

The Significance of the Person and Ministry of the Apostle Peter

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"Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof" (Matthew 21:43).

"Ye are... a holy nation" (1 Peter 2:9).

Reading: 1 Peter 1:1-4.

We are going to be occupied at this time, with the Lord's help, with the significance of the person and ministry of the Apostle Peter. The Apostle Paul occupies such a large place in the New Testament that we are perhaps in danger of losing the great values of the Apostle Peter. This may be partly due to the fact that so little is on record as to the life and ministry of Peter. He passes out of view almost entirely, so far as the history of the Church is concerned, after the council recorded in Acts 15, and Paul seems to eclipse everyone else from that point onward, right to the end of the Book of the Acts, which is the historical record of the growth, the development and expansion of the Church. Peter, while he has not gone by any means, does cease to occupy the place that he had, once Paul comes in.

I must confess that I have often been a little puzzled as to why, seeing that there were twelve Apostles called, appointed and commissioned, only three or four of them are on record. The rest are hardly mentioned at all until you get right to the last chapters of the Book of the Revelation, and then they are only spoken of as the twelve apostles of the Lamb. They are not in view at all in that great gap in the New Testament, and you do not know very much of what is happening to them. You do not know very much, so far as the record is concerned, of what Peter was doing during all that time.

Of course, here, when Peter opens his Letter, he lets us know that he has not been inactive, and the elect in all these parts of the world have come under his influence. However, it is strange, is it not, that the history of the Church, so far as the New Testament is concerned, is very largely confined to Paul.

But we have to think again about this matter, for there are very great values indeed in Peter, and we shall do very well if we give ourselves to a consideration of these values.

Of course, in the first three Gospels, Peter always has the first place, and is the most prominent of the twelve disciples. I have made a list of some thirty-eight incidents in which Peter figured most prominently. I am not going to trouble you with all those thirty-eight, but there they are, and that does not cover the whole ground by any means. I am simply saying that, right up to the time of that council in Jerusalem concerning what had happened over the Gentiles, Peter occupied the foremost place, and it is quite evident from his Letters that something very deep and very real was wrought into this man.

I have been tremendously impressed - I cannot tell you how much - as I have carefully read through this comparatively short first Letter of Peter with my eye on one thing, and that one thing is: Where did Peter get that? How did that come to Peter? Why is Peter saying that? As I have looked I have found that the Lord Jesus wrought Himself into this man, that you can trace the Lord Jesus in this man so deeply and so richly, and I have no hesitation in saying that this first Letter of his is full of spiritual riches. We shall, of course, only be able to touch the surface, but let us begin with some little consideration of the significance and the value of Peter's ministry.

We shall at once discover how Peter has come to understand the Lord Jesus. What was Jesus doing? Peter did not understand in the days when the Lord was present in the flesh, but He was doing something. The wonderful thing is this: that while the Lord Jesus was working, teaching, living and moving right under the eyes of this man Peter, Peter was not grasping it, was not understanding it, was not seeing it, but here in his Letter he has it all. That, I think, contains something we should lay hold of. We can hear, see, have under our eyes and ears even for years, the Lord Jesus in what He is saying and what He is doing, and He being really present, and we not grasp the significance of it all. That is a terrible possibility. It is one of the problems that we may come up against. It is almost disconcerting to see Christians who for years have been receiving all the teaching about the Lord Jesus, before whose eyes and ears He has been brought over a long period, and then, when you really come up to practical matters, they do not know it, they have not got it, it is not in them. Or shall I say: the Lord Jesus is not there in a way commensurate with all that they have heard. They have missed it. That is a possibility, and it is one of the big tragedies in Christianity that it is so, and that, like Peter, at a certain crisis point, after all they have received, it can be demonstrated under trial that they are not really in the good of the teaching. They break down, after all, in the hour of the ordeal.

But that, of course, leads to this: How important it is that what we have heard, what we have seen and what has been brought to us shall be put right into us by the power of the Holy Spirit. Is that not necessary? That we have not only been where it is, but it is in us by the Spirit.

And that is the tremendous change from the Gospels, with all the place and prominence that Peter held there, into his Letter. Something has happened to the man, and that is what it is.

That is the first thing about his significance, his person and his ministry: that he is not retailing things that he has heard. He is not 'dishing up' (if I may use the expression) that which has come to him secondhand. Here is a man who, through a deep crisis and experience, has himself moved right into the spiritual meaning and value of the teaching and the work of the Lord Jesus. That is a very important thing, and it is the first thing about his significance.

The New Israel

But I ask the question: What was Jesus doing when He was here? Of course you would answer: 'Well, He was doing this... that... and a whole multitude of things.' Yes, but what was the comprehensive thing that He was doing? What was it that embodied all His teaching, all His work and activities, signs and parables? What was it that comprehended the Lord Jesus when He was here?

We have answered the question in the passages which we have just read together: "Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof... Ye are... a holy nation." What was Jesus doing? He was building, constituting a new Israel, a spiritual, heavenly Israel in the place of the old one.

Jesus - The Messiah

Who was Jesus? His name is Messiah, which is the Hebrew form of the Greek 'Christ'. It is the same thing in two languages. It might help you, and throw light on things, and make something quite real if, wherever you find the name "Christ" in the New Testament, you put there "Messiah".

Now think what Messiah meant in the Bible! Both "Messiah" and "Christ" mean 'the Anointed'.

The Old Testament had just one Person in view. It was moving toward, looking for, longing for, the day of the appearing of the Messiah. What was He going to do in their expectation? He was going to save their nation. You remember the words of Simeon, when he took the babe Jesus in his arms? He spoke of Him as being for the salvation of God's people, Israel. Messiah would save the nation. Of course, they had their own ideas as to what that would mean, for their whole conception of the coming Messiah was that He would constitute and establish the Kingdom of Israel. From the beginning of Genesis, right up to the end of the Old Testament, the one Person in view was the One who was coming, whom the Jews called the Messiah.

You remember even the woman of Samaria, when she got to that point of discovering something of the truth of who He was who was speaking to her, went back to the city and said: "Come, see a man which told me all things that ever I did: can this be the Messiah?" (John 4:29). This showed that even in the Samaritans there was this deep-rooted hope and expectation: the coming Messiah, who would establish the kingdom of Israel and save it - and much more, of course.

Well, when He came we know what they did with their Messiah. We can leave that, but Jesus said: "The kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof", and Peter says: "To the elect who are sojourners of the Dispersion... Ye are a holy nation." 'You are the inheritors of the kingdom of God. You are the ones who have taken over from Israel. You are the new Israel.' As you know, the Apostle Paul speaks of "the Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16). This is a new conception.

Here, then, is the Christ, the Messiah. Now, I have said that Jesus was building a new Israel. How was the old Israel built?

You remember that charming little Book of Ruth? At the end of that romantic story of Divine sovereignty, when Naomi has come back and Ruth is married to Boaz, people say to Boaz: "The Lord make the woman that is come into thine house like Rachel and Leah, which two did build the house of Israel." The nation was built upon the twelve sons of Jacob, and was composed of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Now, with Jesus that has passed and been taken away, and He begins with twelve Apostles, building, you see, on the same principle. There are twelve Apostles, of which Peter is the first, and, quite evidently, the most conspicuous to begin with. Twelve! You know what the number twelve means? It is the biblical number of heavenly government and rule - it is the Kingdom number. Well, here you have the twelve Apostles, and to sum it all up you come at last to the new Jerusalem, the heavenly city coming down from God out of heaven. It is a figure, a symbol of the new governmental centre of Jesus Christ in the age of glory. But the characteristic number of the city is twelve: twelve thousand furlongs, twelve foundations, twelve gates, twelve pearls, twelve angels. Twelve is the dominating number of that symbolic representation of the centre of government for the coming age.

Peter is the first in this, and Jesus is very consistent with what is in His mind and in His principles. Peter, on the day of Pentecost, is using the keys of the kingdom, and keys are the symbols of authority, of government, and they are entrusted to Peter to open the Kingdom on the day of Pentecost. It is all so consistent.

A Holy Nation

The point is - without being too detailed - that Jesus was building a new spiritual Israel, a 'holy nation'. You and I belong to that new Israel. We are of that holy nation - but what kind of nation is this?

If you look now at Peter's first Letter, not only verse by verse, sentence by sentence, but almost fragment by fragment, you will see what Peter is doing - he is transferring the old Israel to the new at every point. That is why we read those first four verses.

What kind of 'holy nation' is this? What kind of an Israel are we? Here it is: "Elect... according to the foreknowledge of God the Father." You know those were the words that were used so often in the old dispensation about the old Israel. God chose them, and that is only another word for the same thing - He elected them, or, if you like, selected them. They were an elect people, a chosen people. That is how the old Israel is spoken of even to this day - 'the chosen people'. But here Peter has followed up Matthew 21:43, transferred from the old to the new, and says: 'You believers, scattered abroad throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, Bithynia, over the world, and over the nations, you are the elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father. God has foreseen you before all time. He has had His eye on you, and His hand on you in foreknowledge before ever you were.'

Of course, Paul has much to say about this. "He chose us in him before the foundation of the world" (Ephesians 1:4). Peter and Paul agreed on this, at any rate, and understood the same thing, although Peter did say once about Paul's writings: "Wherein are some things hard to be understood" (2 Peter 3:16). However, that did not apply here. This Israel to which we belong is "elect... according to the foreknowledge of God the Father". That is where the new Israel begins.

But note! I said 'fragment by fragment' ... "into sanctification of the Spirit". What is that? What is "sanctification of the Spirit"? You can put it this way if you like: 'Sanctification by the Holy Spirit'. What is that? What is the meaning of sanctification?

Well, you see, sanctification is just another word for 'separated unto God', and that is the thing that happens in time... 'elect... through the sanctification of the Spirit'. The eternal fact, now the time act of being set apart for God. 'Sanctification' basically means 'set apart', consecrated, given to God. Put it how you will. When we use the word 'sanctification' we usually concentrate our thought upon a condition. That is the working out of the sanctification, but sanctification itself is a basic thing that at a point the life is separated unto God, set apart for God, by the act of the Holy Spirit; made the Lord's - there is a race which is the Lord's, a nation which is the Lord's, a people which is the Lord's of which every unit, individual, is the Lord's.

You get a tremendous amount of New Testament teaching into that! "Ye are not your own; for ye were bought with a price" (1 Corinthians 6:20). You belong to the Lord - not to yourself, or to anyone else. That is the meaning of sanctification: Set apart, made wholly unto God.

This sanctification matter was the real battleground of the Old Testament where Israel was concerned. It does open the door to an immense amount of what happened in the Old Testament, because the one thing, more than anything else where Israel was concerned, was to break down their separation, and in some way bring about a link with what was not the Lord. This is where all idolatry came in and why all intermarriage was forbidden. You know it was a battleground. It was a battleground in Nehemiah, in Ezra, in the Prophets - this broken-down

distinctiveness of this people as belonging wholly to the Lord, and the work of the evil powers to make them to belong to someone else. To put it the other way, to take away the absolute proprietorship and possession of the Lord of this people. On that issue there is battle all the time.

You are in it every day, are you not? The real battle is to keep wholly the Lord's and to refuse to compromise where the Lord's rights are concerned. Peter recognizes that battle. "Your adversary the devil as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8). He is all the time taking away from the Lord, drawing away, forcing away, enticing away somehow, and this ground of sanctification in its deepest meaning - being wholly the Lord's - is a battleground.

"In sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood..." - of goats, rams, lambs? No! Peter has transferred from that realm. All that is finished. The old Israel has gone. "Sprinkling of the blood of Jesus the Messiah." And when Peter uses language like this, it is amazing what has happened. When you think that Peter was a Jew, a born, bred, dyed-in-the-wool Jew, with all that Hebrew background of tradition and ritual, sacrifices and all that hope and expectation of the Messiah - and now he says: "The blood of Jesus the Messiah"! The one thing that Israel could not accept about their Messiah was that He had died in this way. 'But', you say, 'what about Isaiah 53?' We all know what is in that, but how does it begin? "Who hath believed our report?" They did not believe that their Messiah was going to be the Messiah of Isaiah 53. They could not. Why, this man hanging on the Cross? No, He could not possibly be the Messiah! His being crucified was full proof that He was not the Messiah. Peter, one of that nation, says: "the sprinkling of the blood of Jesus the Messiah". Is it not impressive? Something has entered into the heart of this man, he has now seen something new - the suffering Messiah! Peter goes on in this Letter to say a lot about the sufferings of Christ. "The sprinkling of the blood of Jesus the Messiah." That is a transfer, is it not, from the old to the new? And that is ours!

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus the Messiah, who according to his great mercy..." We are going to see, as we go on, some of the weight of those words. Peter speaks of "his great mercy". Well, Peter knew something about that! He is the first one of this new Israel, the outstanding one of this holy nation, and he must know, perhaps more than anyone else, His great mercy.

If you and I are members of this heavenly Israel, our membership rests upon this: His great mercy. It will never rest upon anything else - He will see to that.

How do you feel about that? I wonder what your exercise has been about that? I believe, you know, that that is the sort of thing the Lord will do with His heavenly people. He will make them know that mercy is not just a word in the Bible, and they will realize that but for the mercy of God they would be nowhere. That is going to be brought home. But, mark you, there is the other way of looking at it: If you are there, where the mercy of God is your only hope and ground, you are an inheritor of the Kingdom. You are an heir. We come to that almost immediately. Ah, yes, that is safe ground, and Peter is there right at the beginning of his Letter.

"According to his great mercy begat us again unto a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah from the dead." Did I say that Peter had the whole thing wrought into him? Well, think of him again. Cast your eye back to that episode down there in the lower hall, when the accusing finger of the servant maid pointed at him and she said: 'Thou art one of them', and he denied it: 'I know Him not'; a second time, more vehemently; and a third time, with his fisherman's old bad language, oaths and curses, he denied it. Then Peter went out and wept bitterly. It was this that necessitated the angel sending a special message through Mary: 'Go to his disciples, and Peter, and tell them...' That man is in despair. He has come out into the dark, he is smashed, desolated, devastated, hopeless. Perhaps his thoughts at that time were: 'What a hopeless, hopeless fellow I am!'

"Begat us again unto a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah from the dead." That man knows what he is talking about! He has been through it - and he is the first of the heavenly Israel.

Do we know it like this? We go on: "The resurrection of Jesus the Messiah from the dead, unto an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you." Here is another point of the great transition. The old Israel had an inheritance, which was the land of promise, the land of Canaan. It was defiled, corrupted and faded away. They lost it. It is not theirs now in fullness, and for many centuries they had little place in it. You know the Book of Joshua, when their inheritance was divided up, apportioned and made over to the tribes. There is a lot about it, but they lost it all. It faded away and was corrupted and defiled. That is why they went into Babylon, and why they went under Roman domination. They defiled the land. That is the whole accusation of the Prophets, is it not? It was lost... "unto an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away" ...but now not on this earth, subject to all the changes and influence of a world like this... "reserved in heaven for you." A wonderful nation, is it not? Well, this is the kind of nation it is.

The Significance of the Person and Ministry of the Apostle Peter

"Reserved in heaven for you, who by the power of God are guarded through faith unto a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."

That is only opening the door to Peter's significance in person and ministry. I think it is opening it enough - even if it is still only just open - to see that there is something here of riches, and we are going to agree with Peter when he says: "For you therefore which believe is the preciousness..." Of what? Of Christ, yes, but of the new inheritance, of what He has brought us to, and what He is bringing us to.

May this have a very practical application to us! Go out from this place and say to yourself, if you have never said it before: 'As a member of the new Israel I inherit in Christ all that the old Israel lost through unbelief, through disobedience. I am of the Israel of God.'