

A Secular Salvation

By David H. Roper

When our nation was involved in sending spacecraft to the moon, the question of whether or not the expense was justified frequently arose. We were putting a great deal of expensive hardware into space, and taxpayers questioned whether or not there were any practical applications to be derived from our space program. We have since learned there are quite a few, but at the time people were justifiably concerned. It occurred to me that this must be what goes through the minds of those outside the Christian faith looking in when we talk about heaven, which is the ultimate space trip! No doubt they think it is only "pie-in-the-sky, by-and-by" and therefore has no real application to life here and now.

There is no question but that the gospel does include "pie-in-the-sky, by-and-by". Paul says, "If there is no resurrection, then we are of all men most miserable." If that were the case, we would be believing a lie, and our life would be based upon a gigantic fraud. Therefore hope is a very important part of Christian faith. But we also know it to be true that our ultimate destiny has implications for the present. That is Peter's concern. That is what he wants to demonstrate in the passage which concludes chapter 1 of his first epistle. Though our ultimate destiny is salvation-an inheritance which is unfading and undefiled, and the resurrection of the body-yet there is eternal life here and now. We have the best of both worlds. We have heaven itself someday, and heavenly living now. This is Peter's emphasis.

As we study through this passage I would like to have you note two things.

The first is that the passage begins with the conjunction "therefore." Conjunctions are very important in studying Scripture. The Bible is not merely a homily of ideas; it is a reasoned argument. So where you find this word "therefore," it normally indicates a logical conclusion from what has gone before. In the first 12 verses of chapter 1, Peter is writing about the certainty of salvation. Then in verse 13 he writes, "Therefore," i.e. because our inheritance is sure, certain conclusions can be drawn. These conclusions follow in verses 13 through 25, and are in the main a list of the products of that future salvation.

The second thing I want you to note is the series of verbs in these verses. There are four imperatives or commands. These are not apparent from most English translations because the translators have tried to make the language flow smoothly and thus have not employed the tenses Peter used.

Let me point them out to you. Verse 13: "Fix your hope..." Verse 15: "Be holy..." Verse 17: "Conduct yourselves in fear..." Verse 22: "Love one another..." These four commands indicate the products of salvation: hope, holiness, fear, and love. Let's begin reading with verse 13. Peter writes, Therefore, gird up your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you [literally, "bearing down upon you"] at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Peter is looking ahead to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, and he writes, "Fix your hope on that." That is what gives peace and confidence and quietness in the face of much pressure. "Fix your hope on the grace that is coming at the revelation of Jesus Christ." Our English word "hope" implies contingency. The Greek word did not, and might better be translated "have a confident expectancy." It is faith projected out into the future. It suggests an attitude of positive expectation and optimism which ought to prevail in our lives.

Now, the two verbs which precede this command appear in most translations to be commands themselves, but they are not; they are participles, and would be better translated this way: "Therefore, when you have girded up your minds for action, keeping sober, hope completely on the grace..." These two verbs are antecedent in time to

the action of the command.

So Peter begins with the image of "girding up the mind," which is a beautiful symbol. It was taken from the practice of gathering up the long, flowing, oriental robes people wore then, in order to facilitate walking or working. They would tuck their robes under a belt at the waist, and then they would be ready for action. Perhaps the contemporary idiom would be to "cinch up your belt," or "hitch up your trousers," or "roll up your sleeves"--something you do in preparation for work. It is the mind which must be girded up. Paul uses a similar image in Ephesians 6: "...having girded your loins with truth..." He is referring to action we take based on what we know is true.

The foundation of all advancement in the Christian life is the truth, the Word of God. It is not experience, nor vision, but the Word. And so Peter says the first step is to call to mind what the Word says. That is what keeps you stable and steadfast. When everything else is shaking around you, go back to the one thing you know is true--the Word of God--and pull your mind together with the truth. Remind yourself of what is true.

In his second epistle Peter writes, "For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ..." In order to substantiate that statement he brings together two facts: First, his own eyewitness experience on the mount of transfiguration. He saw the Lord glorified. That was a never-to-be-forgotten experience for Peter; he never got over it. And who would? Peter says, "You can be assured we are not perpetuating a myth, because we saw the Lord on the holy mountain." But he doesn't stop there. He goes right on to say, "And we have the even surer prophetic word." What Peter ultimately rests his faith upon is not the vision on the mount, but the Word of God. All of our experience has to be tested and tried on the basis of the Word. It does not matter what our experience has been, nor how glorious our vision. We rest our life upon the Word. The Word must test all experience.

Some time ago a young man told me he awoke in the middle of the night and saw "Jesus" standing at the foot of his bed. And "Jesus" spoke to him! I said, "That's very interesting. What did he say?" He told me of their conversation. Unfortunately, most of what he reported "Jesus" said was contrary to the Scriptures. I said, "How do you know that was Jesus?" "Because he said he was." I said, "Do you know that Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light? That wasn't Jesus, and that vision, whatever it was, did not come from God, because it said things which contradict the Word."

It does not matter what your experience has been, or what your vision has been--that is not the basis of your hope. Visions and past experience do not supply stability in times of stress. But the Word does, and we can base our life on that foundation. Therefore, we ought to know it, read it, memorize it, and thus set our minds on it in times of stress, times when we need wisdom, times of decision, whatever our circumstances may be.

First, "Gird up your mind," then, "keeping sober..." A mind fixed on the word makes sobriety possible. The Greek word translated "sober" means exactly what our English word means: "not drunk", i.e., with your wits about you. In Letters to Young Churches, Phillips paraphrases it, "Live as those who know what they are doing." That ought to be the experience of every believer who bases his life upon the Word. We can be sober and have our wits about us. We can keep our heads when everyone around us is failing apart. We can see beyond the observable to what ultimately is real. It is the Word that cinches up our mind. It is the Word that enables us to be sober.

And thus being sober, we then can hope completely--without reservation, with no strings attached --we can hope thoroughly on the grace which is to be ours at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Don't hope on the Word... and something else. A divided heart fills us with darkness and confusion. Jesus said, "If the eye is single, then the whole body is full of light. But if the eye is evil [literally, the word "dual"], how great that darkness." If you are confused, it may be that you are not hoping completely on what God has said.

So that is Peter's first word. "Fix your hope completely on the grace that is to come at the revelation of Jesus Christ." We are like lost sailors who, when the clouds clear, can navigate by the stars. We have a fixed position--the Word itself--which witnesses to the truth. We can gird up our minds with the truth, and that keeps us

sober. And then we can fix our hope on the grace borne to us in the revelation of Christ.

The second product of salvation is holiness, verses 14 through 16:

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance [of God], but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."

This principle was enshrined in the Old Testament. God said to his people, "Be holy, for I am holy. You are to live out my life in all your national affairs." I don't know what comes to your mind when you hear the word "holy," but initially I had a very distorted idea. I thought in terms of hairshirts and hermits like Simon Stylites, who spent his life sitting on a pole to isolate himself from the world. Someone who is isolated, withdrawn, who has no contact with reality--that is the picture which often comes to mind when we think of holiness. But this passage indicates, rather, that holiness is conformity to the character of God; it is being godlike. "Be holy," God said, "because I am holy." In the character of God, you see everything you have ever wanted out of life. There is love, compassion, grace, and justice. There is strength, courage, mercy, self-control, poise, power-- everything that we as men and women have ever desired. That is what holiness is--being like God-- and that is what God calls us to.

Peter reveals the way to be holy: "As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance..." The phrase translated "obedient children" is literally "children of obedience" -- the alternate reading given in the margin of the American Standard Version. This is a Hebrew idiom. Peter was a Jew and, though he spoke and wrote Greek, he thought in his native tongue. So when he wrote Greek, he sometimes did it as though it were Hebrew. Here he used an idiom which was frequently employed in the Old Testament. When the Hebrews talked about "a son of" something, they meant someone who was characterized by that thing, someone whose nature was of that thing. For example, if they looked at a field and it was fertile, they would call it "a son of oil," for it was a productive field--that was its nature. That is why the term "son of God" is so meaningful. It means more than "descendant of;" it means "one who partakes of the nature of."

So when Peter says we are to be children of obedience, he means ones who partake of that nature, who are obedient by nature. Why? Because we have been made partakers of the Divine nature. We are holy, you see, not because we have some natural ability to be so, but because we have received from God his very nature. That is why John says, "That which is born of God cannot sin." That nature of God in you cannot sin. That is the new nature you received when you asked Jesus Christ to come into your life, so that now you are a child of obedience. You have his nature, and that nature will express itself--unless it is inhibited in some way.

These inhibiting factors are taken up in the next phrase: "do not be conformed to the former passions, or ambitions...." Our word "lusts" has a sexual connotation, but the Greek term here merely refers to drives, ambitions, or passions. Once we were conformed to the world's passions and drives and desires and ambitions. Whatever the world was seeking, we sought; what the world was doing, we did. Now, Peter says, we are to conform ourselves to a new ambition--to be God-like.

There is a new conformity--to God himself. If we refuse to allow the world to squeeze us into its mold, then the life of God will express itself in us, and we will be holy. Now, there is a measure of conformity to the world which all of us have to assume. There are superficial conformities in matters such as dress, customs, and other things not contrary to Scripture, which we cannot avoid. He is not talking about that sort of disconformity. He is talking rather about the deep down attitudes and ideas of the world. It is these we are to reject. So Peter says the life of God will manifest itself when we resist the tendency to conform to the world.

Please note also that the command is really "be becoming holy". Peter has a process in view. Sometimes we think the Christian life is a Cinderella story. A fairy godmother waves her magic wand, and suddenly we are transformed. But the problem is that when midnight comes, the whole thing falls apart. Then we wonder if actually we ever had been transformed. No, the Christian life is not immediate transformation; it is, rather, a lifelong process. And if you give him the right to be Lord in your life, and sit in judgment on tendencies to

conform to the world's way, God's life will become manifest in yours, and you will become holy. I know people who have struggled with alcoholism or some other enslaving habit for many years before they were delivered. God does grant deliverance in time, though we may struggle awhile. God does not see the failure but the attitude of the heart, and our desire for him to be Lord. Holiness is a process, you see.

The third command is found in verses 17 through 21:

And if you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each man's work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay upon earth; knowing that you were not redeemed [ransomed] with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious [costly] blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ. For He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you who through Him are believers in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

The third command is to be fearful, to "conduct yourselves with fear." It sounds strange to be summoned to fear, when so much of Scripture is a summons to faith. But Peter could not possibly be talking about the kind of craven fear we would usually associate with this word. It is not cowering from God; it is rather, to be in awe, or to live life with a sense of responsibility. God expects us to look at life with a sense of responsibility. We are responsible.

There are two sobering facts which ought to produce this sense of accountability. The first is that God is a judge: "If you invoke as Father the One Who impartially judges..." God is a Father, with all the characteristics of fatherhood which come to mind when we use that word. But he is also a judge. He is not a pushover. He is not a softie. He is a judge, and he is an impartial judge. The word translated "impartially" literally means that he does not judge "by the face." He does not care if your face is handsome or homely, old or young, black or white or brown; all those superficial factors are immaterial. He judges by the works a person exhibits.

Again that sounds strange, because we know from Scripture that we are never judged on the basis of works. Remember, Peter is speaking to Christians here. He is not talking about a judgment to condemnation. Those of us who know Jesus Christ in a personal way will never be condemned. Scripture promises that. Our salvation is secure. Those who truly have been regenerated will endure to the end. We will never have to stand before God and account for our salvation on the basis of works. No, no. Peter is writing, rather, about the judgment seat of Christ, where we as Christians will give account for what we have done in our body, and how we have used the resources God has given us.

In 2 Corinthians 5 Paul says, "We also have as our ambition...to be pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment-seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad [worthless]." In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul describes this symbolically as a spiritual building process. "A foundation is laid, which is Christ." And we build upon that foundation either wood, hay and stubble, or gold, silver, and precious stones. The individual will be spared when the building passes through the fire. The individual will not be lost, because his salvation is based upon Christ's work. But the worthless acts, the things done in the flesh, as opposed to those done in the Spirit, will be burned up. All that will endure will be those things done in faith, in dependence upon Jesus Christ. So Peter says, "Live out your life with an awareness that someday we all are going to stand before the Lord, and the worthless things we have done, the things done out of self-effort, out of self-centered motives, the things done out of the flesh, will be burned and will pass away. That accounting is certain, and therefore we should live life with a proper sense of responsibility.

The second incentive to godly fear is the nature of our salvation. In 2 Corinthians 5 Paul likewise declares that there are two incentives in the Christian life. One is the impending judgment of Christians, and the other is the love of Christ which constrains us. This is what Peter is doing. There is both impending judgment-we live out our lives under the scrutiny and surveillance of God-and there is also the fact of God's grace and mercy and love. This he underscores in verses 18 and 19: "...knowing that you were not ransomed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with costly blood, as of a lamb unblemished and

spotless, the blood of Christ."

The emphasis here is on Messiah, Christ. Can you believe it! Messiah died for you, died for your sake! The most costly thing in the whole universe, the life of God himself, was offered up for you and for me. That ought to stop us cold in our tracks when sometimes we are hell-bent on getting our own way, when we are rebelling against the truth. It is an arresting truth that we have been ransomed from all our sin. God himself paid the price, at the cost of his own blood. As I read this, I thought of the words of the hymn:

Alas, and did my Savior bleed?
And did my Sovereign die?
Would He devote that sacred head
For such a worm as I?
Was it for crimes that I have done?
He groaned upon the tree?
Amazing pity! Grace unknown!
And love beyond degree!

What an amazing thing-that God himself died for our sake! That ought to give us pause in times when we want to reject the truth. Therefore, on the basis of these two sobering facts -our accountability before God, and the cost of our salvation -we ought to live out our lives with a proper sense of responsibility.

There is a fourth command, verses 22 through 25:

Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart [The word "fervently" used here occurs nowhere else in the New Testament in this particular form. It means "to be stretched out"; "to go all out", in the contemporary idiom-an energetic kind of love], for [and this explains why we can love this way] you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and abiding word of God.

Then Peter quotes from Isaiah to corroborate his statement about the abiding Word of God. The point of his quotation is to underscore the idea that the Word remains.

For,

"All flesh is like grass,
And all its glory like the flower of grass.
The grass withers,
And the flower falls off,
But the word of the Lord abides forever.
And this is the word which was preached to you."

We are summoned to love. The word he uses for love indicates unconditional love, love which does not hesitate to give to an unlovely, unresponsive object. Many of you have been called to live out your lives in circumstances where your love is not returned. That is a most difficult way to live. Peter says that because of the new birth, because your heart has been changed, you now can love with divine love.

Before Christ, all of life was self-centered. We loved ourselves, we thought in terms of ourselves, everything pointed in toward us. But when Christ comes into our life, and we experience the new birth, our thoughts begin to go out to others, because that is our nature. That is what we are, because of Christ in us. We do not have to try to produce that love. We can respond to people in need, reach out to them, regardless of their unloveliness, knowing that the love of God himself is undergirding us-the love which never flinches. In his first epistle John says, in describing this love, "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." That is what love is-giving even when people do not respond. Peter calls us to that love

because our hearts have been changed.

C. S. Lewis is a favorite author of mine, and his life has been of great interest to me. He was a bachelor almost all of his life. When he was 59 he married Joy Davidman, who was dying of cancer. They had only three years together. When she died in 1960 he was inconsolable. Many of you have read *A Grief Observed*, which he wrote immediately after her death. He was very open and honest during this time. He almost lost his faith, and it was not until several months later that he was restored. He wrote *A Grief Observed* under a pseudonym, and people kept sending him the book, thinking it would be helpful to him! During this time he also wrote a number of poems, many of which were unpublished. After his death they found this poem in his effects:

All this is flashy rhetoric about loving you-I never had a selfless thought since I was born.

I am mercenary and self-seeking through and through:
I want God, you, all friends, merely to serve my turn.
Peace, reassurance, pleasure, are the goals I seek.
I cannot crawl one inch outside my proper skin:

I talk of love--a scholar's parrot may talk Greek--but, self-imprisoned, always end where I begin. Only that now you have taught me (but how late) my lack, I see the chasm. And everything you are was making My heart into a bridge by which I might get back... And now the bridge is broken.

That is despair. That is the honesty of a man who tried to love, and could not produce. And that is where we all stand. Love is an exotic. We cannot love people. It is only the love of God in us and through us that enables us to heed this command.

There was a Scottish evangelist by the name of George Matheson who began to lose his eyesight. He told his fiancée of his condition, and she decided that she could not go through with the marriage. She did not want to care for a blind man, so she broke the engagement. For a while he was, like Lewis, inconsolable. But the Lord began to reveal the source of unfading love, and he wrote the hymn *O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go*, one verse of which goes like this:

Love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in Thee;
I give Thee back the life I owe,
That in Thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.

Now, if you have trouble loving-and I do-the only way to love is to give back to the Lord what we owe that is, our life- and to say, "Lord, I cannot do it. I thank you for changing my life, for giving me the power to be the loving person you want me to be." And then we can begin really to love, knowing that his power sustains and undergirds us.

These four things, then, are the products of our salvation: A hope based on the coming of Jesus Christ. He is coming again, and that is our hope. Secondly, holiness, or conformity to the character of God. Third, fear of God-a proper sense of accountability. And finally, love. These are the things which make earthly life heaven.

Gracious Lord, we thank you for the Word that you have given to us, which comforts and strengthens us puts starch in our backbone, gives us the will and the desire to act. We thank you, Father, that your Word is dynamic, living, abiding, and never stops working. We thank you in Jesus' name, Amen.

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