



THE BENEFITS OF BEING BORN AGAIN

I Peter 1:3-12

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Did you ever wonder what makes a church different from any other organization on earth—even different from civic and community organizations that do good things for people? There are lots of similarities between the many clubs and organizations out there and the church. But there are **two profound differences** that make the church unique from any other organization or club in the world:

1. The church is directly connected to Jesus Christ. There's a spiritual connection between the church and Jesus. He's the driving force behind the church and He's the ultimate leader of the church. The church is the body and bride of Christ. No other group in the world has this kind of relationship with Jesus Christ.

2. Salvation is the primary identity of the church. The church is composed of lost people who got saved. Salvation is the one dynamic more than anything else that makes the church the church. No other group in the world is about being eternally connected to one another through salvation. It's this second feature about the church—salvation—that I want to talk about today. It's the first subject Peter talks about in this little letter to Gentile Christians.

But before I talk about some phenomenal benefits about salvation, I want to deal with a few **introductory matters** concerning I Peter.

1. The date and place of writing. We don't have absolute certainty about this but most biblical interpreters place the writing of I Peter about AD 63-65 from Rome. I think that's pretty close to reality. If this is true, the date and place of writing are significant. His readers would be going through a time of horrible persecution under Emperor Nero. Which leads me to the next introductory matter.

2. The message of the book. When you read through I Peter, it's clear. These Christians are suffering. They're feeling pain. They need hope. So the message of I Peter is directly related to what his readers are going through. So here's the message: "Don't let suffering compromise your faith." You see, pain and suffering can have such an adverse effect on us. We can doubt the love and care of God. And we can lower our Christian standards concerning how we live. Peter is writing to encourage us not to let suffering damage our faith. If you're facing trials, this book is going to be good for you over the next several months.

Here's the third introductory matter I want to address:

3. The vocabulary of the book. Peter uses words that are distinctly Christian words—words like foreknowledge, sanctify, born again, salvation, redeemed, the just, and the unjust. I want to say at the outset that I'll be using these words in this series. Why would I have to tell you that? Because many church leaders in America are telling us not to use words like these when we preach, that these words are Christian-ese, that they don't relate to modern hearers who may be unchurched. But these are good words and we need to use them. And here's why:

1. They're biblical words. These words are in the Bible. These are the words the Holy Spirit chose to use. They were specially selected words to convey specific meaning about spiritual realities. I'm not going to second guess the words God chose. And I don't think we should invent new words. It's important to explain the words of the Bible when we use them. But we shouldn't avoid them.

Here's the second reason these words are good:

2. The expansion of our spiritual vocabulary is a good thing. Think for a moment. What if we never used grownup words around little kids? What if we talked baby talk to them because we're afraid our words were too big for them? They'd never talk like adults. We expand our vocabulary because people older than us used bigger words.

The same thing is true in the spiritual realm. If we never use terms that convey special spiritual meaning, people will stay spiritual babies in their vocabulary. But as we use them, they'll eventually learn to use them.

I think the biggest case in point is this—the writers of the New Testament used these words with raw pagan converts. These people came from the worship of mythological gods and emperor worship. There was no Christian preculture in the Roman world whatsoever. Yet Paul and Peter used words like this liberally and the people got it.

Well, two of these words roll out in today's passage—"born again" and "salvation". They're two great words that are getting at the same thing. Something has to happen to a human being in order for him or her to spend eternity with God in Heaven. So let's look at these two words for a moment.

In verse 3, Peter tells the church that they were "born again". Perhaps you remember what Jesus said to Nicodemus in John 3:3, "Truly, truly I say to you; unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Every-one in this room has been born the first time. You had a physical birth or you wouldn't be here. Well, to get into heaven, we need a spiritual birth. The Apostle Paul tells us that flesh and blood cannot enter Heaven (1 Cor. 15:50). We need a spiritual birth for Heaven just as certainly as we need a physical birth for earth.

So being born again is about a new or second birth. Being born again is that act of God upon a human being who, in the exercising of genuine faith, is given a spiritual nature that is able to enter heaven. This act of God is also called regeneration. Regeneration is the spiritual renewal that happens in a person by an act of God. Being born again and regeneration have everything to do with the second birth, which is a requirement for life with God in Heaven. Well, that's the first word—"born again".

Here's the second special word in my sermon—salvation. It's used three times in our passage today (vss. 5, 9, 10). This is the primary word used in the Bible for the spiritual transformation that must happen for human beings to be right with God. The meaning of salvation is "to deliver, rescue, or preserve from danger so that some-one is in a safe place." Spiritually, salvation means that guilty and condemned human beings are forgiven from sin and pardoned from hell apart from any effort or merit on their part into a permanent spiritual realm of life with God through the cross of Jesus Christ.

Friends, salvation is about God rescuing us from our worst nightmare. That's what the whole Bible is about from Genesis 3 to the end of Revelation. God's desire is to prevent the human race from destruction. But so often I feel like Christians look at salvation as though it were a nice amenity of life. I'm going to live a nice American life in a nice house with a nice car and get some salvation added in. The truth is—salvation is our only hope in this life and in the next. We can never forget that! By the way, the closest synonym for salvation is the word "redemption."

As I said, salvation is what Peter talks about first in his letter. We could approach these verses from many angles, but I'd like to talk about six benefits of being born again or being saved. These are absolutely astounding and they just scratch the surface! Well, here's the first benefit of salvation Peter talks about:

Benefit #1—Salvation doesn't depend on us (vs. 3).

Friends, this is great news. Salvation is totally a work of God. Verse 3 says that because of God's great mercy, He caused us to be born again. There's not one thing we can do to get ourselves saved or to keep ourselves saved. All we can do is to accept the free gift of salvation through Christ.

Isn't it interesting where salvation got its impetus? God's great mercy. God's ocean of mercy is what drove Him to save us. God's mercy is simply this. It's His incredible compassion and pity for those in miserable and desperate straights who deserve nothing. Whether we know it or not, humanity is hopelessly lost and condemned. We were all headed for eternal damnation and separation from God.

But even though we've all deeply hurt God because of our sin and even though God has a right to be angry at us, He can't help Himself. He still loves us and it breaks Him up that people would perish because of their sins. These strong positive feelings for humanity compelled God to act favorably on our behalf at His own expense. He sacrificed His own Son to prevent our destruction. That's God's mercy!

So in verse 3, Peter tells us that what began with God's mercy culminated in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Whenever someone accepts all that God has done for them through Christ, God causes them to be born again. It's all of God.

Aren't you glad that salvation depends on God and not on us? Who could be strong enough over a lifetime to do all that's necessary to be saved? No one! If salvation depended on us, none of us would make it. That's why Peter says that we're to praise the Lord—blessed be the God and Father who has saved us (vs. 3). Church, we need to live in the constant realization that God loved us so much He rescued us from Hell. That should be enough fuel to praise God with overflowing passion every day for the rest of our lives.

Benefit #2—Salvation insures us a remarkable inheritance (vs. 4).

You'd think a rescue from burning eternal fire would be enough. But not with God. For those who in undeserving misery turn to Christ, He's going to give them an inheritance in Heaven when they arrive. Peter describes that inheritance although he doesn't reveal the express nature of it. He says it's going to be unlike anything valuable we know on earth. It can't be destroyed, evil can't touch it, and time can't adversely affect it.

And Peter says that an inheritance is reserved for everyone one of us—without exception. It's set aside, specially marked with our name on it, and kept under watch. No one can take it from us. It's ours by virtue of being born again.

Can you see why the Bible keeps telling us not to get our focus on the treasure we have here? Whatever we have is nothing compared to the treasure that's waiting for us there. Our treasure here is only temporary and subject to loss and decay. Sure we can enjoy it here, but our interest needs to be on the treasure that awaits us! We must not be taken with the treasure we have here. It will only divert us from God.

Peter tells us about our inheritance for one reason. It's encouraging to know something marvelous is waiting for us that can never be taken away. If we have treasure here, we come to the realization that we'll leave it all behind and get something better. And if we have little or nothing here, we come to the realization that when we get to Heaven, we'll have an inheritance that can't be compared to anything on earth.

Most of the people to whom Peter wrote were in the later category. They had nothing. But he said, "Your true riches are coming." What a word of encouragement in tough times!

Benefit #3—Salvation puts us under the protective shield of God (vs. 5).

There's something we need to realize about salvation. It happens in stages. The first stage of salvation is deliverance from the penalty of sin. That means that we're safe for eternity. Then comes the next stage—living the Christian life here and now. That stage is mostly about becoming more like Christ and being delivered from the power of sin. We're being saved from ourselves.

The third stage is what Peter mentions in several of our verses today—the revelation of salvation in the last time (vss. 5 & 7). That will be the grand climax of salvation—when Christ returns for His church and we're saved from the very presence of sin to spend eternity with a Holy God. We won't enter into the fullness of salvation until that stage.

We're in that second stage of salvation right now—being saved from the power of indwelling sin in our lives to become more like Christ. We're a work in progress. God takes an active role in this stage. Verse 5 says that we who are born again are being protected by the power of God until stage three. The word "protected" in verse 5 is a military word. It's from a word that means "to guard or shield or protect by a military garrison." While we wait for our salvation to be complete, God Himself is protecting us so that our salvation cannot fail!! He's going to insure that neither sin nor self nor trials negate our salvation.

Friends, not only did God cause us to be born again, He protects us by His power so we stay born again. Since there's no greater power than the power of God, nothing can defeat God. Those who are truly born again will be kept that way by the power of God. And when the Lord returns and our salvation is completed or revealed, we're going to be there. God isn't going to lose one of us (Jn. 10:28, 29; Phil 1:6)!

But here's the problem. Sometimes it looks like God isn't doing a very good job of protecting us. We lose our jobs, we get sick, we have accidents, people hurt us. I mean, we're happy that God's protecting our souls, but we really want Him to keep the trials from us. "Lord, protect us from pain in this life!" It was the same for the people to whom Peter was writing. They were being beaten, plundered, and killed. Sometimes it's hard to believe God even cares when trials overwhelm us, especially if we feel He's not around when we hurt.

But Peter wants us to know the truth—God is protecting us! The most important part about us is our soul and God is protecting that for a salvation that's yet to be revealed. So even though we may suffer in the flesh, we need to know that God is protecting us from within. That leads us to the next benefit of salvation.

Benefit #4—Salvation gives us a reason for hope when we're distressed by various trials (vss. 6-7).

Several months ago I told you the story of how Marie and I were on our way to San Antonio to see our son Jared and his wife. We got to the airport and that's all we were thinking about—getting to San Antonio. Until I dropped my brief case on my big toe at the ticket counter. The pain so overwhelmed me that all I could think about was the pain.

And that's the way it is in life sometimes. We know that we're saved and headed for heaven. We know the Lord is going to come back and our salvation will be complete. But in the meantime, when we get hit with trials and tribulations and adversities, our thoughts are diverted. All we can think about is the pain we're feeling. And we stop thinking about the hope of our faith. Sometimes the pain makes us question how well God's really protecting us. But Peter is saying, "If we can just remember that there's a stage three in salvation, we can make it through stage two.

Here's the really difficult part. In verse 5, Peter tells us to greatly rejoice during trials. When you're in a lot of pain, that sounds pretty ridiculous. Well, it's going to be impossible unless we become skillful at something—thinking above our pain. What am I talking about? We're going to have to combat our pain with two thoughts, two truths about pain. They're in verses 6 and 7.

1. Our distressing trials are temporary (vs. 6). When we're in very distressing trials, they seem permanent. But Peter says, "They're only for a little while." Eventually they'll subside. I know what some of you are thinking. Somebody says, "'Cheer up, things could be worse.' So I cheered up and things got worse.'" Sometimes it seems that way. But think about it. The longest the worst trial could last is probably 100 years if you lived that long and it started when you were a baby. Compared to eternity, 100 years is a vapor.

Then comes eternity where John says in Revelation 21:4, "He shall wipe away every tear. There shall no longer be any death or mourning or crying or pain." That's our hope! The worst is now and temporary. The best is coming and forever. We have to tell ourselves this when we're distressed.

But there's a second thought that must take control.

2. Our distressing trials authenticate our faith (vs. 7). You see, how we handle our trials reveals the nature of our faith. How we handle our trials reveals whether or not we've been born again. If we've been born again, our faith will sustain us. If we haven't been born again, if all we have is a surface religion, then we'll cave in during adversity.

Trials prove the nature of our faith. That's what the word "proof" is about in verse 7. It's a word for testing something to see if it's real or false. Trials and tests more than anything else prove to us that our faith is real. Peter says that a faith that's tested through the hot fires of adversity is more valuable than a whole pile of gold on this earth.

It's not your profession of faith that proves your faith. It's not church attendance or being nice in good times. It's trials. It's how we respond in the fire. Peter says that faith put to the test comes out genuine. When we see ourselves surviving in the fire with our faith intact, it's party time. Our faith is real.

Friends, when we think like this in trials, we can rejoice. We have a salvation to look forward to when hit by earthly setbacks. And when Jesus returns to this earth for His church, we're all going to be praising God that our trials are behind us and our full salvation is accomplished (vs. 7). We'll realize that not only did we make it through the trials of life, we came through priceless! You see, hanging on to the truth of salvation, more than anything else in the world, will see us through our trials. That's a huge benefit.

Benefit #5—Salvation fosters a remarkable love for Jesus Christ (vs. 8).

This is amazing to me. As a believer in Christ, we're called upon to love Someone we can't see. We have no other relationship on earth like this one. Every other relationship we have is with someone we've seen. It's hard loving an invisible person. And yet that's the nature of our relationship with Jesus.

I'm convinced that these verses were written because of what Peter heard Jesus say to Thomas when he doubted that Jesus had risen from the dead. Thomas demanded to see and touch the Lord before he would believe. Then Jesus said, "Blessed are they who did not see me and yet believed (Jn. 20:29)." That was Jesus talking about us! We're the ones who have never seen Jesus. We're more blessed than those who actually saw the Lord.

When God causes us to be born again, we get the desire and ability to love the invisible Christ. It's a love we feel and it's a love that's real. It doesn't really matter if we can't see Jesus in our relationship with Him right now. We love Him and we believe in Him with as much certainty as if we could touch Him.

I was going downtown on Thursday. I turned off the radio and spent time talking to this invisible Jesus as I was driving down the road. My lips were moving as I prayed. At one point, I realized that I was doing this at a traffic light with cars on either side of me. I thought to myself, "If the people in those cars were watching me, they'd think I was crazy." There was nobody visible in my car. But Jesus was there.

The love for Christ Peter is talking about is not a dispassionate and passive love. It's a love with such passion that words and emotions fail us. I know it's hard to love someone you've never seen. But when you think about all that Christ has done for us, when you realize that He's present with us now by His Spirit, and when you realize that one day we'll see Him in all of His glory, there better be some passion and shouting going on!

God spare us from religion that makes us emotionless and reserved about our salvation. Without salvation, Jesus is just a historical person or an idea. The capacity to love Him isn't there. But with salvation, our hearts are drawn in passionate love to the invisible but living Christ. What a benefit!

Benefit #6—Salvation is best understood by those in the church age (vss. 10-12).

Believers in Jesus are living in what's called the "church age". It's a period of time that runs from the beginning of the church in Acts 2 until the return of Christ to earth for His church. Prior to the church age, believers in God were incorporated into the Israelites who were the recipients of the covenants and the law of

God in the Old Testament. Well, here's the benefit of salvation to those of us who are in the church age—the gospel has been revealed to us. Before the church age, people had a sense that God's grace in salvation would burst upon the world in a new and powerful way. But they didn't understand very much about it.

Even the prophets were limited in their knowledge of the things that we now commonly know. Verse 10 says that they prophesied about the salvation that was to come but they didn't understand what specifics they were prophesying about. The prophets foretold of Messiah and the future salvation of the Jews and Gentiles. But they didn't know who that would be or the specific time He would come to earth (vs. 11).

So they made salvation a matter of careful study and they investigated as much as they could to learn as many specifics as possible (vs. 11). But they didn't really ever come to know that much. The details of their prophecies were veiled to be revealed at a future time.

Church, I want you to understand the blessing we have in the church age. We now know details that even the prophets couldn't understand! We're living in the day of the fullest revelation of the gospel ever made known. We know who Messiah is, when He came, exactly how He suffered and how He was glorified in Heaven (vs. 11). Let's not take this for granted. And let's appreciate the Old Testament prophets for being willing to serve us by writing about things they would never experience (vs. 12).

Conclusion

The first subject Peter addresses in his little letter is salvation. The people who he wrote to were suffering under intense trials. I think they were losing hope. He wanted them to know that physical and emotional suffering doesn't negate the reality of salvation and the great eternal life to come.

So he writes to encourage them that even though they will suffer for a short while, since they're born again, God is protecting them and each day is one day closer to the Lord and a brand new day.

I don't know what's going on in your life today. Maybe you're suffering. Maybe everything is fine. Maybe you've never given your heart to the Savior. Maybe you have but you're not living for Him. Listen to me. The greatest thing about life is salvation. Jesus came to rescue us from hell. Once you realize that and are born again, the agenda of life is about living a new life in Christ and marveling at all the amazing benefits that have come to us because we've been born again.