

A Royal Priesthood



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Pet. 2:1–3; Heb. 4:12; 1 Pet. 2:4–8; Isa. 28:16; Exod. 19:3–6; 1 Pet. 2:5, 9, 10.*

Memory Text: “You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (*1 Pet. 2:9, NKJV*).

Immersed as he is in Jewish culture, religion, and history, Peter refers to the Christians he is writing to as a “holy nation, God’s own people.” By doing so, he is taking covenant language that the Old Testament uses to refer to ancient Israel, applying it here to the New Testament church.

And no wonder: Gentile believers in Jesus have been grafted into God’s covenant people. They are now partakers of the covenant promises, as well. “If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not consider yourself to be superior to those other branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you” (*Rom. 11:17, 18, NIV*).

In the passages for this week, Peter points his readers to the sacred responsibility and high calling that they have as God’s covenant people, those who (using Paul’s language) have been grafted into the olive tree. And among those responsibilities is the same as what ancient Israel had—proclaiming the great truth of the salvation offered in the Lord.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 15.

Living as a Christian

First Peter 2:1 begins with “therefore,” meaning that what follows results from what came before. First Peter 1, we saw, was a *tour de force* in regard to what Christ has done for us and how we should respond to what He has done for us. In the next chapter, Peter picks up this theme and takes it further.

Read 1 Peter 2:1–3. What is Peter telling us about how we should live?

Peter uses two separate images to show that Christians have a double duty. One is negative, in that some things are discarded; the other is a positive, in that we should seek to do something.

In his first image, Peter urges Christians to rid themselves of malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking (*1 Pet. 2:1, NKJV*). In doing this, Christians will conduct themselves differently from the way that many of those around them do. Because they have discarded malice, they will not desire to harm others but, instead, will seek their good. Because Christians have discarded insincerity, they will not act to deceive others but will be straightforward and honest. Christians will not envy those who have more than they do. They will be content with their lives and flourish where Providence has placed them. Nor will they make statements that deliberately damage another’s reputation.

The second image that Peter uses—that of a baby hungry for milk (*1 Pet. 2:2*)—provides the positive side of his instruction. Christian life is not merely a matter of giving up bad things. Such a life would be empty. No, it is a matter of seeking spiritual nourishment but with the same intensity that a hungry baby cries out for milk. He points readers to the source of that spiritual nourishment (*see also Heb. 4:12, Matt. 22:29, 2 Tim. 3:15–17*), the Word of God, the Bible. It is in the Word of God that we can grow spiritually and morally, because in it we have the fullest revelation possible, at least to us, of Jesus Christ. And in Jesus we have the greatest representation of the character and nature of the Holy God we are to love and serve.

How are these two ideas related to each other: that is, why would seeking spiritual nourishment from the Word help us lay aside the bad actions and attitudes that Peter is warning us about?

The Living Stone

Read 1 Peter 2:4–8 (see also Isa. 28:16; Ps. 118:22; Isa. 8:14, 15). What crucial truth is Peter referring to here? What is he saying to us about how we should act in response to Jesus?

After telling his readers to seek spiritual nourishment, Peter immediately directs their attention to Jesus Christ, the Living Stone, most likely a reference to the Jerusalem temple. In 1 Peter 2:4–8, he cites three Old Testament passages that highlight the significance of cornerstones, which represent the role of Jesus in His church. Peter is not alone in linking these verses to Jesus. Jesus Himself uses Psalm 118:22 at the conclusion of one of His parables (*Matt. 21:42*). Peter does likewise in Acts 4:11 in his speech to the Jewish leadership. And Paul uses Isaiah 28:16 in Romans 9:33.

Peter's point is that even though Jesus was rejected and crucified, He was chosen by God to become the cornerstone of God's spiritual house. Christians, then, are living stones that are built into this spiritual house. By using the terminology of the cornerstone and building blocks, Peter is presenting an image of the church. The church is founded upon Jesus but is made up of those who follow Him.

Notice that becoming a Christian means that you become part of a Christian community, or local church. Just as a brick is to be built into a larger structure, so also Christians are not called to be followers of Jesus in isolation from others. A Christian who does not worship and work with other Christians to further the kingdom of God is a contradiction in terms. Christians are baptized into Christ, and by being baptized into Christ, they are baptized into His church.

Peter also talks about the function of the church. It is to form a "holy priesthood" (*1 Pet. 2:5*) that offers "spiritual sacrifices." In the Hebrew Bible, the priests mediate between God and His people. The words of Peter and others in the New Testament often use the language of temple and priesthood to present the church as the living temple of God and His people as its priests. He is pointing to the Old Testament system of worship in order to reveal truths about how Christians should live and act today.

Read 1 Peter 2:5 again. What does it mean to "offer up spiritual sacrifices"? How do Christians, as part of a community at worship, do that?

God's Covenant People

Peter is writing very much from an Old Testament perspective. And central to this perspective is the idea of covenant, a theme so central to Jewish and Christian theology.

What is the covenant?

Covenant (Hebrew, *berit*) is a word that describes a treaty or formal agreement between two parties. It could be made between two individuals (for example, Laban and Jacob in Genesis 31:44) or between two kings (for example, Solomon and Hiram in 1 Kings 5:12, where *berit* is translated as “league” in the KJV and “treaty” in the NRSV). It could also be made between a king and his people, such as David and the elders of Israel (2 Sam. 5:3).

Prominent among these themes is the special covenant relationship that exists between God and His chosen people, the descendants of Abraham.

Read Genesis 17:1–4, Exodus 2:24, Exodus 24:3–8. What do these texts tell us about the covenant God made with Israel?

The first book of the Bible, Genesis, recounts how God made a covenant with Abraham (*Gen. 15:9–21, 17:1–26*). God “remembered” this covenant when He rescued His people from oppression in Egypt (*Exod. 2:24*). God renewed it at the time of Moses, when He gave the Ten Commandments and other laws to the children of Israel (*Exod. 19:1–24:8; especially Exod. 24:3–8*).

But the covenant promises were not unconditional. “The Lord covenanted that if they were faithful in the observance of His requirements, He would bless them in all their increase and in all the work of their hands.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 2, p. 574. Indeed, the prophets repeatedly warned Israel of the dangers of disobedience to God’s law, often using language reminiscent of the covenant. It has been argued that with the possible exception of the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation, many prophecies in the Bible are conditional. That’s how central the idea of obedience is in regard to the covenant promises. The covenantal prophecies of blessing were conditional on obedience to God’s law, and prophecies of doom applied only to the disobedient.

What does it mean to you to be in a covenant relationship with God? What obligations does this covenant relationship place on you?

A Royal Priesthood

In the book of Exodus, chapter 19, the Lord said to Moses: “ ‘Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation’ ” (*Exod. 19:3–6, NKJV*).

Here’s the gospel message, revealed millennia before the Cross: God redeems His people, saving them from sin and the bondage of sin, and then He commands them to love and obey Him as a special covenant people before Him and before the world.

Read 1 Peter 2:5, 9, 10 and Exodus 19:6. What does Peter mean when he calls Christians a “royal priesthood” and “a holy nation” (1 Pet. 2:9, NKJV)? What does this language say to us as Seventh-day Adventist Christians about our obligations?

Spiritual house, chosen generation, royal priesthood, and God’s own people are all terms of honor that in the Bible describe the special relationship that God had with the descendants of Abraham. Now, in the context of the New Testament, in the context of Jesus and the Cross, Peter is using the same covenant language and applying it to members of the church. The covenant promises made to Israel have now been widened to include not just the Jews who believe in Jesus but Gentile believers, as well. Yes, through Jesus, Gentiles, too, can claim to be children of Abraham. “And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (*Gal. 3:29, NKJV*). Through Christ, anyone, regardless of birth, can become part of this “royal priesthood.”

A holy nation? A royal priesthood? Applied to ourselves, what should terms like this mean in regard to the kind of lives we live, both as individuals and as a community? How can we better live up to this high calling?

Proclaiming the Praises

The parallels with the Old Testament church didn't end with just salvation and being called out and chosen by God. The question is, *Called out and chosen for what?* Peter quickly gives the answer.

Peter points out that this special relationship is for a purpose. Christians are to “proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9, *ESV*). This is what ancient Israel was to do. God called them to be witnesses of Him to the world. God's purpose was to bless the whole world through ancient Israel, His covenant people.

Read the following texts. What's the one point that they all have in common? *Deut. 4:6; 26:18, 19; Isa. 60:1–3; Zech. 8:23.*

Ancient Israel, as the covenant people, had a mission to reach the world with the gospel, the salvation offered by the Lord. Christians have the same divine mission. They are called to share with others their experience and knowledge of God and what He has done for the world through Christ.

Read 1 Peter 2:10. Why is this text so central to the whole mission and purpose of Christians?

The world is steeped in sin, in death, in impending doom. But Jesus gave His life to save everyone from this destruction. As with Israel of old, the terms of honor are also terms of responsibility. Christians have an extraordinarily high status: that of the people of God. But this brings the responsibility to invite others to share in that high status. As 1 Peter 2:10 states, Christians now form their own people. They once were not a people but have now received mercy to become a *holy* people (see *Hosea 1, 2*). In the Bible, the word *holy* usually has the meaning of set aside for the purpose of worship. Therefore, as a “holy” nation, Christians are to be separated from the world, a distinction seen in the kind of lives that they live. They are also to be like a fire on a cold night, which will draw others to its warmth. Christians are tasked with the responsibility of sharing with others the glorious salvation of which they have partaken.

Further Thought: “The church is very precious in God’s sight. He values it, not for its external advantages, but for the sincere piety which distinguishes it from the world. He estimates it according to the growth of the members in the knowledge of Christ, according to their progress in spiritual experience.

“Christ hungers to receive from His vineyard the fruit of holiness and unselfishness. He looks for the principles of love and goodness. Not all the beauty of art can bear comparison with the beauty of temper and character to be revealed in those who are Christ’s representatives. It is the atmosphere of grace which surrounds the soul of the believer, the Holy Spirit working upon mind and heart, that makes him a savor of life unto life, and enables God to bless his work.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 298.

Discussion Questions:

1 What is it like to be called out of darkness into “His marvelous light” (*NKJV*)? What does that mean? If you were to explain this idea to someone who didn’t believe in Jesus, what would you say? What is the darkness? What is the light? And what is the difference between the two in the context of what Peter is talking about?

2 “ ‘Surely I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should act according to them in the land which you go to possess. Therefore be careful to observe them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.” For what great nation is there that has God so near to it, as the LORD our God is to us, for whatever reason we may call upon Him? And what great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day?’ ” (*Deut. 4:5–8, NKJV*). In what ways do these words apply to us as Seventh-day Adventists and what we have been called by God to do because of all that we have been given?

3 Read 1 Peter 2:3. What does Peter mean when he says, “If indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious” (*NKJV*)? How have you “tasted” of His grace?

4 Look around at your local church. What is it about your church, if anything, that makes it and you who are members of it appealing to those who know nothing about Seventh-day Adventists or about what we believe?

The Canceled Funeral—Part 3

I was still sleeping when a knock awakened me at dawn. “Pastor, come. She’s dead again!” One-Ojo’s mother cried. In disbelief, I opened the door and asked what had happened.

“While we slept, her father came home. Maybe he put the herbs on her,” she said. Someone wanted One-Ojo to die. Was it the father? Perhaps it was her mother, too. Should I go back and pray again? Would God be honored? One-Ojo’s mother knelt before me and begged me to come and pray for her daughter. I went.

Once more I prayed for the girl, and she awoke again. This time I told her mother to take One-Ojo away from the village. Her mother agreed, and One-Ojo’s brother took her to relatives in another village.

One-Ojo returned home several months later, strong and healthy. She continued her Bible studies and was baptized along with nine other new believers. On her baptismal day, One-Ojo took the name Blessing to signify her new life. Her presence in the village is a testimony to God’s power to save, even from death. Today 70 believers worship in a simple shelter near One-Ojo’s home in central Nigeria.

The story of One-Ojo spread throughout central Nigeria and opened doors to share God’s love with people in neighboring villages. Many people have come to know Jesus as their friend and Savior because of God’s power in the life of One-Ojo.

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