

2 Peter 1:4

Introduction

Last week, we got half way through Peter's thought in verses 3-4 and then we were cut off right in the middle of what he was saying. So this week, we pick up right where we left off.

Peter begins the main body of his letter with these amazing words: “[Christ's] divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and virtue...” We saw last week that piety and godliness is a really big deal for Peter in this letter. It's an absolute necessity for every true Christian. So Peter begins his letter by reminding us that *Christian* piety relies not on our own resources, but on all the immeasurable resources of Christ's divine power, not on our own initiative but on the divine initiative of Him who called us, and not on our own virtue and praiseworthiness but on Christ's *own* praiseworthy deeds of valor and renown. And then Peter continues:

I. 2 Peter 1:4a — ...*by which* he has granted to us his precious and very great promises [*epangelma*],

The words, and the clauses, and the phrases are starting to pile up, aren't they? That's just because of how rich salvation our salvation is. We've already seen that our “calling” has come on the basis of Christ's own glory and virtue. Now we see that it's also **only on the basis** of Christ's glory and virtue that He is able to grant us His precious and very great promises. Are you getting the picture that what Peter really wants us to see, here, is the *greatness* of the promises? In the first place, these promises are *so great* that apart from the glory and virtue of Christ—apart from *His* mighty achievements in his sinless life, and sacrificial death, and victorious resurrection and ascension into heaven—these promises couldn't exist at all. That's how great these promises are.

When I promise you something, you could say in a sense that I've already *given* you a promise (I've given you my word). But you could also say that I haven't really given you “the promise” until I've *kept* my word. When I keep my word is really when I've given you the promise. When Peter says that Christ has granted us these precious and very great promises on the ground of His glory and virtue, it's obvious that he's talking about more than just giving us His word. Peter's saying that there's a sense in which Christ has already granted us the promise itself because this promise is what He's already achieved for us through His mighty deeds of valor and renown. The thing that He's promised and that we're still waiting for is already accomplished and therefore in a very real sense already ours. This helps us to understand why Peter, for the second time in these two verses, uses that rare word “granted.” Christ has not simply “*granted*” us His word, Christ has “granted” us the promises themselves (the Greek has the article). “...**by which** [glory and virtue] He has **granted** to us **His precious and very great promises...**”

Peter has a habit in this letter of pairing words together to communicate a single idea (hendiadys). We have one of those word pairs here: “His **precious** and **very great** promises.” “Very great” is actually one word in the Greek; so what do you think is the *idea* that these two

words, “precious and “very great” are *together* meant to communicate to us? The word for precious has to do not with something that’s subjectively precious to me but of no real value (like a keepsake from a loved one). Instead, this word, “precious” describes the inherent worth and value of something – the value that something has in and of itself. So in 1 Corinthians 3 we hear of gold and silver and “*precious* stones” (3:12). In Revelation 18 we read about a cargo of “gold, silver, *jewels*, pearls, fine linen, purple cloth, silk, scarlet cloth, all kinds of scented wood, all kinds of articles of ivory, all kinds of articles of *costly* wood, bronze, iron and marble,” etc. (18:12; cf. 17:4) And in Revelation 21, the New Jerusalem is described as “having the glory of God, its radiance like a most *rare* jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal” (Rev. 21:11).

If “precious” refers to the inherent worth and value of something and already tells us that that worth and value is exceedingly high, then adding “very great” to “precious” must tell us that here is something of a worth and value that far surpasses even the words to express. The word for “very great” is just the Greek superlative of “great,” so the emphasis is very much on both words: “*very great.*”

What is it, then, that’s of such incomparable worth and value? Peter says: “By which [Christ] has granted to us His precious and very great *PROMISES*...” Are you getting the picture this morning that what Peter really wants you and me to see is the *greatness* of Christ’s promises that have been granted to us? It’s clear again that Peter isn’t talking only about the external form of the promise (Christ’s giving of His word), but about the very substance of the promise itself. The very things that Christ has promised have, in effect, already been granted to us; and its these things that have been granted to us in His promises that are of such incomparable worth and value.

So what *are* these precious and very great promises? Do you want to know? The fact that these promises have in some sense already been granted to us leads some to the conclusion that Peter’s emphasis is on promises that have already been fulfilled – such as the giving of the Holy Spirit, or the forgiveness of sins through Christ’s shed blood, or the righteousness and justification that we have by faith in Him. But for all Peter’s emphasis on something already granted to us, there’s still an equal and perhaps even greater emphasis on the *promise* as something still waiting for fulfillment – something that we still look forward to with longing and hope. So I ask again: What are these precious and very great promises that Christ has granted to us by His glory and virtue? Peter says that Christ has granted us these promises...

II. 2 Peter 1:4b — ...so that through them *you*¹ may become partakers of the divine nature...

¹ Peter switches, here, from the 1st person “us” (“His divine power has granted to **us**... through the knowledge of him who called **us**... by which he has granted to **us**...”) to the 2nd person “you” (“so that through them **you** may become partakers of the divine nature”). Peter’s point isn’t to leave himself out, so I think his point must be that he wants his readers to feel *personally* the full import of what these promises mean for *them personally*. These precious and very great promises are not granted to an impersonal group, but rather to a church composed of individual men and women and children each one of whom Christ has called by name and each one of whom Christ knows and loves personally.

Even before we quite know what this means, can we already feel the magnitude of it? Can you understand more, now, why Peter calls these promises “precious” and “very great” and why he says they can only be granted to us on the basis of Christ’s mighty deeds of valor and renown? When Peter says that we’ll become partakers of the divine nature *through* these promises, he’s saying that we’ll become partakers of the divine nature *when* we actually *inherit* these promises in their final fulfillment. *That’s* the power, and *that’s* the glory of His promises!

We saw last week that embedded in the definition of the word “divine” is the meaning, “*not* human.” The point of the word “divine” in Greek philosophy (where this word is mainly used) was to highlight the *contrast* with that which is human and mortal. So that begs the question: How can *we*, who are by definition *human and mortal*, become partakers of the *divine* nature? An understanding of the word “nature,” here, is very important. At its *root*, nature may refer to the very essence or being of something (cf. Rom. 2:14).

- James 3:7 — Every **kind** [every **nature**] of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind [human **nature** / human **beings**].
- Galatians 4:8 — Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by **nature** are not gods.
- Galatians 2:15 (cf. Eph. 2:3) — We ourselves are Jews by **birth** [by **nature**]...

So is Peter really saying that one day we’ll partake ourselves of the very being and essence of God? Is he saying that one day we’ll all be deified and become as “gods” ourselves? That could easily be what it sounds like to our ears – at least at first. But this would contradict the explicit teaching of the rest of Scripture, and, indeed, it’s not what Peter means. We really need to apply ourselves to this not only so we can avoid and refute this error, but also so we can rightly understand just how “precious” and how “very great” those promises *are* that have been granted to us.

Think about it this way. The essence or the being of something or someone is invisible to us. It’s something abstract and *metaphysical*. In this sense, the “divine nature” is certainly a reality, but it’s not something we can define or explain. For that matter, even the nature of man, in this sense, is a complete mystery to us. And yet intimately and organically connected with the nature of something or someone, there are always attributes or *characteristics* that are visible and that *can* be defined and explained. So by extension, the word “nature” can also refer to these visible attributes and characteristics (cf. 4 Maccabees 16:3).

- Wisdom of Solomon 19:20 — Fire even in water retained its normal power, and water forgot its fire-quenching **nature**.

The essential “definition” of water is not that it quenches fire, but this is one of its attributes, and this attribute *is rooted in its nature* – which is why we hear of water’s fire-quenching *nature*. In the apocryphal account of Solomon’s prayer for wisdom, someone imagined him praying with these words:

- Wisdom of Solomon 7:17, 20 — It is [God] who gave me unerring knowledge of what exists, to know... the **natures** [habits, ways, characteristics] of animals and the tempers of wild animals, the powers of winds and the thoughts of human beings, the varieties of plants and the virtues of roots...

So now we know that “nature” does *not* always refer to the very essence and being of something or someone; it can also refer to the characteristics and the attributes that *belong* uniquely to that being. But how do we know what Peter means here when he talks about us becoming partakers of the “divine nature”? It’s very simple. The Bible knows nothing of one being becoming another being or of one being sharing in the being of another. In Genesis one, we’re told no less than fifteen times that the plants and fruit trees and creatures in the sea and creatures on the land were all created “according to their kinds” and one of the points here is that these different “kinds” forever and always remain separate and distinct (contra, evolution; Gen. 1:11-12, 21, 25). How much more must it be impossible for *mankind* to partake in any way of the being or essence of God. The Bible knows nothing of any teaching that would even begin to blur in any way or at any time this most fundamental *distinction* and *separation* between God the self-existent Creator and man the wholly dependent creature. It’s this reality that’s fundamental to all true and genuine worship, and to all true and genuine submission and obedience. It was the desire to erase this distinction between God the Creator and man the creature that led to the very first sin, which plunged the entire human race into misery and destruction and death.

Brothers and sisters, if we can be humbly *and also* zealously devoted to always confessing this distinction in all parts of our lives, this will enable us to live godly and pious lives, and also guard us from many practices in the church today that are actually rooted more in New Age mysticism and Pantheism than they are in any of the teachings of Scripture. Let it be forever settled in our minds that there is—and there will always be—between the being of man and the being of God an infinite gulf and a fathomless, immeasurable divide. There is no way that we can ever partake, ourselves, of the being or the essence of God – not now, and not ever; not even to all eternity.

But if all of this is so, then we’re about to see that far from diminishing the promises we’ve been granted, this only reveals all the more just how “precious” and how “very great” they really are. In Greek philosophy and in Jewish Hellenism, the chief characteristic or attribute of divine nature was immortality and incorruptibility.

- 3 Maccabees 3:29 — Every place... is to be made unapproachable and burned with fire, and shall become useless for all time to any **mortal creature** [**nature**; versus any immortal (divine) nature].”

The Apostle Paul also speaks of those who:

- Romans 1:23 — ...exchanged the glory of the **immortal God** for images resembling **mortal man** and birds and animals and creeping things.

So is Peter really saying that one day—on the basis of the precious and very great promises that Christ has granted to us by His own glory and virtue—one day we will partake ourselves of *God's own* immortal and incorruptible life?

I want to try to put this in perspective for us. We hear Peter's language about becoming partakers of the divine nature and we know it *can't* mean—and it *doesn't* mean—that our natures are somehow deified or that we're somehow absorbed into God. That would be a version of the pagan Greek view which wasn't fully developed until after Peter's time (Neoplatonism). So what *does* it mean? Many good commentators conclude that Peter's talking about a "formal resemblance" (we'll call this the "resemblance" view). In other words, to partake of the divine nature simply refers to our moral character *resembling* or looking *like* the moral character of God. That's pretty safe isn't it? It certainly takes away all our "uneasiness." My only problem is that it seems clear that in using the language of "becom[ing] **partakers** of the **divine nature**" Peter's saying "more" than this. So what other options do we have? Another commentator tries to solve this tension by suggesting that what Peter refers to is "not participation in *God*, but in the nature of heavenly, immortal beings." We all agree that Peter can't be referring to participation in *God* (that's the pagan Greek view), but when Peter refers to "the divine nature," is he really just referring to "the nature of heavenly, immortal beings [in general]"? My problem with this "generic" view is that for Peter, *God is the preeminent* heavenly and immortal being.² And furthermore, he's already spoken of Christ's "divine power" (1:3), and I don't think he was referring generically to the power of heavenly and immortal beings, but specifically to the power of God. So where does this leave us? If none of these three views is correct (the pagan Greek view, the resemblance view, or the generic view), then what *is* Peter saying?

I believe what he's saying is this: Without in any conceivable way partaking of the being or the essence of God—without in any way minimizing the infinite gulf and divide between the being of God and the being of man—we will, nevertheless, in some way partake ourselves of that immortality and incorruptibility that *belongs* only to the being of God. On the one hand, Paul speaks of God who:

➤ 1 Timothy 6:16 (cf. 1:17) — ...*alone* has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light...

According to Paul, immortality is an attribute, or a characteristic, that *belongs* only and exclusively to the being of God. On the other hand, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:

➤ 1 Corinthians 15:51–54 — Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on the incorruptible, and this mortal must put on immortality. When the corruptible puts on the incorruptible, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory."

² See also footnote 3

The immortality that we will one day put on cannot *resemble* the immortality of God because we've already seen that God *alone has* immortality as that which belongs to His very being. Therefore, when these mortal and corruptible bodies put on the immortal and the incorruptible, this will be nothing less than a sharing in, or a partaking of the immortal and incorruptible life of God Himself. We will partake of these attributes that *belong* only to the divine being even as we ourselves remain *fully* and *only* human. How can that be? I don't know! I don't understand! It doesn't seem like it can even be possible. And yet the Scriptures tell us that it is so. Therefore, all we can do is rejoice by faith in the precious and very great promises that Christ has granted to us; promises that in their fulfillment are going to bring about this otherwise unspeakable and unimaginable reality of becoming partakers in the divine nature—of becoming partakers ourselves in the immortal and incorruptible life of God Himself.

On the one hand, we can't fathom how these things can be. On the other hand, we know that these promises are possible only on the basis of *Christ's own* glory and virtue – and therefore ultimately on the basis of our union with Him. In Christ the nature and being of God is united with the nature and being of man indivisibly and inseparably, and yet without any mixture or mingling, the distinction of the natures not being taken away by the unity, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person, not divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Chalcedonian confession) And it's this same Son who has immortal, incorruptible life *in Himself* (cf. Jn. 1:4; 5:26)—our Lord Jesus Christ—who lived a sinless human life, who died a sacrificial atoning death, and who was raised up to partake of God's own immortal, incorruptible life, enthroned at His right hand. The mystery of our partaking of God's own immortal, incorruptible life (an attribute that *belongs only* to His being, while our being is separated from His by an infinite, unbridgeable gulf)— this mystery is rooted in the even greater mystery of the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ, with

whom we have now been united by faith so that we are in Him and He is in us.³ So Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:

- 1 Corinthians 15:45, 47–49 — Thus it is written, “The first man Adam became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit... The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.

How precious and very great are these promises that Christ has granted to us! Peter writes: “...so that through [these precious and very great promises] you may become partakers of the divine nature...”

III. 2 Peter 1:4c — ...having escaped from the corruption that is in the world **because of sinful desire** [*epithumia*].

In case anyone was still wondering what this future partaking of the divine nature—of the incorruptible and immortal life of God—has to do with the godly and pious lives that we’re called to live today, that question is answered here. Our mortality (or our perishability) and corruptibility is not, as the Greeks would have it, the result of our physical and material existence. That’s clear from the physical and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our mortality and corruptibility is the result of our sinful lusts and desires. That’s *why* we die; that’s *why* our bodies decay and return to the dust. Have we ever really, fully made that connection? But in 2

³ Though Jesus says that in the resurrection, man will be “like” the angels in terms of not marrying or being given in marriage (Mat. 22:30), the Scriptures never picture man as inheriting or becoming partakers of the life or nature of angels. It is the *unique* destiny of elect *human beings* to experience union with Jesus Christ and inherit eternal life. The angels do not have salvation or union with Christ, but are, in a sense outside observers of these awesome realities.

Hebrews 1:14 — Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?

1 Peter 1:12 — ...the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.

Ephesians 3:10 — ...so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

Even as the angels do not participate in union with Christ, so also they do not possess the “eternal life” that God has granted to His people. In the Scriptures, eternal life is not simply unending life, but rather a certain “kind” and “quality” of life (Jn. 10:10; 17:3). Indeed, what *we* speak of as the immortality of the soul (unending existence) is not at all the same thing as the immortality of God (cf. 1 Tim. 6:16). Similarly, the immortality and incorruptibility that believers will one day inherit will be very different from the life that Adam and Eve possessed before the fall. While the angels certainly enjoy far more than simple unending life, they do not have eternal life abiding in them (cf. 1 Jn. 3:15) in the sense that believers do through their union with Christ (cf. Eph. 2:4-7; Col. 3:1-4).

1 John 5:11–12 — And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

This eternal life that already abides in believers today is the guarantee that in the future resurrection we will enter fully into the immortal and incorruptible life of God Himself (and this in a way that angels cannot experience as those who have not been united with God in Christ).

John 6:54 — Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood *has* eternal life, and I will raise him up *on the last day*.

Peter, the false teachers were promising a “freedom” that actually *allowed* people to indulge in those very lusts and desires (2 Pet. 2:19). So Peter speaks in chapter two of:

- 2 Peter 2:10, 18–19 — ...those who *indulge* in the **lust** [*epithumia*] of defiling passion and despise authority... speaking loud boasts of folly, they entice by sensual **lusts** [*epithumia*] of the flesh those who are barely escaping from those who live in error. They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption.

In chapter three, Peter warns that:

- 2 Peter 3:3 — ...scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own **sinful desires** [*epithumia*].

It’s *against* these “promises” of the false teachers which led to the indulging of sinful desires that Peter would remind *us* of the precious and very great promises of Christ by which we will one day become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world *because of* sinful desire. The death and decay and corruption that are all around us and that we still partake of ourselves are the result of the sin that still remains in us (though it no longer reigns over us). Therefore, to become partakers of the immortal and incorruptible life of God must mean that we will have then escaped not only from corruption and mortality, but also from all sin and from all sinful desires. To share in the immortal, incorruptible life of God *must* mean that we’ll be wholly conformed in that day to the image of His Son – spotless, and blameless, and pure. The false teachers were casting doubt on these promises of God. Peter says in chapter three:

- 2 Peter 3:4 — They will say, “Where is the promise [*epangelia*] of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.”

But Peter would fix in our hearts this morning the absolute certainty of the promises that Christ has granted to us. At the end of chapter one, Peter writes:

- 2 Peter 1:16, 19 (cf. 1:11) — We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty... And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

In chapter three, Peter writes:

- 2 Peter 3:9 — The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise [*epangelia*] as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

And then, in verse thirteen, Peter concludes his letter as he began it here in verse four:

- 2 Peter 3:13 — According to his promise [*epangelma*] we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth *in which righteousness dwells*.

Conclusion

The day is coming when we will become partakers of the divine nature—of the immortal, incorruptible life of God Himself, having escaped the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. *That's* our future. *That's* the goal of our very existence. Knowing, then, for *what future* we have been created, and then recreated in Christ, and knowing the certainty of these precious and very great promises, let us strive to the utmost to live lives of Christian piety and godliness *today* – relying not on our own resources, but on all the immeasurable resources of Christ's divine power, not on our own initiative but on the divine initiative of Him who called us, and not on our own virtue and praiseworthiness but on Christ's own glory and virtue – that in all things, *He* may be all in all.