies the heart of evil desires and thus enables it to see the truth of other people and thus to be free. See John 1:17, 8:32. Jeremiah and Ezekiel had prophesied long ago of a new heart based upon the covenants now

written in the people's hearts, and the letter of Peter says that this prophesy has now been fulfilled. See Jer. 31:31-37; Ez. 26:16-38.

2. The letter picks up on the image of Jeremiah that is connected to the new covenant, the image of a new seed being planted that would lead to justice. See Jer. 31:27-30. Jesus had described the word of God as a seed in the ground, see Matt. 13:1-9, and now the letter applies this notion to the Christian life, saying that we have been born again from God.

3. The letter contrasts that imperishable seed, the permanent household built on the word of God with the perishable human institutions that wilt and die. The quote is from Isaiah that contrasts the glorious promise of a new land and kingdom with the temporality of earthly promises. See Is. 40:1-11. This analogy that one without the word of God is like grass that comes and goes is a common one in the Old Testament, see Job. 14:2; Ps. 37:2; Sir. 14:18; see also James 1:10. This letter adds to this advice the positive aspect that the field of our souls is, if we are willing, sown with imperishable seed. And this land is the inheritance of the children of God.

II. The letter then turns to the analogy of a living temple.

A. The first line connects the analogy of a family by referring to the new Christians as newborn infants longing for spiritual milk (more literally "milk of the word"), which implies the gifts of Mother Church, that they may grow into adults. As with Jesus' image of accepting the kingdom as children, see Matt. 18:3-4, his image is a positive one, in contrast to a similar image in Hebrews. See Heb. 5:11-14. But the idea is that one should be childlike in avoiding experience of sin, or being too involved with the world, but also experienced as maturing Christians in theological understanding. Jesus balances the two images by saying that one should be as innocent as a dove, but wise as a serpent. Matt. 10:16.

- The letter refers to Psalm 34, which calls for the faithful to taste the goodness of the Lord. As that Psalm does, the letter then calls upon the reader to avoid evil, especially evil of the tongue, and to trust the guidance of God throughout all troubles, rather than envy or slander those who seem to have no difficulties.

B. The letter then turns in full to the image of the living temple.

1. The idea is in part that rock buildings are considered the most permanent, but they are not alive. By contrast, things that are alive on earth are subject to decay. There is a combined image here of a permanence greater than stone, with a life

greater than earth can give. There is a similar combination of the images of family and temple in Ephesians, the Pauline letter that is especially on the subject of the Church. See Eph. 2:19-22.

2. The letter also taps into the image of the Temple in Jerusalem, which presumably was still standing when the letter was written.

- Even among the Gentiles, the Temple was known and widely admired. It was the resting place of God's glory on earth and the place to which all peoples were to come. See Is. 56:6-8; see also Ez. 47.

- The letter is indicating that the people of God are that new and glorious temple, meant to sanctify the world through their sacrifices as a holy priesthood. The Church maintains that there is a priesthood of all believers, as well as an ordained priesthood. See Catechism 1141-42, 1546-47; Vatican II Council, Lumen Gentium 10.

3. Jesus is of course the central living stone, the cornerstone upon which all else is built. He gives life and structure to the rest of the building. There is the image of life coming from the cornerstone to the entire building.

4. The image of Christ as the cornerstone springs from Isaiah's prophesy that he will level Judah, that He may plant again the field of God. See Is. 28:14-29. Here, the letter is emphasizing the need to receive life from Christ, who gives us that seed for the sowing.

5. As Jesus Himself and later St. Peter did, the letter also picks up on the image from Psalm 118 that this cornerstone will be rejected by men but central to God. See Ps. 118:2; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11. Psalm 118 is a Psalm celebrating deliverance from seemingly overwhelming evil through the power of God, and Jesus and Peter cited it in the context of persecution by enemies, in Jesus' case in the days before His Crucifixion, and in Peter's case in the midst of the beginnings of the persecutions. The implication is that Christians can in turn expect the opposition of the world, for the world to besiege this new Temple. But the life of the cornerstone will defend it against all things. See, e.g., Zech. 14:1-5.

6. The letter then quotes the prophesy of Isaiah regarding a stone that will be a stumbling block. The prophesy is in the context of a warning that the kingdom of Judah should not enter into alliances with pagan powers, in that case Egypt, but should rely on the Lord alone. See Is. 8:11-15. That prophesy is followed by the prophesy of the great King of Peace, the Wonder Counselor, God-Hero, Father Forever, and Prince of Peace. See Is. 8:23-9:6. St. Paul likewise cited this

prophecy in the context of emphasizing the need for faith in Christ. See Rom. 9:33. Here there is a calling to put full faith in Christ and thus offer all struggles through Him as a sacrifice.

C. The letter then sums up this calling by describing the dignity that the people of God have received.

1. It begins by describing the people as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people."

- The first title, a chosen race, seems to come from Isaiah's prophecy of a glorious kingdom God is preparing in which the desert will bloom and even the wild animals will again serve God's people. See Is. 43:19-21. Yet there is a warning in that prophecy that the people did not recognize God's providence.

- The next title "a royal priesthood" comes from Israel's consecration at Mount Sinai and indicates that the aspects of kingdom and priestly service, united in a sense in Kings David and Solomon in their dedication to the Ark and the Temple, are now given even more so to the people of God. See Ex. 9:6; 2 Sam. 6:11-23; 1 Kings 8; Ps. 110. Again, the priesthood of all believers is to be distinguished from the ordained priesthood. See, e.g., Is. 66:21.

- The third title "a holy nation" comes from the initial dedication of Israel as God's nation, separate from other nations, at the Exodus and again as she was to enter the Promised Land. See Ex. 19:6; Duet. 7:5-11. The emphasis is on how God and He alone will make them a great and holy nation.

- The fourth title "God's own people" (or more literally "a people of possession") comes also from the prophecy of Isaiah mentioned above as well as from the prophecy of Malachi regarding the coming day of the Lord and the establishment of a new and glorious people. See Is. 43:21; Mal. 3:17-21.

2. The letter then gives the goal of the glorious calling, to proclaim the deeds of God who brings us from darkness into His own light. Again the letter cross-references the prophecies of Isaiah mentioned above regarding trust in the Lord and the coming of Immanuel who will bring the people from darkness into light. See Is. 8:23, 43:21. It is an image Jesus used in the Sermon on the Mount, calling Christians to be a light to the world. See Matt. 5:14-16.

3. The chapter then concludes by saying that the prophecy of Hosea, who spoke of the people of God as the spouse of God, then unfaithful, but to be espoused again, is now fulfilled. See Hos. 1:6-9, 2:25. The idea is that the promises to the

people of Israel are now being fulfilled in the Christian community.