

A Peculiar People

***“Who gave himself
for us, that he
might redeem us
from all iniquity,
and purify unto
himself a peculiar
people, zealous of
good works.”***

—Titus 2:14

IN TODAY’S USAGE, THE word “peculiar,” when referring to people, most often denotes those who are thought of as odd, strange, or even eccentric by those who have observed their manner of life, behavior or appearance. As a result, such persons are frequently viewed in a negative or derogatory light.

While many have, perhaps, similarly viewed those spoken of in our opening text as “peculiar,” that is not the essence of Paul’s statement. Here, rather, the apostle speaks of the divine viewpoint of those who strive to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, and who seek to do the Heavenly Father’s will. To God and his son, Christ Jesus, these individuals are “peculiar” in an entirely different sense.

The Greek word translated “peculiar” in our text is *periousios*, which, according to Professor Strong, means that which is special, or beyond the usual. *Thayer’s Greek Definitions* adds that it refers to those selected by God “for his own possession.” Thus the apostle is stating that this people whom Christ purifies “unto himself” are esteemed by him

and by the Heavenly Father as something of great value to be held dear and cherished. Similar language was used by God concerning Israel when he established his covenant with them. He promised, "Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation."—Exod. 19:5,6

High indeed was the possibility of Israel's relationship with God, but it was dependent upon continued faithfulness in obeying his voice and keeping his commandments. Ultimately, as a nation, Israel failed along these lines. Finally, they rejected Jesus, their Messiah, and were cast off from the hope of continuing to enjoy the chief place of favor in the divine arrangements. Concerning this Paul explains: "Israel hath not obtained that which he seeketh for; but the election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded."—Rom. 11:7

The apostle explains, however, that a remnant of individuals from among Israel qualified for the chief blessing which would come to those who accept Christ and follow in his footsteps. This agrees with the statement concerning Jesus which says, "He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God." (John 1:11,12) However, there was not a sufficient number among the Jews who received the Master to make up the foreordained special people of God, so this calling was opened up to the Gentiles.

Explaining this, using the symbol of an olive tree, Paul says that the Gentile branches are grafted into

the Jewish olive tree to take the places of the natural branches that were broken off because of unbelief. These “wild” Gentile branches, together with any remaining Jewish branches that were not cut off, constitute “spiritual” Israel. Together, these branches partake of the “root and fatness” of the Abrahamic promises which give this symbolic olive tree life and sustenance, so that it may bring forth the fruitage of holiness.—Rom. 11:17-20; 6:22

TAKE HEED

Israel’s standing as God’s peculiar treasure continued only as long as the nation was zealous for hearing and obeying the voice of God. We, also, who have come into this favored position as spiritual Israelites can hope to be reckoned among God’s choice treasure only if we are, as stated in our opening text, “zealous of good works.” The apostle warns us to “take heed,” for if God spared not the natural branches, he will certainly not spare us if we become unfaithful.—Rom. 11:21

Without zeal for doing God’s will, and for engaging in “good works,” no one can hope to be a part of God’s peculiar people. While God may exercise a measure of tolerance toward “lukewarm” Christians, such cannot for long remain within the inner circle of his special treasure. (Rev. 3:15,16) Whatever may be their final destiny, such cannot hope to be a part of that “royal diadem” in the hand of God which will be used by him for the accomplishment of his purposes toward the children of men.—Isa. 62:3

The example of zeal which we should endeavor to emulate is that which was displayed by Jesus. The zeal of God’s house consumed him, and we are

called to follow in his steps. (Ps. 69:9; John 2:17) Jesus' zeal was manifested in the sacrifice of his earthly life, which he voluntarily laid down on behalf of all mankind. We are invited to lay down our lives for the brethren, and to let our light shine before men. (I John 3:16; Matt. 5:16) Jesus' sacrifice constitutes the basis of redemption for both the church and the world, and no matter how much zeal we might display, our sacrifice would not be acceptable apart from the Master's ransom sacrifice. (I John 2:2) However, if in full faith we dedicate our lives to be "zealous of good works," we have the assurance of being "holy and acceptable" in God's sight.—Rom. 12:1

HE GAVE HIMSELF FOR US

In our text, the apostle tells us that Christ "gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity." As members of the condemned and fallen race we were contaminated with sin, because "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." (Rom. 3:23) Jesus' redemptive work makes it possible for us to be made free from "the law of sin and death," and acceptable as joint-sacrificers with him. (Rom. 8:2) However, the mere fact that we accept this provision of divine grace is not sufficient to constitute us a part of God's peculiar people. In addition to this, the apostle says, we must be purified.

This purification is affected by the "washing of water by the word." (Eph. 5:26) This is a cleansing from all fallen fleshly propensities. It is the washing away of selfishness and self-will so that the divine will may reign supreme in our hearts. This cleansing must be thorough if we are to be God's peculiar people. It must be more than a mere passive submission to

his will. It is to be a consuming zeal for the accomplishment of the divine will irrespective of what the cost to us may be. To be purified in such a manner will mean that we are, indeed, a people “zealous of good works.”

These “good works” for which we are to be zealous are God’s works. It was so in Jesus’ case. He came, not to do his own will and work, but the will and work of his Father. (John 6:38) The night before he died, in a prayer to his Father, Jesus said, “As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world.” (John 17:18) This is a wondrous partnership in which we are invited to share. The way by which we can commend ourselves to the Lord in connection therewith is through our zeal for the work that is being done. As workers together with God, we are endeavoring to set everything else aside in order that we may zealously engage in that which he has put into our hands to do.—I Cor. 3:9; II Cor. 6:1

The Apostle Peter also speaks of the consecrated followers of the Master as being a “peculiar people.” (I Pet. 2:9) The Greek word used by him has the thought of a “purchased” people, or a people acquired by purchase. The thought is similar as that outlined by Paul in our text. This people has been purchased at great cost, even by Jesus’ laying down his life for them. Being acquired at so great a sacrifice, they are precious in his sight, a very special treasure.

A CHOSEN GENERATION

Peter mentions other characteristics of these peculiar people. He says, for example, that they are a “chosen generation.” In I Peter 1:2 we are told

that this special group is “elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience.” Paul explains the manner in which God’s foreknowledge operates in connection with this elect people, saying, “Whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son.”—Rom. 8:29

Here again we are reminded of the condition requisite to being the peculiar people of God, that condition being zeal for good works. God has predetermined that each one of this class must be conformed to the image of Christ. The zeal of God’s house consumed the Master, and if we are like him, conformed to his image, then the same zeal will consume us. The Master’s zeal was for the good work of God, and our zeal must also be for God’s work. In this regard, it will not do merely to be zealous without schooling our desires by the word of God. Such zeal could in fact be working in opposition to the designs of the Heavenly Father. Rather, our zeal must be controlled by the divine will. Then it will result in blessings to others and bring honor and glory to the Lord.

God wants us to “give diligence” to make our “calling and election sure,” and if we do, we will become more and more conformed to the image of his beloved Son. (II Pet. 1:10) To be like Jesus we need to know him. This we do through the Word of truth. As we note the details of his consecrated life we are at once impressed with the full extent to which he sought to know and to do his Father’s will at all times and under all circumstances. Even in the most trying moments of his earthly walk he lifted up his heart to God and said, “not my will, but thine, be done.”—Luke 22:42

Jesus met temptation by appealing to the expressed will of God—"it is written." (Matt. 4:4,7,10) He was faithful in prayer, and could say to his Father, "I knew that thou hearest me always." (John 11:42) The Master let his light shine so faithfully that it finally cost him his life. He was ever on the alert to bless others, even the little children. Jesus put all of his hours toward the glory of his Father and the service of his disciples and others as he had opportunity. Such is the portrait of the Master as revealed to us in his life of devotion and sacrifice. God has set the requirement that if we are to be a part of the "chosen generation" of this age, we must be conformed to the Master's image.

A ROYAL PRIESTHOOD

"Ye are a royal priesthood, an holy nation," the apostle asserts. (I Pet. 2:9) Here again the language God employed to describe his chosen people of the past is applied to spiritual Israel. The nation of Israel was designated "a kingdom of priests," but to retain that title required continued zeal for the doing of God's will. (Exod. 19:5,6) This zeal was lacking, and now the title is transferred "to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof."—Matt. 21:43

The priests of Israel represented God among the people. Their work was twofold. They offered sacrifice, and they dispensed the blessings of God to the people. All Israel, in fact, was to be a nation of priests in the sense that they were to represent God before the rest of the world. However, they fell short in attaining this high position of divine favor. Now this title and privilege belong to God's peculiar people of the present age. In I Peter 2:5 the apostle explains

that these constitute a “holy priesthood,” consecrated to offer up sacrifices. Peter also says that they are “built up a spiritual house.” This is a reference to the symbolism of the temple as the meeting place between God and Israel. The people came to the Temple to receive God’s blessings. So God’s peculiar people are to be the channel of divine blessings to the whole world when the work of sacrifice is complete. What wondrous grace is thus bestowed upon those who are “zealous of good works.”

AN HOLY NATION

To be holy means to be pure and blameless. The holiness for which God is looking in his people is that which is suggested by the plate of pure gold which was attached with a cord of blue to the mitre which Israel’s High Priest wore on his forehead. Engraved upon the gold plate were the words, “HOLINESS TO THE LORD.” (Exod. 28:36-38) The thought evidently is that of an unmixed and whole-hearted devotion to God. To the extent that Israel’s worship and service were in harmony with the inscription visible on the forehead of the High Priest, they were “accepted before the LORD.”

God expects that his peculiar people of the present age will be undivided in their devotion to him. We are not to be “double minded.” (James 1:8) There may be very little danger today that we will worship Moloch or other heathen deities. However, there are many “idols” which our wayward hearts may set up, and through the worship of which we would become unholy in our devotion to God. There is the god of pleasure; the god of wealth; the god of ease; the god of pride and ambition. There is also the dangerous

god of “self.” How we need to be on the alert lest we become worshippers of self and self-will. To qualify as a part of God’s holy nation of today, only the divine will is to rule supreme in our hearts and lives.

God wants us to be, as the Apostle Peter states, “obedient children, not fashioning yourselves according to the former lusts. ... But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation.” Then the apostle quotes from the Old Testament, “Be ye holy; for I am holy.” (I Pet. 1:14-16; Lev. 11:44,45) The entire text in Leviticus from which Peter quotes, reads, “I am the LORD that bringeth you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: ye shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.”

God is here reminding Israel that he was exclusively their God. Later, through Amos, God declared, “You only have I known of all the families of the earth.” (Amos 3:2) God is pure and sinless from whatever standpoint we may view him, but in this and the Leviticus passages he seems to be emphasizing the point that he had not been a God to any other nation in the same way as he was to Israel. It is upon the basis of this holiness toward them, that he asked them to be holy toward him. He had no other people; they were to have no other gods.

The same thing is true today. God loves all nations and peoples, and has promised blessings for them in due time. However, he considers the “holy nation,” the footstep followers of Christ, as being his peculiar people. To these he becomes Father, Helper and Friend. He engraves them upon the palms of his hands, and they are as dear to him as the apple of his eye. His name is written in their foreheads. He

provides for all their needs, gives them strength when they are weak, comforts them when they are discouraged, and sustains them when they are sorrowful. In the end, he will exalt them to his own nature. Indeed, they are a peculiar treasure unto him, and no good thing will he withhold from them.—Ps. 17:8; 84:11; Isa. 49:16; Phil. 4:19; Rev. 14:1

SHOWING FORTH GOD'S PRAISES

After applying these various symbolically descriptive titles to the followers of the Master, the apostle Peter explains the practical significance of what they all imply. He says, "That ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light." (I Pet. 2:9) This, after all, is the objective of the "good works" for which God's peculiar people should be zealous. All that is done by the Christ, head and body, both in this age and in the next, shows forth the praises of God.

The Messianic age work of healing the sick and raising the dead will certainly show forth God's praises. When, through the instrumentality of the Christ, the knowledge of God's glory fills the earth as the waters cover the sea, all mankind will praise the Lord. (Hab. 2:14) Then every creature in heaven and in earth will praise "him that sitteth upon the throne," and will also give glory to "the Lamb that was slain." (Rev. 5:12,13) Those who are privileged to share in that future work of filling the earth with the glory of God will be those only who previously have zealously sacrificed all their earthly interests in showing forth the praises of the Lord "in the midst of a crooked and perverse" generation, among whom they presently "shine as lights."—Phil. 2:15

The extent to which the light of the Gospel penetrates the darkness of this world is not the responsibility of the Christian, but we are responsible for letting the light shine. Whether men hear or whether they forbear does not affect the obligation imposed upon us by divine grace to show forth the praises of God, who has called us out of darkness into the light of truth. We are sacrificing priests to this end; we are a holy nation for this purpose; we are a chosen generation to be the light of the world. A consuming zeal for carrying on this good work as God directs in his Word, and in recognition of the fact that it is all by his grace that this privilege is extended to us, means that God will continue to encircle us with love as his peculiar people.

Being zealous of good works does not mean that we can earn our way into the kingdom, nor does it indicate that salvation is of works, and not “by grace ... through faith.” (Eph. 2:8) It does mean, however, that we will be demonstrating our faith by our works. (James 2:17,18) We will realize that we do not belong to ourselves, but to God, and are privileged to serve him forever. It means that we qualify to be God’s peculiar treasure by showing our appreciation of what he has done for us. If we really appreciate God’s love, we will want to tell everybody about it, and by doing this, we show forth his praises. Let us daily have zeal such as Jesus had—zeal which will fully consume us in our Heavenly Father’s service as his peculiar treasure. ■

“... So that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

—Ephesians 2:7, New American Standard Bible