

1 Peter 4:1-11 (NRSV)

Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same intention (for whoever has suffered in the flesh has finished with sin),² so as to live for the rest of your earthly life no longer by human desires but by the will of God.³ You have already spent enough time in doing what the Gentiles like to do, living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry.⁴ They are surprised that you no longer join them in the same excesses of dissipation, and so they blaspheme.⁵ But they will have to give an accounting to him who stands ready to judge the living and the dead.⁶ For this is the reason the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead, so that, though they had been judged in the flesh as everyone is judged, they might live in the spirit as God does.

⁷The end of all things is near; therefore be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers.⁸ Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins.⁹ Be hospitable to one another without complaining.¹⁰ Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.¹¹ Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.

We may live in a world with pain and loss and hatred, but we have been born anew into a world of love and compassion and forgiveness. Peter urges us to actually live this new life even as we strive to endure through tough times. God has given us many gifts, now as always. Our charge is to put them to good use to the glory of God.

A tale of two worlds

This series is the first occasion I've had to spend considerable time studying and contemplating 1 Peter. I've been struck by how much sense this letter makes as a letter written to encourage and comfort Christians who are going through very tough times. The suffering of the believers in Asia Minor is the ever-present subtext for all of the letter.

I've also been struck by how often Peter strikes the same themes as Paul does in his own letters. Mind you, these are two men who were sometimes at odds at one another as they, and all the early believers, worked through the implications of Jesus' death and resurrection. In his letters to the Galatians, Paul actually calls Peter out over the question of who will share a dining table with whom (2:11-14; note, Paul calls Peter, "Cephas," which is the Aramaic equivalent of the Greek "*Petros/Peter*," both meaning "rock.")

Just Breathe

In two weeks, we'll begin a new five-part series: *Just Breathe: Stories of the Spirit*.

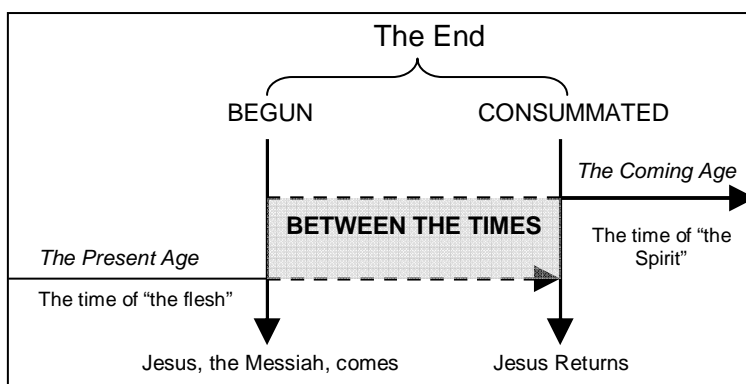
The series will begin the week of Pentecost, which celebrates the arrival of the Holy Spirit after Jesus' resurrection and ascension. In this series, we'll be taking a look at five pivotal stories from the book of Acts. In each, it is God, in the person of his Spirit, who is the key player, driving events forward.

The Holy Spirit is often given short shrift in our churches, yet the book of Acts dramatically demonstrates both the power of the Holy Spirit and his work among all people. It is the Holy Spirit (aka the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ) who is God's empowering presence among us even now.

In today's passage, Peter, like Paul, contrasts two worlds, the world of the "flesh" (v. 6) and the world of the Spirit (also, v. 6). The world of the flesh, as Peter puts it, is a world filled with "licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry" (v. 3). In other words, this world of the flesh is a world driven by all that is wrong with us and all the wrong we do; in shorthand, it is a world of sin. In contrast the world of the Spirit is a world filled with constant love, hospitableness, and good stewardship of the many gifts and graces God has given us (v. 8-10).

Now, you might think that all Peter has in mind is a call to Christian living, but that isn't all of it, not by half. Look at v. 7: "The end of all things is at hand" (following the footnoted translation in the NRSV). It is an echo of Jesus' first words in the Gospel of Mark: "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Good News (Mark 1:15). Peter, like Paul, came to understand that with Jesus' coming, this second world, the world of the Spirit, the Kingdom of God, had arrived. And the believers had been given a new birth (1 Peter 1:3) into this world.

Yet, the fact that the "old" world, the world of the "flesh," was still around was as obvious to Peter and the believers as it is to you and me. They understood that Jesus' resurrection had changed everything; God's great plan to rescue humanity had *already* been accomplished, yet the project was *not yet* consummated. Somehow, they lived in a period between the times, within both the age of the flesh and the age of the Spirit. Perhaps this diagram will be helpful:¹



The believers had been given a new birth into the age of the Spirit, they were the ones on whom the ends of the ages had come (1 Corinthians 10:11). They were new creations who had been given "a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven . . ." (1 Peter 1:3-4).

God's work in them was real, concrete, and undeniable. They could look back to their old lives even as they lived their new life in Christ. Thus, Peter isn't merely urging them to live virtuously; Greek philosophers such as Epicurus did that all the time, as do thousands of self-help books on our own day. No . . . Peter is reminding them of who they are, urging them to live as the new people into whom God has already made them. It's akin to telling a teenager to act their age.

Living between the times

If we have been given a new birth into a living hope, then what is the shape of this new birth, this new life in the Spirit? Both Peter and Paul have a great deal to say to

¹I adapted this diagram from one in Gordon Fee's excellent book, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*. There is more on this in the June 29, 2003, Weekly Bible Study, which is available at www.thebibleacademy.com.

believers as they help them to grasp the substance of this new life. Peter, here in v. 7-11, draws the Christians' attention to:

- Serious (clear-minded; thinking wisely) discipline for the sake of our prayers, by which Peter seems to mean that wisdom and discipline are the right soil for our prayers;
- "Above all" maintaining constant love for one another, for such love puts sin in our past, exactly where it belongs;
- Hospitality, which was an important norm across much of the ancient world;
- Being good stewards of the many gifts that God has given us;
- Taking care in our proclamation of God's Good News, for, looking back to 1:12, we speak of the things at which even the angels long to look; and,
- Being ready to serve, for it is God who strengthens in our work as we build for God's kingdom.

Paul on Gifts in the Church

Paul has a great deal to say in his letters about the gifts that God has given us. These gifts, of which Peter reminds us we are stewards, are both tangible and intangible, wide-ranging, and vary from person to person. Their purpose is to both build up the person but, even more importantly, to build up the body of Christ. The following are some brief reflections on this from Richard Hays, a leading Pauline scholar.

The church is a charismatic **community**. Paul is also insistent that the gifts of the Spirit must be exercised within the body of Christ for the benefit of the community as a whole. This leads him to highlight the twin themes of *diversity* and *interdependence*: it is good that different individuals have different gifts, and all these different gifts must be orchestrated together for the common good of the community. An important part of the preacher's task will be to discern how these motifs should be balanced to address the needs of the particular local congregation. Some churches, more susceptible to the error of "Lone Ranger" Christianity, may need to hear the appeal for interdependence emphasized, while others, more inclined to press for conformity of Christian experience, may need to hear Paul's affirmation of diverse gifts within the body of Christ. In any case, the image of the body of Christ, as Paul has developed it, provides a vision for authentic community in which there is both great individual freedom (vv. 14-20) and powerful interpersonal sharing and support (vv. 21-26). The goal of our ministry should be nothing less than the formation of such communities.

As in Paul's letters, these lists are not meant to be complete. Rather, they paint a picture of what living in the Spirit really looks like. Peter's brief words about gifts and stewards is a good example.

Good Stewards

In one sentence (v. 10), Peter uses three key NT themes. First, we Christians have been given many gifts. Some we might refer to as our "talents," others we call our "possessions," and still others, we throw into the loose label, "spiritual gifts." But regardless of what we call them, they are all gifts from God. Our accomplishments and accumulations are not our own, but are entirely from God, for even life itself is God's gift to us.

Second, we are stewards of these gifts, not their owners. As I outline in the p. 4 textbox, Leonard Sweet thinks we'd hear this better if we used the word "trustees" rather than "stewards." I think he is right. All our gifts, and they are just that, are given to us for purposes, God's purposes.

Third, we are given these gifts so we can serve. Whom? God and one another, or better, God *through* serving one another. Like last week, Peter urges us, even in tough times, to look outside ourselves, to use what God has given us to strengthen the community that is God's people and to be a good witness to all those who have yet to be reborn. And all this is to God's glory!

Our Responsibilities in God's House

Often, when we speak of our responsibilities in God's house, we speak of our "stewardship." In Greek, the word for house is *oikos* and the person who oversees the house, who manages it, is called an *oikonomos*. This word is used ten times in the New Testament and is translated variously (based on the context) as steward, or manager, or treasurer in the NRSV. Jesus tells a parable about a bad steward (Luke 16: 1-13). This is the story of a trusted steward who squanders the property of his master, which was a particularly despicable crime in Jesus' day. The moral of the story is something like this: use what you possess to serve people because everything you have was given you by God!

In today's Scripture passage, Peter reminds us that we, the people of God, are to be "good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (1 Peter 4:10). When writing to a congregation he founded in Corinth, Greece, Paul referred to himself as "a servant of Christ and steward of the mysteries of God," and as a steward, was required to be "trustworthy" (1 Cor 4:1-2). Clearly, Peter and Paul knew that their responsibilities to God extended far beyond their possessions.

Leonard Sweet suggests that "steward" is probably not the best way to think about this. After all, he notes, who really uses the word anymore, other than to refer to someone you might meet on a cruise ship! Instead, Sweet suggests that "trustee" is more meaningful for us and would be a better translation of the Greek. Many of us have some experience with trusts and the responsibilities held by trustees, even if it is simply some sort of family estate. When we think of ourselves as God's trustees, the message of the Bible becomes a little clearer. We are given dominion over God's creation, not so we can rule as a tough or selfish taskmaster, but so we can be effective trustees of God's wealth, managing it wisely, helping it to grow and flourish. God's creation is not ours, we don't own it; rather, we hold it in trust. We hold the Christian faith in trust and we are charged with guarding what has been entrusted to us (1 Timothy 6:20). We, God's people, the body of Christ, the church, have received a treasure, a trust, given by the Holy Spirit (2 Tim 1:14). This treasure is the truth about God and the proclamation that Jesus is Lord!

Understanding our responsibilities as being those of a trustee turns our talk about money and financial giving on its head. I've been in many Sunday school classes and when the subject comes up, people always end up talking about tithing. Pretty soon, somebody would ask the inevitable question – do we tithe on pre-tax or after-tax income! But this is all backwards. It assumes that all the stuff and money we have is ours and the challenge is to figure out how much we want or need to give to God. Do I give 1%, 2%, 5%, or even 10%? Tithing is a long tradition in the Christian church, but it has always been more talk than tithe! You see, tithing is not the approach of the trustee. Trustees of God's gifts recognize that, yes, everything we have – all the money, cars, houses, stuff – is a gift from God. We use what we need and then grow the rest for God. Do we need to keep for own use 80% of what God entrusts to us? 85%? 90%? 95%?

John Wesley understood this. When he was a young man he made 30 pounds a year. He figured out that he needed 28 pounds a year to live on and gave two pounds to the church. When his income increased to 50 pounds, he kept 28 and gave 22. When he made 100 pounds a year, he kept 28 and gave 72. Let those who have ears, hear!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. With regard to this business of living in two worlds, i.e., between the times, Richard Hays writes, ". . . the redemptive power of God has already broken into the present time, and the form of this world is passing away." What is to be our role in the consummation of God's kingdom? Should we quietly await Jesus' return and watch the present world "pass away?" Or are we to do all we can to renew creation and make God's kingdom a present reality? If renewal is our responsibility, what can we actually *do*? What would you say that Peter has been calling his readers to *do*?
2. God has given us all talents and abilities. Some we have discovered in ourselves, some may be waiting to be discovered. Some we've cultivated, others we've ignored. Sometimes, we even fail to understand that it's all a gift. How would you summarize what Peter wants us to understand about the gifts? For what purposes has God given us any gifts at all? Of all that you have, tangible and intangible, what is the hardest for you to see as a gift from God? What are some concrete ways we can be better stewards of what God has entrusted to us?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage. In this week's readings we are taking a look at some passages that bear on this week's reading from 1 Peter.

<p>Monday, 1 Cor. 12:27-13:13 None of the gifts we are given by God for the work of the church are superior to the others. The greatest gifts, the ones for which we should strive, are faith, hope, and love.</p>	<p>Tuesday, 1 Cor. 14:26-40 Using our gifts for the good of the community not for ourselves.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Acts 4:32-37 The first community of believers living as a unified family in unlimited service to God and to one another.</p>	<p>Thursday, 2 Timothy 2:3-14 Paul speaks of "trusteeship" being a two-way street. What do you Paul speaks of as having been entrusted to him?</p>
<p>Friday, Deuteronomy 14:22-29 The tithe to be used for community and celebration of the Lord.</p>	<p>Saturday, Psalm 30 The psalmist praises God for all that God has done for him (or her!)</p>

