

# GOD'S PEOPLE

SERIES: IMMORTAL. INVISIBLE.



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1 Peter 2:9–12

4th Message

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## 1 Peter 2:9–12

There is a compelling moment in the story of Elisha when the prophet and his servant are surrounded by a Syrian army bent on their destruction. The servant said,

**Alas, my master, what shall we do? <sup>16</sup>He said, 'Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.' <sup>17</sup>Then Elisha prayed and said, 'Oh, Lord, please open his eyes that he may see.' So the Lord open the eyes of the young man and he saw, and behold the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. 2 Kings 6:15-17**

We're continuing in a sermon series based on Hebrews 11:1, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Our hope is to have the experience of Elisha's servant: eyes opened in order to apprehend 'things not seen.' The topic for consideration in this message is the church. There is much hidden from view regarding the true nature of the believing community.

This room is filled with beloved royal children gathered as the church of the living God; the very pillar and foundation of the truth. We are a mighty army against which the gates of hell will not prevail.

Yet look at us—an ordinary slice of twenty-first century Silicon Valley humanity with very little to commend us. Not many wise according to worldly standards. Not many powerful. Not many of noble birth. In addition, a post-Christian culture has moved on from respect for religious faith and is waiting impatiently for the sun to set on our place in the world.

In the letter, First Peter, the apostle Peter plays the role of Elisha. The churches he wrote to were poor and persecuted. He wrote to open their eyes to greater realities—truths we need to hear as well.

### 1 Peter 2:9-12:

**But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of**

**him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. <sup>10</sup>Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. <sup>11</sup>Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh which wage war against your soul. <sup>12</sup>Keep your conduct among the Gentiles [those who do not follow Christ] honorable, so that when they speak against you as evil doers they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.**

Verse nine begins with three Old Testament descriptions of the people of God: a race, a priesthood, and a nation. Taken together, these will help us understand Christian community: *a people for God's own possession*. Further, when we look back at Israel, we might note that it has always been God's pattern to make something out of nothing—conflicted patriarchs, Egyptian slaves, flawed kings, returned exiles. So when Peter says of us, 'once nobody, now God's people', we observe a familiar pattern. We have a high calling founded on God's mercy, not our intrinsic worth.

The first metaphor: *a chosen race*. In our setting, most references to race are negative: racial tension, prejudice, unequal treatment etc. However, the Greek word used here could well be translated 'family'. The emphasis is not on lines drawn to create insiders and outsiders. Rather it calls attention to believers sharing life together. We are a chosen fellowship. We belong together as members of the same family.

In healthy families, each member is valued not because of great accomplishment or victory in competition. Rather, acceptance comes first. We rejoice and suffer together. Because we have been chosen by God we can choose the best for one another.

The second metaphor: *a royal priesthood*. In the previous message we noted that the work of a priest is to declare sinners right with God. A priest should tell the truth about human brokenness for the purpose of forgiveness and reconciliation. In Peter's view, priests are not a special class. All who follow Christ (our faithful high priest) should take up the ministry of

reconciliation. We are those who have received mercy (verse 10) and therefore we should be agents of God's mercy to others.

The third metaphor: *a holy nation*. A nation differs from a family or priesthood in its goals. It exists to harness power for shared accomplishment, especially to establish justice. We judge a nation by asking questions like: are laws fair and the disadvantaged cared for? Can ordinary citizens flourish and is evil restrained? Are the wise given a voice and is truth honored? The church is a society (a holy nation) that can be examined with these questions as well. Do we act together for the sake of righteousness?

Peter has a big and beautiful vision of what it means to be the church—one that directly challenges our reduced self-perception and the low estimation of the world around us. Lord, open our eyes; open our eyes so that we can see what you see, so that we can live as you've called us.

Next, we observe that our text goes beyond challenging inadequate beliefs. There are two important calls to action. The first concerns proclamation (verse 9); the second has to do with conduct (verse 11).

The phrase, "proclaim the excellencies of him who called you" (1 Peter 2:9), is a bit unusual. It does not direct us to preach the gospel, make a case, or call for response. It directs us to public praise. We must examine and appreciate the Lord's nature and accomplishments. Then we put them into words. We are to declare the beauty, the love, the faithfulness, the creativity, and the wonder of God. We tell our story of God's goodness—our journey from darkness into light—with focus on the Savior, not on ourselves.

Proclamation also requires giving attention to one's audience. It does no good to speak well of God if those who hear cannot receive it. We must learn to communicate in ways that can be understood.

This is especially true of the generational differences in our day. Images are replacing words as the primary means of communication. We cannot assume a shared storehouse of information across age groups. I recently read an account of a high school English teacher who used the phrase 'let there be light' to make a literary point. He asked his students if they recognized the phrase. The vast majority had never heard the phrase before.

How can we do the good work of *proclaiming the excellencies of God* to those who are deeply embedded in a 'virtual world'? How do we speak of a heavenly father to those who have no experience of an earthly father? Wise proclamation requires both a vital connection

to the living God and a willingness to enter the world of those who don't know him. Though it may require thoughtful effort, the invitation to speak God's praise is a great privilege. Don't miss out.

The second call to action is found in verse 12. "*Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable.*" In context, Peter focuses first on what to avoid in describing an honorable life. *We must abstain from the passions of the flesh*. With similar concern Paul writes in **Galatians 5:19-21**:

**Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, <sup>20</sup>idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of rage, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.**

Fleshly conduct wages war against our souls. The lure of fleshly experience is always short lived, and what happens in Vegas doesn't stay in Vegas. It survives in the form of a decaying heart. I urge you to abstain from passions that wage war against you.

But the Peter's greater concern in these verses is what happens to outsiders who witness fleshly hypocrisy. Our 'conduct among the Gentiles' makes a difference for good or ill. Of course, this assumes that we are not withdrawn from the unbelieving world around us. Simply put, do we participate in life 'among the Gentiles'? Do we know the names of the quiet souls and energetic children in our neighborhood and do business ethically with those who have no use for our faith? Do we appreciate the 'good works' of secular men and women who seem to believe that human determination can fix the world? Are we a source of blessing to family members who walked away from church long ago?

On the positive side lives lived honorably among unbelievers can lead to this: *they may glorify God on the day of visitation* (1 Peter 2:12). The fateful 'visitation day' can refer to the final unveiling of the Lord at the end of history. Or, more likely I think, it can refer to a Spirit-filled, personalized invitation to trust Christ—a profound encounter with the gospel.

An individual facing cancer might remember the witness of a Christian friend who was strengthened by God in similar circumstances. A long forgotten letter of encouragement from a praying grandparent turns up in a crisis moment and suddenly God's presence offers new life in Christ. The timing of visitation is up to the Lord. The seeds of influence, honorable conduct, are sown over the long haul.

Christian witness is rendered more powerful when persecution is factored in—when they speak against you as evildoers. It is always tempting to revile those who revile us. But Jesus' example of blessing one's enemies unleashes power that changes the world. They may see your good deeds and glorify God.

In summary, do we see the church accurately – a healthy family (race) ministering reconciliation (priesthood), and establishing justice (nation)? Do we proclaim the glory of God in language that can be understood by outsiders? Can our behavior be honestly described as 'honorable conduct' that opens doors for outsiders (even enemies) to encounter the love of Christ?

We do well to close with a prayer, one of the beautiful New Testament requests for fullness of life in Christ.

**Ephesians 1:17-19:**

**I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him; <sup>18</sup>having the eyes of your hearts enlightened that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, <sup>19</sup>and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe.**