

Sermon - The Experiences of Peter

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Reading: Acts 12

What dramatic events we read about in the Acts of the Apostles!

It must have been a very exciting time after all the fearful events which had taken place a few weeks beforehand; the apostles were right out there preaching the gospel and getting the response they were getting, challenging the authorities, and even having to face the case of Peter being arrested, in prison, and praying fervently about that. The ecclesia was really buzzing with life and energy and I guess while it might have been a little bit scary for some at that time it was nevertheless a very exhilarating time.

Would that the circumstances in which we find ourselves trying to witness were quite so exhilarating because instead of getting opposition and an opportunity to really try and be challenged, more often than not we are having to cope with lack of interest or apathy, or a lack of response all together, but we shouldn't give up for we need to try and capture that enthusiasm, that fervour which we see here in the first century church.

Now it's quite impressive to me the way in which Peter has been transformed in all this as an entirely different kind of a person, or to put it another way, someone who has developed enormously over these few weeks, and in a sense represents the kind of development that needs to take place in us. We remember that he was earlier on a very faithful and loving disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ, the one who found it not easy as did most of the disciples to really grasp what was going on or how it was that Jesus was not going to quite conform to the expectation they had of what the Messiah all about.

If we go to Luke Ch 9, we have the record here of the apostle Peter being the one who recognised in the very character and in the work of the Lord Jesus Christ, the one who was the Christ, ch 9 v 20, "Peter answering said you are the Christ of God", other versions say the Son of the Living God. So he recognised here was indeed the Messiah. Although it's not recorded here, we know from elsewhere how Peter when Jesus spoke about his forthcoming death upon the cross in Jerusalem the Son of man must suffer and die, Peter couldn't get hold of that at all and we have elsewhere the instance of him being put behind Jesus as a satan (adversary).

Then you remember how Jesus then speaks about seeing the kingdom of God a kind of vision which we understand is what we understand the transfiguration was all about, and that's recorded here for us in the gospel of Luke. Peter with John and James went up into the mountain with Jesus and this amazing experience took place. In v31 it says that Moses and Elijah who appeared with Jesus in glory spoke of his decease, which he should accomplish at Jerusalem. Now the word decease there is the word "exodus", and of course exodus immediately throws our minds back to the events at the beginning of the book that is called the book of Exodus, the time when the

children of Israel's cry went up to God because of the bondage they were experiencing, a time when Moses was challenging the regime in Egypt, finally when Pharaoh let them go after they had celebrated the Passover, a time when they had fled across the Red Sea and entered into a covenant relationship with God at Mt. Sinai. A time when they commenced their wilderness journey to the promised land. So we can see that this exodus is about the very process of salvation, about moving from one situation where we are dead in trespasses and sins, wherein the bondage of Egypt with all its darkness to another situation where we are on a journey, a journey the destination for which is the inheritance of God that He has in store for us.

While we may know that in our heads and understand in our heads, somehow it's got to be something that becomes internalised, something that we actually grasp and can live within ourselves. I think that's a process Peter went through, not only realising as a result of encountering the risen Lord and being spoken to in a very personal way by the Lord Jesus Christ, but also worked it out in his life. There's a nice verse in Luke 22 v 31. and you remember this in the context of the disciples again not getting it right and thinking about who was going to be chief in the kingdom and Jesus gives them a rebuke at the same time as giving them reassurance about their future.

"Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers."
(Luke 22:31-32)

Now it's quite an interesting, intriguing thought that Jesus could pray for Peter that his faith would not fail, at the same time as knowing (as he subsequently tells in the verses later here) that his faith is going to fail, telling Peter "Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice", and it demonstrates in a sense, something that is not easy for us, that God is on our side even in our struggles, that God sometimes must know that we are going to fail, but it's not his desire that we should fail but he is going to use that failure as something that can be turned about into something stronger. So Jesus in praying for Peter was not praying insincerely, he was praying because he wanted the best for Peter.

In a way our prayers have to be like that, we can pray for people and have our ideas as to what is the appropriate solution, in the end we have to think what is the best outcome, what is going to work for the best, what's the end of our prayer, the end of our prayer has got to be this person will ultimately be saved and will be able to attain to the Kingdom of God. So I think what Jesus was praying for Peter was that he would actually, through the experiences to follow, be able to pick himself up and "when thou art converted, when thou art turned again, establish thy brethren", so in the very process he was going to learn and that learning was going to put him in a better position to be a better witness. We can learn from our own mistakes, not saying that we should deliberately make mistakes in order to learn from them but we do make mistakes, we say things, we do things that we regret and those around us disappoint us from time to time. We should all be trying to use those situations as learning experiences and try to make the word of God effective in our daily lives.

When we come to Acts 12, remember how Peter had to go through a pretty vivid learning experience here, because having killed James the brother of John with the sword, Herod now seeing that he is gaining a few points with the Jews proceeds to take Peter also and so the sword is at work here. Remember Peter had been told by Jesus when he was arrested to put the sword away, “the person who lives by the sword will perish by the sword”, said Jesus and I wonder if Peter in seeing this use of the sword which would have been something which would have been second nature to his thinking to the way you did things, whether he could see actually this man Herod was going to perish in the process of using the sword, that he could actually feel a certain security that this was not the way, not God’s way, and that whatever was going to happen to Peter, then it was not for him to deal with that situation for God would deal with it in his good time.

It is interesting that it is actually around the Passover time, v4 tells us he was delivered to 4 quarternions of soldiers to keep him, intending after Easter (only occurrence of “Easter” in KJV, revised version says Passover) to bring him forth to the people. This is a time when Peter would have been thinking about the Passover which was a key event in the Exodus and how amazingly, while the church is praying to God for him and the same evening Herod (v6) says he would have brought him forth, Peter is sound asleep between the soldiers bound with two chains. That’s a remarkable thing that he was fast asleep, now that speaks to us of a mind of a man who is resting secure in the purpose of God, that there somehow is understanding that whatever is happening around him, whatever the future holds, actually there is nothing he can do about it, it’s in God’s hands and so he rests himself and is able to fall asleep whereas the rest would have been wide awake with anxiety and frantic considerations as to what is going to happen. Then of course the angel of the Lord comes upon him and his chains fell from off his hands and he is told to go and bind on his sandals.

Think here of the Exodus, a time when people had to be ready to go and had to be shod appropriately to get out of Egypt, and so Peter is able to move out and it’s as though the waters part, the very things that would normally be obstructing him just fall apart as he girds himself. “Cast thy garment about thee” the angels says and out he goes and various doors open up and they pass on through out into the street and Peter is able to say with surety that the Lord has sent his angel and delivered him out of the hand of Herod – so he knows for sure that the angel of the Lord encamps around those that hear Him.

What he is experiencing is something of what the Exodus is all about and ask yourselves whether we have that experience, or whether we try in our lives to make the things that we know about actually effective in our daily living.

If we think about again what the Exodus is all about and just take some key elements.

The feast of unleavened bread, of course this feast is about getting rid of the things that are associated with wickedness and so we have to be people who are looking to try and remove out of our experience those things we know are contrary to God’s word.

It's also about the Passover, about the sharing of a meal, about the shedding of blood of that Passover Lamb, and the placing of that blood on the lintels of our homes, so it's that sacrificial fellowship, something that isn't simply taking place here in our association of the emblems of Christ that speak to us of the death and resurrection of the Passover Lamb par excellence, but is it something that is part of daily existence in our homes and families, where we are actually ourselves living sacrifices where we see ourselves as being associated with that redemptive work of God and the fellowship that comes from it with our brothers and sisters in Christ?

Then there's the having our feet shod appropriately and our loins girded, because where people who have got to be prepared to be in haste, people who are busy, people who are ready to go, people who are not clinging to the things of this life, but ready to move out have associated with the purpose of God and walk with Him along the way.

We are people who for being born again, the waters of the Red Sea are a link to baptism, and so we are baptised in the same way into the Lord Jesus. It's not just simply an event that took place at one time in our lives, it's surely something to do in the way we are putting behind us the man of the flesh and instead now living the life of the spirit, we are being born again, something to do with the washing of the conscience. The answer of a good conscience is to do with our committal, the values that are associated with the resurrected Christ.

Then there was the covenant at Mt. Sinai, which was to do with people who said "all the Lord said, we will do" and God saying "I will bless you and make you a holy people". Are you committed and willing to associate your lives, your walk with the Lord's ways?

Then there is the journey of pilgrims and strangers going through the wilderness with all its difficulties and challenges, the difficulties of those we are travelling with, difficulties of finding the way, deprivation where it's not always as we would like it to be in terms of comfort and ease. So are we actually thinking of ourselves as on a journey and making our circumstances, not about building a permanent surround, but using those circumstances as opportunities along the way.

Finally are we sure of our destination? Are we seeking first the kingdom of God, is it something that is ahead of us, something that is our prime objective, so that we are prepared to cope with whatever life brings now, because we are looking forward to that time when we shall enter into the rest that God has provided.

All the elements are very much there which became part of the experiences of Peter. Moving on to his epistles, if we go to 1 Peter 1 we can see how it's become so much a part of his experiences that as he talks about life in Christ those elements are built into his thinking. If we think for example about the purification, the removal of the leaven that was associated with that time then in 1 Pe 1 the apostle talks about the getting rid of the things to do with corruption on v22 "you have purified your souls in obeying the truth...", so there is a purification process that comes about as a result of obeying the truth, not simply obeying the truth in a sense of a set of doctrines, that's part of it, but those doctrines themselves are doctrines which are about recognising the imperfection of our

mortal state and our need to try to work into our way of living those things associated with the perfection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Then if we think about the Passover Lamb, in v2 there is a reference to the sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ, and specifically in v19 he talks about the way in which we've been redeemed with the precious blood of Christ as of the lamb without blemish and without spot. There we have the association with the Passover Lamb. We know that association brings with it the fellowship that was part of the fellowship of the Passover meal, it wasn't eaten in isolation, but with the family and neighbours as well, you'd have others around to share that meal and you couldn't eat it all on your own. We're associated together in a fellowship as a result of this very process. Again, v13 talks about girded up the loins of your mind, which was part of the process.

Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; As obedient children, not fashioning yourselves according to the former lusts in your ignorance: But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation;
(1 Peter 1:13-15)

So it's rather like those words at the beginning of Romans Ch 12, which talks about being a living sacrifice where the apostle Paul says to be transformed, not conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewal of our minds. It's the same theme that by inspiration Peter is putting forward here, the idea that we're not to be part of the world of Egypt, but we're actually getting out of that world as fast as we can in order that we might be associated with God's purpose and be led by him on that wilderness journey. Then there is the being born again of water and the spirit and so again further on in Ch 1 the apostle Peter speaks about (v23) "Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth forever."

Peter quotes from Isaiah 40, and the word of God which is preached is the very heart of this being born again process. It's not some kind of magical operation of the Holy Spirit, it's to do with the seed of God's word which grows in a good and honest heart and brings forth fruit in His glory. Is that happening to us? Is that seed, is that renewal, is that going to the Red Sea, the waters of baptism, that being born again, is it something that is not just an event, but a process that continues day by day as we try to make that word of God effective in our lives.

Then there was the entering into the covenant relationship with God at Sinai, in 1 Peter 2, the apostle says that we are a holy priest to offer up spiritual sacrifices and in v9 he says you are a "chosen generation of royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people for God's own possession which you may show forth the praises of Him who has called you out of darkness into his marvellous light." The praise of course is the word Judah, which means "praised", so he is saying is saying, you are Jews in the truest sense, people who should be praising God in the quality of your lives. We see what a huge journey has taken place in the thinking of Peter, from one time thinking of the messiah-ship of Jesus, about rescuing them from the Romans and the Jews, becoming the ones who would be in positions of privilege and released from all kind of difficult circumstances to rule the world, to instead seeing now that this is about a change in one's life, what the Lord Jesus Christ was demonstrating through his sacrificial work, the repudiation of sin, the dealing with sin,

there could be no kingdom of God till that had been accomplished and so to be a royal priest and an holy nation brings obligations, brings responsibility, brings with that privilege and the responsibility to be responsive to the word of God.

Then similarly Peter has got hold of the idea of a being a stranger and a pilgrim.

Dearly beloved, I beseech *you* as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul; Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by *your* good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation.
(1 Peter 2:11-12)

Well, he'd seen that hadn't he? And he'd seen how even when he was thrown into prison he resigned himself to the Word of God. He learned that was the way to deal with it, let God, let the angel of the Lord encamp around those that fear him and work things out, not to be one who resisted and challenged, but like the Lord Jesus Christ when he (v23) "was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judges righteously". In his very experience he comes to grasp what this was all about and of course ultimately beyond it he could see that there was an inheritance which was associated with this marvellous purpose of God

To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.
(1 Peter 1:4-5)

So he is saying you can cope with this prospect in mind, you can live the life, you can make the gospel active in your life despite the many challenges and speaks in v6 about the trials and temptations and the resting experiences, but he says (v7) "That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ", so the very processes of challenge, the very processes of trial, the hard things that come to us each day, these things can be part of a process which is preparing us for that ultimate inheritance.

Coming to 2 Peter 1 to draw our thoughts to a close, Peter again calls to mind the significance of the Exodus as a model for the experience of one who is associated with the Lord Jesus Christ, with the prospect of glory because he speaks of being right at the end of his life and he says:

Moreover I will endeavor that ye may be able after my decease [exodus] to have these things always in remembrance. For we have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty.
(2 Peter 1:15-16)

We see how immediately he is associating in his mind with the transfiguration, "we were eyewitnesses of his majesty", as he speaks about that event which made such an impact on him. This exodus process is also something that is associated with the transfiguration, and the transfiguration is the metamorphosis that the apostle Paul speaks, again, the "transforming by the

renewal of your mind”, so he’s understanding there is a process we are engaged in that has to real for us in our daily lives and earlier in the first chapter of 2 Peter he speaks about having escaped from the corruption that is in the world through lust having as it were come out of Egypt, and all of its works. We have before us the prospect of being partakers of the divine nature. He says the person who doesn’t understand all this is blind (v9)

But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins. Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall: For so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

(2 Peter 1:9-11)

We have seen very briefly how Peter came to understand the significance of the Exodus, how despite his failings and his moments of weakness he was able to learn from all that and was able to be a source of exhortation to his brothers and sisters. What we have to do as we come to share the bread and the wine is remind ourselves it isn’t just an event at one moment, it’s a reminder of the process that is going on in our lives, an exodus process that is designed to help us not only to be able to be in place to obtain ultimately the inheritance of God prepared for us, but we might to be examples to those around us as we try to help each other along the way, on that journey which will find it’s apotheosis in the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. As we take the bread and the wine then we are sharing in the Passover Lamb and in the very exodus which he achieved on our behalf.

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