

Futility No More

1 Peter 1:17–25

And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for “All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.” And this word is the good news that was preached to you.

Jesus' resurrection changed everything. When you've been rescued from a deadly situation or restored to health, there's a new sense of life. If you had been plucked by a helicopter from a raging flood, you'd gladly follow the directions of the crew: “Sit here.” “Yes, sir! Thanks!” Jesus' resurrection has changed everything. It brings new clarity, joy, and life to even the darkest days. I am rescued. I am baptized. I will live forever.

In today's Epistle, Peter revels in the kindness of our Father. He rescued us from our dire predicament. Not only did he pour out his Son's blood to ransom us, but he raised him from the dead, changing everything for us. Peter proclaims:

We were born of perishable seed. Peter writes, “you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers” (v 18).

Since the human genome has been mapped, we're learning about the design of our genetic code. Your hair color, eye color, and potential for height and intellect were established at conception. Sadly, we all inherited terrible birth defects: a sinful nature and a countdown clock. Peter calls our inheritance “futile ways” and “perishable seed.”

Futility is part of our genetic code since Adam's fall.

Futility abounds. We're quick to repeat the same mistake or evil thought. We're quick to excuse our sins and keep track of others' sins. Relationships crumble all around us. We can't stop illnesses. And look around: there's pointless violence, needless pain, ugly addictions, rampant selfishness, and false gods that abound. It's all because of this infection we caught from our forefathers. We're never going to stop all crime, cure all diseases, and protect all from violence. We're never going to end death. Unless our Lord returns first, these bodies will fail us. Peter quotes Isaiah, “All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls” (v 24). There are those beautiful people in your life. They bring smiles to our faces and joy to our days. But the tragic fact is that all the flowers of mankind will wither. We're born to futility and death. That's what it means that we're born of “perishable seed.”

But you were ransomed by Jesus' blood. Peter proclaims, “you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (vv 18–19).

Ransomed is a beautiful word for Jesus' saving work for you. Jesus said, “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45). *Ransomed* means “set free,” the word for purchasing a slave's freedom, a useful image for winning our release from eternal futility and death. How were you purchased from the infection of perishable seed? “Not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (vv 18–19). If perishable money could have ransomed us, we might have been able to pay it. But it requires a holy, powerful currency: the blood of Christ, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.

Think about this. From man's view, wasn't the death of Jesus and his shed blood about the most futile thing ever? No one, without the aid of the Spirit, looked at dead Jesus hanging on the cross as anything but futility. Where is his kingdom? How can the death of this most beautiful flower who healed the sick; raised the dead; opened blind eyes and deaf ears; preached good news to the poor; forgiveness to sinners, comfort to the troubled, and life to the dying —how can the death of Jesus be good? But you know what could not be seen with the naked eye. This was the Father's plan for your rescue. Jesus, the only conceived

person ever to be free of perishable seed, took on our sin -- made to be sin for us. The Father had poured out on him the punishment for all rebellion, the wrath for all evil, and the wages of sin. All so that God's only-begotten Son could pour out his blood for you. Jesus is the full payment for freedom from futility and death. As Luther put it so joyfully in his explanation of the Second Article of the Creed, "I believe that Jesus Christ . . . is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sin, from death and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with his holy precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death that I may be his own". Jesus redeemed you with his blood.

And then at Easter, God raised Jesus from the dead. This is the beating heart of today's Epistle, of this joyful season, and of every Sunday. The Lord is risen! *He is risen indeed. Alleluia!* The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the opposite of futility. It is death that now has become futile! What can death do? Scare us, concern us, stalk us, but in Christ Jesus it cannot harm us. It must release us, just as it released our Lord Jesus. Jesus' death was not the mere withering of another blade of grass; it was the brilliant, saving plan of your heavenly Father to rescue all fallen mankind. Jesus appeared to be the weakest plant set before the relentless combine of death. But death had no right to claim him; he was the completely innocent Son of God, the sinless Son of Man. Jesus destroyed death from the inside. Death died. Consequently, his grave is empty and yours will be, too. Death's designs, Satan's strategies, and all the efforts of men against Christ Jesus and his Holy Church are futile. They will all fail. They will all wither and be turned for your good. For God raised Jesus from the dead. You who believe in Jesus' resurrection are declared innocent, free! Even more, sin's infection, which still lingers in your mortal body, will soon be completely eradicated! Death is kaput. Jesus lives. God raised him from the dead for you.

So you're set free by the good news of Jesus! "This word is the good news that was preached to you" (v 25).

Of ourselves, we're frail and weak, but the Gospel of Jesus reaches into us and plants imperishable life in us. Luther beautifully comments on the preached Gospel: "To be sure, it is quickly spoken and heard; but when it enters the heart, it cannot die or pass away. Nor does it let you die. It holds you as long as you cling to it. Thus when I hear that Jesus Christ died, took away my sin, gained heaven for me, and gave me all that He has, I am hearing the Gospel. The Word is soon gone when it is preached;

but when it falls into the heart and is grasped by faith, it can never slip away.

Yes, "'All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, *but* the word of the Lord remains forever.' And this word is the good news that was preached to you" (vv 24–25);. The Word of the Lord remains forever, so you remain forever. The Word of the Lord proclaims Jesus' ransoming blood and saving resurrection, so your freedom and new life in Christ cannot fail. You are set free by the Gospel of Jesus.

What the next step? Love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God" (vv 22–23).

Before, we were trapped because of inherited sinfulness, but now, in Holy Baptism, you've been born again of imperishable seed. The name of our saving God was planted in you, sin was washed away, and Jesus' eternal life became your own. Now you're free. You are free from futility and unending death. You are set free and sent by your heavenly Father to live your life here in loving service to your neighbor. Your risen Savior empowers you with his love to love—not to earn your salvation; that's impossible. But freed from total selfishness, his love has its way with you as you serve one another in his love.

What blessed comfort the resurrection of Jesus gives! His eternal life now lives in his baptized believers, and born of this imperishable seed, you, like your Jesus, live. And your work in him, like his work, is not in vain. Amen.

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