

Preparing to Put Off Our Tabernacle

2 Peter 1:1–15

This evening we have read the magnificent opening words of 2 Peter. This is a general epistle, written not to a particular church but to the whole church. Peter, of course, was the first and foremost of Jesus' twelve disciples, whom he named apostles. Peter is listed first in all the lists of the Twelve. Rome has made him into the first pope, the vicar of Christ, the universal leader of Christendom. Yet Peter himself would have been horrified at such an idea. Peter, though present at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:7), did not preside. His role seems to have been less than that of James, and the decision of that council was not Peter's alone but that of "the apostles and elders, with the whole church" (Acts 15:22). We do not see a pope in Acts 15.

We can also see Peter's humility in the last chapter of 1 Peter, where Peter again does not represent himself as the first pope but as "a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ" (1 Pet. 5:1). With apostolic authority he directs, "Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for 'God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble'" (1 Pet. 5:5). He himself seems to have been set back a peg or two when he denied the Lord before a servant girl, and later went out and wept bitterly (Matt. 26:75).

Second Peter doesn't begin, "Simon Peter, first pope of the Christian church" but "Simon Peter, a bondservant and apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who have obtained like precious faith with us by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ." Peter saw himself as a humble bondservant who, along with all the saints, *obtained* like precious faith by the grace and merits of Jesus Christ. He would have vociferously rejected the idea that he had done anything at all to merit salvation.

But Peter was an apostle, the most notable of the twelve. As an apostle he felt a profound responsibility for the care of the saints. As he grew older and his life drew to a close, Peter wanted to prepare the church to carry on after his decease. He knew full well that the church was not *Peter's* church, but *Christ's*. No one of us should see ourself as indispensable. It is *Christ* who is indispensable. Our Lord had earlier told his church, "I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you. . . . When He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth" (John 16:7, 13). If our Lord's physical presence was not essential to the ongoing success of the church, then Peter's was not, either. Our Lord had promised to build his church, and the gates of hell would fall before it. He, now ascended to the Father, is still committed to this work, and we must not doubt that he is going to be successful at it.

In this second epistle Peter urges the saints to grow in the faith and to make their call and election sure. Here Peter refers not to Christ's special call of some, such as elders and pastors, to church office, but to the "internal and effectual call by special grace, to grace here, and glory hereafter" (to use the words of Gill). This is the calling to which Paul referred when he wrote, "we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are *called*, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:23–24).

How do we make our calling and election sure? By growing in faith and maturity, gaining victory over temptation and the sin that so easily besets us, and living a life of good works that demonstrate that our faith is real. As Jesus said, a tree is known by its fruit. In like manner, election is known by the fruit of good works. Good works are not the *cause* of our justification but the *result* of our justification.

In the remainder of this sermon I want to focus on verses 12–15. Here, Peter speaks of his approaching death. Now the fact that we are all appointed once to die, and after this the judgment, is one of those things that should be evident to all from general revelation, what we called this morning "the witness of nature."

Just as nature itself teaches us that if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him,¹ so nature teaches even more strongly that in a fallen world we are appointed to die. Walk past any cemetery and look at the gravestones. It perfectly reflects what Moses taught in Psalm 90, "The days of our lives are seventy years; and if by reason of strength they are eighty years, yet their boast is only labor and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away" (v. 10). In a world under God's curse due to sin, life is short, relatively speaking. Moses understood this, and expressed it poetically in the only Psalm known to have been written by him.

Because of advantages in nutrition and healthcare there has been a dramatic increase in lifespan during my lifetime. Esteemed OPC minister John Galbraith died in 2016 at the age of 103. A few years ago I officiated at the funeral of Helen Zetterholm, a godly mother and charter member of this church, at the age of 99. In early 2022 my dear mother-in-law, the last of her generation in our family, will turn 99. There are a number of OPC ministers who continue to pastor churches into their seventies.

On the other hand, younger people die as well. Norma and I this fall attended the funeral of a faithful Baptist minister who was much younger than we. Just a few weeks ago we prayed for the family of a young Christian mother who died, leaving her husband to raise several adopted children alone. Just this past week one

¹ 1 Cor. 11:14

of our elders was shocked to hear that a man in his forties who had been in his wedding party suddenly died, leaving his wife to raise their children.

Older people die, middle-aged people die, younger people die, children die, babies die. Death is a fact of life in a fallen world. Yet the Christian looks forward to the day when “God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be *no more death*, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away,” the day when he who sits on the throne makes “all things new” (Rev. 21:4–5).

The fact that nature teaches us that we are all going to die ought to move us all, no matter our age, to prepare for death. It ought to motivate us to pray each day for grace to be “faithful unto death” (Rev. 2:10)—the verse that is chiseled on my father’s tombstone in Hagerstown, Maryland, where he spent the last few years of his life.

Peter writes, “I think it is right, as long as I am in this *tent*, to stir you up by reminding you, knowing that shortly I must put off my *tent*, just as our Lord Jesus Christ showed me” (2 Pet. 1:13–14).

Twice, Peter uses the word σκηνωμα, tent. This teaches us that our body is like a tent, a *temporary* dwelling.

Nothing in this world is permanent. The Bible says, “the world passeth away, and the lust thereof” (1 John 2:17).

The house in Detroit where Norma and I lived when we were first married was a beautiful house. It was brick and had a fireplace and lots of beautiful woodwork. A few years ago we drove back to the old neighborhood with our son. As we drove down the street we were shocked to find that many of the houses had been abandoned, some had burned, and others were boarded up. When we got to the block where we had lived, we couldn’t find the house right away. Then I spied the house next-door, and looking carefully, found the old brick house, still standing. It was completely hidden by overgrown brush. Several windows were completely missing, allowing wild animals easy access. It was totally uninhabitable.

Along U.S. 12 in St. Joseph County there is a grand old manor that housed a nursing home up until the early 60s, when a new, cinder block structure was put up in town. Norma and I have driven past that grand old manor many times. It has been vacant for over 60 years. Norma remembers how her church youth group had gone out to the grand old manor to sing for the residents many years ago. As I look at that structure, which isn’t even boarded up and is surrounded by overgrown brush, I imagine how it could be fixed up and turned into a bed and breakfast or even a hotel. Yet there is no market for it at the present time. So there it sits, quiet, decaying. If it sits there long enough, eventually the roof will fall in. Eventually, the place thereof will remember it no more (Ps. 103:16).

Some castles and cathedrals in Europe are many centuries old, but many lie in ruins; and eventually, all will come down. Nothing on this earth is permanent, the earth and everything in it will be burned up (2 Pet. 3:10). Only what is done for Christ will last. At the final day all our works will be tried as by fire.

Peter was very much conscious of the swiftness with which life passes. He didn't understand this theoretically or philosophically. For him it was very personal. It occupied his thinking. It occupied his thought as to how he would minister to the church for which he was bore spiritual responsibility.

He also spoke of his impending death as a “decease,” (literally “exodus,” ἔξοδος, a going out on a road, as the Israelites went out of Egypt, a euphemism for death). We, too, will all one day go out too—go out of this life and into the life to come.

The older we get, the more aware we are of the shortness of life. As Peter took stock of what the Lord had laid on his heart for him to do, he decided he wanted to pen two epistles that would prepare the saints for his eventual departure. As we take stock of what the Lord has laid on *our* hearts, perhaps there are things that we, too, should do. They who are wise will surely focus on being faithful unto death, and on leaving a legacy for their children and grandchildren.

Death for the Christian is a departure, a going out of this life and going in to the life to come. Christ has already won the victory, and he knows the way. Let us all pledge ourselves to be faithful to him at his coming. Our Savior has conquered death and taken away its sting. Let us comfort one another with these words. Amen.