

2 Peter No. 2, “Theosis”

2 Peter 1:1-4

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Text Comment

For those who are interested, Peter, like Paul, had a penchant for long sentences. In Greek his first sentence runs from v. 1 to v. 11. It is broken up into smaller pieces for the sake of English readers. Peter’s Greek teacher apparently never rapped his knuckles or wrote “run on sentence” in red pencil over school work!

v.3 Who is the “him” in the phrase “the knowledge of him who called us”? The flow of the sentence and its relation to the previous sentence demands that it is Jesus Christ, not God the Father. Jesus calls us, and Jesus is the one who enables us to live the Christian life. [Green, 71] No one would have known better the attractive power of Jesus Christ than Peter whose whole life was dominated by what he had heard and seen of the Lord.

“Divine,” of course, but also “Glory” are two words that belong to God. Here they are being attributed to Jesus Christ. Only a few times in the NT is Jesus actually called God. This is one of those times.

This first phrase, “his divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness...” is an opening salvo. The false teachers were by their example undermining these Christians’ commitment to living a godly life, a life that is, as we all know, a life that makes radical demands on our thought, speech, and behavior. The ordinary Christian then as now can be severely tempted from time to time to think that God has simply asked too much of us; that the Christian life is literally impossibly difficult. Our struggle with sin has more than once led us to despair. The false teachers were proposing an easier way, a relaxing of the high standards of behavior taught by the Lord in his Sermon on the Mount and by his apostles. “No!” says Peter. “Christ gives us everything we need to be godly. We are not being asked the impossible because with the law of God comes Christ’s enablement. And so, it is throughout the Bible. Our moral failures are never chalked up to the fact that what is asked of us is too difficult, that the Christian life is simply beyond anyone’s ability. Everything we require to live it has been given to us. Christ is with us by his Spirit to help us. “All things” not some things, not a few things, but all things necessary have been given to us. If we do not live this life, given the provisions Christ has made for us, *we have no one to blame but ourselves!*

So, there is more in the phrase “through the knowledge of him” than we might grasp at first glance. The Greco-Roman world also taught a form of *theosis*, participation in the life of God, but one entered that participation in a variety of different ways depending upon one’s school of thought – esoteric knowledge (the secrets that others do not know), the pleasures of the flesh (which seem to have been a feature of the teaching of the false teachers Peter will condemn in this letter), religious rituals, or whatever – depending on the school of thought. But people of that time and place very definitely did *not* suppose

that such participation in the divine would be obtained through the knowledge of Jesus Christ – an amateur Jewish rabbi who had been executed by the Roman state in Judea, one of the most despised parts of the Roman Empire in those days – any more than people do today. They are more likely to think it can be obtained through yoga, meditation, self-actualization, or moral goodness. It has always been and is today precisely the audacious claim of the gospel that what every human being is actually looking for, the perfect life, to be a whole person, can be found only in the knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Notice that Peter doesn't say that God gives us everything *we want*, but everything *we need* for life and godliness (a very different thing, is it not?).

I miss the KJV's "exceeding great and precious promises..."

- v.4 The great and precious promises however are fulfilled in the lives of those who have escaped the corruption of the world. Peter repeats this in almost identical language in 2:20

Let me begin with two observations before we come to the substance of the sermon. *First*, I simply want you to observe the paradigm at work here in Peter's discussion of the Christian life that is characteristic of biblical teaching. He begins by reminding us *what God has done* for us in vv. 3-4. Then, in the following verses, he will go on to tell us *what we must do*, how we must respond to God's gifts and make use of them. Peter makes God's gifts to us the ground for his appeal to us to live worthy of that grace and that salvation. It is what we have learned to expect from the apostle Paul: theology first, ethics always second. *We are saved to do good works, to follow Christ in obedience and service, never the other way around!* And you'll find that paradigm literally everywhere you look in the Word of God. God has given his grace to us, therefore it is ours to live in response to it.

Second, it is important for us 21st century Americans, who are unfamiliar either with Greek or with the social world in which Peter was working, to appreciate that Peter's choice of wording derives from the culture he is addressing. Or, to put it another way, Peter is teaching his Christian readers against the backdrop of their Greco-Roman culture. In the same way a preacher today must understand his audience, even his Christian audience, as the product of their culture. He must address them in terms that both catch their attention and make sense to them. He must make especially clear how a biblical worldview departs from that in which they were raised, and which is still embraced by their neighbors. For example, the phrase "divine power" is not biblical terminology, in fact this is its only appearance in the Bible, but it was common in the literature of the period, indeed it was "a standard term in Greek literature." So was the word "divine;" much more common in Greek literature than in the Bible. [Bauckham, 177] I won't bore you with other details, but the point is accepted in all the commentaries. Peter is putting his teaching in terms familiar to his readers but reminding them that only Jesus Christ fulfills the actual meaning of these terms or ideas. *What the whole culture was looking for could only be found in the knowledge of Jesus Christ.*

But what does Peter mean when he says that we may become partakers of the divine nature? Well, let me ask you this: what do you think of Athanasius' statement in his great work *On the Incarnation* [54], one of the four or five most important books written in the history of Christianity: "He [that is Jesus Christ] became man that we might become God." A statement like that makes me sit up and take notice. Are we not to believe in the absolute antithesis between God and man, between the Creator and the creature, and between the infinite and the finite? How can a mere man, even a saved man, even a perfect man become God? But then we find something similar in Augustine's statement – a man we trust to be wise, thoughtful, and an intelligent exponent of the Bible's teaching: "God wishes not only to make us alive but to deify us." What does he mean? That we are actually going to become God? Is this not the kind of drivel that we have come to expect from TV preachers nowadays? Some of you may remember the flap over the teaching of Creflo Dollar, the pastor of one of those huge congregations in Atlanta. In one sermon he asked his congregation:

"If horses get together, they produce what?"

"Horses," the congregation replied.

There followed similar questions and answers substituting dogs then cats for horses. Then this.

"So, if the Godhead says, 'Let us make man in our image,' and everything produces after its own kind, then they produce what?"

By now the congregation knew what to say in answer: "gods." To which Dollar replied,

"gods. Little 'g' gods. You're not human. Only human part of you is this flesh you're wearing." [Cited in John Bolt, *Bavinck on the Christian Life*, 79]

Is that what Peter means? Or could he be a Mormon, teaching as they do that Jesus once first only a human being became God, equal to the Father, and that we can do likewise? The whole idea sounds alarming to western Christian ears. [Letham, *Union with Christ*, 91]

You may be aware that in Orthodox theology, that is the theology of the Eastern Church, that third branch of Christendom that we know least about, this doctrine of what is called *theosis*, or divinization, occupies an important place. This doctrine has often been criticized, usually quite sharply, by western theologians, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, but, you may be surprised to learn that as our evangelical and Reformed theologians have grown better acquainted with Orthodoxy, they have grown less critical of the Eastern view of *theosis*. That greater familiarity with Orthodox thought has occurred, in some part, because of the number of prominent western evangelicals who, disenchanted by the triviality of western Protestantism, have converted to Orthodoxy, the most recent being no one less than the "Bible Answer Man," Hank Hanegraaff. In any case, as you can imagine, 2 Peter 1:4 plays an immense role in all these discussions. What on earth does it mean for men to "become partakers of the divine nature"?

My friend Robert Letham, one of our best theological minds in the conservative Presbyterian world of our day, has studied the Orthodox doctrine and written about it and his conclusion is that, in part due to our unfamiliarity with Orthodox thinking, we have generally misunderstood

what is taught in the Eastern Church. We have thought that by *theosis* the Orthodox imagined that man's very being would change, and he would become God as God is God. In such a case, of course, the Creator-creature distinction would be obliterated. Lethem writes that *theosis* or divinization in Orthodox thought does not mean that we *become* God or even gods (little "g"), that our nature as human beings is changed into something else. Rather, *theosis* is the Orthodox term for what Reformed theologians mean when they talk of regeneration (the new birth), sanctification, and glorification, the entire work of God's grace by which we are remade after the image of Christ.

In this sense Peter means nothing more, but nothing less, than Jesus meant when he spoke of our being born again or born from above, what Paul meant when he described the Christian as the temple of the Holy Spirit, what Jesus and Paul meant by saying that the believer is "in Christ," or what Jesus meant when he said, "In that day you will know that I am in my Father and you in me and I in you" and "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and he will come to him and make our home with him." [John 14:20, 23]

Remember, we have the example of Jesus himself. He was and is eternal God, with the Father and the Spirit. But he joined to himself, to his person, a human nature, a true and authentic human nature. In his person there now exists both God and man. To be sure his situation is utterly unique. But it reminds us of how intimately manhood and Godhead can co-exist. And that is, as well, the biblical doctrine of our union with Christ. We are, Jesus said in his famous remarks at the beginning of John 15, "in the vine," drawing our sustenance from him, able to bear fruit because we are united to the vine, the very point that Peter is making here! It is from Christ that we receive all that we need for a life of godliness. As Christ's humanity participates in his deity, so in a lesser way our humanity comes by grace to participate in his deity (and that of the Father and the Spirit).

Remember how the Bible says that those who worship idols become like them: dumb, blind, helpless? Well those who worship God become like him. When we participate in the Holy Spirit we become holy. When we participate in the sinless Savior, our sins are taken away. When we participate in the omnipotent God we receive power to live a godly life. When we participate in the eternal God, we become immortal ourselves. When Athanasius – who said "Jesus Christ became man that we might become God" – goes on to explain what he means by partaking of the divine nature he uses terms we are familiar with: adoption, renewal, salvation, sanctification, grace, illumination, and vivification. [Lethem, 94] I think you get the point. As Cyril, a church father put it, we share in the life of Christ because Christ is in us and we are in Christ. [94]

What we have in 2 Peter 1:3-4, then, is only a particularly powerful and arresting statement of our grafting into Christ the vine as the children of God. "Children of God," by the way, is another reminder of how artlessly the Bible joins us to God: we are his children, he is our Father, Christ is our brother, we belong to the divine family, and so, by grace, take on the characteristics of that family. This is what Peter is talking about. This is already true of us but will become so much more the reality of our lives when our salvation is complete, and we become fully and finally what we are now in principle and partially. C.S. Lewis, as he so often did, expressed the point of all this with great clarity in his *Mere Christianity*.

“Our faith is not a matter of our hearing what Christ said long ago and trying to carry it out. The real Son of God is at your side. He is beginning to turn you into the same kind of thing as himself. [Remember, Jesus Christ is a man; he may be God, but he is also a man. Lewis means that Christ is turning us into the kind of man that he is.] He is beginning, so to speak, to ‘inject’ his kind of life and thought, his *Zoë*, into you; beginning to turn the tin soldier into a live man. The part of you that does not like it is the part that is still tin.”

Even those who taught the Christian life this way, never confused our humanity with God’s deity. As Augustine put it, who taught salvation’s purpose and its consummation in terms of this *theosis*, was careful to say, “For it is one thing to be God, another thing to be a partaker of God.” [*City of God*, XXII, 30, 3; *NPNF* II, 510] In fact, this doctrine of participation in the divine nature, without the terminology used in Orthodox theology, can be found in Protestant and Reformed theology, especially in Calvin, though it was never developed to the same extent. We found other ways to talk about the same thing, and 2 Peter 1:4 never figured as largely in our understanding of the goal and consummation of the Christian life. I have come to see more clearly as an older man how paradigms of theology, the familiar ways in which we learn to think about the Bible’s teaching, can rather easily make certain biblical emphases more or less invisible to us.

So, let me finish this exposition of Peter’s remark about our partaking of the divine nature with a short paragraph from an Orthodox theologian whose name, I’m quite sure, you have never once heard before! But as I read, take note of the many biblical allusions to which he refers.

“But the chief thing is that those who attain the future blessed life and become *partakers of the divine nature* (II Peter 1:4), will be participants in that most perfect life, whose source is in God alone. In particular, the future members of the Kingdom of God will be vouchsafed like the angels, to *see God* (Matt. 5:8), to behold his glory not as through a dark glass, not by means of conjectures, but face to face. And not only will they behold this glory, but they themselves will be *partakers* of it, shining like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father (Matt. 13:43), being ‘fellow heirs’ with Christ, sitting with Christ on a throne and sharing with Him the royal grandeur (Apoc. 3:21; Rom. 8:17; II Tim. 2:11-12). [Michael Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, 353]

Now, with all of that introduction behind us and with that understanding of “partakers of the divine nature” before us: so what? Well the first thing to say is what I said early on. What Peter says here in vv. 3 and 4 is the basis for the exhortation to grow in holiness of life, the grace of God, and in likeness to Christ in the verses that follow. The idea is that given what Christ has done for us, given our participation in him, given the resources that are available to us because of our connection with the Lord Jesus, and given what we have to look forward to, we should be practicing our faith *with a vengeance*. We should be leaving no stone unturned in seeking to put on Christ’s life, making *his* life more and more our own. We’ll take up that exhortation next week, but we will notice then again that the two go together as root and fruit, as foundation and superstructure, as motive and action. Or, as the Puritan Walter Marshall put it in his classic on the Christian life:

“We must first receive the comforts of the gospel in order that we may be able to perform sincerely the duties of the Law.”

But tonight, I want to consider more directly the actual prospect of what Peter describes as “partaking of the divine nature.” There was a lot of this kind of talk and thought in Peter’s day in the Greco-Roman world. Interestingly, there is once again a lot of this talk in our day, much more than there has been in the previous centuries of western life. Participation in the divine, of course, means very different things to different people, but it is striking how much of this sort of spirituality has resurfaced in recent years in the western world – pantheism, becoming part of God, and so on. If you read Peter Jones’ *Truth Exchange* or listen to his blogposts you will be up on the revival of various forms of pantheism and mystical spirituality that are attracting multitudes of people these days.

Well it was much the same in Peter’s world. Peter’s language, as I already noted, was taken from that world. What people were looking for then and what people are looking for now is *something better*. You need to know this about your neighbors, the people that you rub shoulders with at work. They want a richer, deeper life. They want more power over themselves and over the forces that shape their daily lives. They want to be happier than they are. In various ways they want to be better than they are. They want to feel fulfilled, satisfied, complete, or whole. In a secular day like our own, people may have less expectation of living with the gods after death as the Greeks did. They may be less concerned with moral corruption and the purification of the soul than the Greeks were, though there is certainly some of that in modern forms of spirituality. Modern methods may tend to be more superficial and require less sacrifice than did those recommended by Greek philosophy or the mystery religions of the first century. But one has only to look up and observe the world around to see how much people want more of life, how conscious they are of how far short this life falls of their hopes and dreams. They seek money and pleasure of course, but for almost all people – whether they see this clearly themselves or not – these are means to an end, not the ends themselves. They want wholeness, happiness, and fulfillment in life. To be honest, most would take those things, even if it required them to be poor. Whether their approaches are similar to those of the ancient Greco-Roman world – and there were a variety of approaches in that world, some quite different from others (cf. Bauckham, 179-180) – or very different, the goal is the same. People are crying out – and literally when they are at home, are often actually crying – for these things.

This is why Jesus began his Sermon on the Mount with the beatitudes: a profile of the truly happy, satisfied, and fulfilled human person. Happiness – I’m speaking of the deeper sense of real fulfillment, a sense of personal wholeness, as well as emotional joy – is the great question facing human life. There is so much woe in human life, so much failure, so much incompleteness, so much frustration, and looming over all of it our onrushing death, and through all of it every human being has this inbuilt longing to be happy, to be good, to be fulfilled. We can’t help ourselves. The whole world is longing to be happy and the tragedy of human life is precisely that it continues to look for it – true and lasting happiness – in so many places where it cannot be found. The Lord Jesus knew this and so he showed them in his teaching how they might find that happiness, that fulfillment of life, and his apostles did the same after him. And so, have the great Christian preachers after them. As Augustine put it:

“If I were to ask you why you have believed in Christ, why you have become Christians, every man will truly answer, ‘For the sake of happiness.’”

And so when Peter uses the language of his contemporaries to say that what they are actually looking for, this partaking of the divine nature, having your life drawn up into the life of the gods or, in Peter’s case, the life of the one living and true God – which, of course, would bring with it power, and success, and inner peace, and fulfillment, and joy – he is saying that in Christ, and only in Christ, can people find what they are all looking for. And that is to be both our message and our own hope and experience as Christians today.

To be sure – and this is our problem, is it not; and this is the problem of the gospel witness in our time, is it not - we don’t have that participation to the degree we someday will. We have only the anticipation of it, the beginning of it. But think with me, brothers and sisters, about what that will mean to partake of the divine nature as we someday will. Why, we will hardly recognize ourselves. Can you imagine what it will be like to have a perfectly pure heart; to be overwhelmed with love for God and others? You know from your own experience that some of the highest, purest, most wonderful and memorable and delightful experiences of your life were those moments when you felt the power of love in your soul: love for God, love for your wife or husband, for your children. Those moments didn’t last; your love, while still there, descended to a more pedestrian level, but you remember clearly how wonderful that felt when your heart was soaring with that pure feeling, how you wished, thinking back on it, you could always feel that way.

And think of “glory,” which Peter mentions here. That powerful, all-consuming beauty that is God himself and being drunk with it as you and I will be when we finally see it and feel it when we are in his presence. We’ve had only distant glimpses of this in our lives: the beauty of something that virtually takes our breath away. But to live in awe must be extraordinarily wonderful. And that is what it means to partake of the divine nature: to live in awe of the majesty of God, wonder and love vying for supremacy in our hearts all day long.

And power, divine power. How impoverished our lives have been because we couldn’t manage to control ourselves as we should have, might have. But then think of what it will be to find ourselves at last in perfect control, our hearts and our bodies in willing submission to our highest, indeed now our perfect desires, commitments, and convictions. That is what it is to partake of the divine nature. God himself never has to regret his failures; never must bemoan his inability to accomplish what he set out to do. And nor will we or ever again when we have finally and fully partaken of the divine nature, when we are drinking from the vine all the nourishment we are capable of receiving!

You know, every Christian knows, what he or she might be if only in every moment what ought to have been thought and said and done was in fact thought and said and done; if in every moment God was loved as he deserves to be loved and our neighbor as ourselves, and if in every moment we were as glad as we ought to be for all that God has done for us and will finally have given to us: accomplishment of the good, a heart of true love for God and everyone else, and the true and powerful joy of our salvation. That is what it is to partake of the divine nature. And that is what Christ is giving us and will give us completely someday. Nothing less than that!

Think about that, ponder that, look forward to that - *realize that divine life is already pulsing through your own life, not to the degree you wish it were, but it is already in you* - and see if that does not animate and empower you to follow hard after Christ, to bear your sorrows with patience, and to make greater and greater efforts to live worthy of the grace that you have received!