

## 1 Peter 4:3b-6

Chester cathedral is well worth a visit if you have a few minutes to spare some day. Sure, it's steeped in history, but like most of these buildings, there's a lot more to them than meets the eye. Within its walls there is an old clock with this inscription: 'When I was a child I laughed and wept – time crept; when I was a youth I waxed more bold – time strolled; when I became a full grown man – time ran; when older still I grew – time flew; soon I shall find in passing on – time gone. O Christ, wilt thou have saved me then?' Peter echoes similar sentiments in his incisive challenge to the Christians living in the first century. He says to them in verse 3: 'For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do.' In other words, you've been there, you've done that; this is the hour to burn your bridges with your past way of life, now is the time to lay to rest once and for all those things which occupied your time and energy. It's a matter of seizing the moment and grasping the opportunity with both hands which God has given to them in his grace. For them, this could be the first day of the rest of their lives as they take up the cross and follow Jesus. In our previous study we discovered in verse 1 that the cross will impact their attitudes, in verse 2 it will seriously influence their ambitions, and right here in verse 3 it will radically impinge on all our activities. And you don't have to be a rocket scientist to understand the reason why! Peter says quite categorically that our former way of life was spent in self indulgence, we lived for me, myself and I; when the old apostle lifts the lid off our pre-conversion shenanigans, he pulls no punches, he gets quite specific, he describes it with extremely colourful language! He says in less than a dozen words that we frittered away our time 'living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry.' Not particularly pleasant reading, is it! Having said that, I think it would be good for us to unpack each of these words, it will help us to understand what makes sinful man tick. Peter says we avidly pursued a course of sensuality, it's the

Greek word 'aselgeia' that is employed here and it is used to describe the spirit which knows no restraint, the spirit which dares to sin any sin; basically, it is unbridled vice. In fact, in the NIV translation we have tended to use the old word 'debauchery' and that word meant an excessive indulgence in sensual pleasure. It is unchecked lawlessness, it's a lifestyle where the individual openly flaunts his pornography. These are actions that disgust and shock public decency. The next item on Peter's hit list of revulsion is the word 'lust' which has the idea of passion associated with it. It means evil desire. It is to be driven by the animal instinct, it's what happens when people engage in bestial behaviour. It is both a mindless and senseless indulgence in pleasures that passion pursues. I believe it goes way beyond sexual promiscuity into a realm where it includes the lust for revenge and the lust for money. At the end of the day, it is an insatiable desire for something that isn't mine, it is nothing less than pure greed! Then he uses another word which we're all fairly familiar with, he talks about drunkenness. This word literally means wine bubbling up and it conveys the idea of intoxication, that's the state of someone who is stupid drunk, it's the person who has had one too many; allied to that, habitual drunkenness could well speak of the inebriation that comes from taking drugs as well. Both are freely available in today's consumer culture and, in certain quarters, it is seen to be chic to indulge in both. The next word is translated orgies and it emerges from the Greek word 'komos'. It really refers to a wild party. The term was frequently used in extra-biblical literature to focus attention on a group of what we would call in today's speak, lager louts; these drunken yobs were, literally, staggering and swaying on the public highway, they were swaggering and singing their way through the streets causing more than a racket and creating a fair bit of havoc. And, by the way, back in Peter's day, such irresponsible behaviour was usually associated with the worship of false gods, the cults of the ancient time, like the worship of Dionysius or Baachus. Peter adds another word to his list which is strikingly similar to

orgies, he talks about carousing and that comes from the Greek word 'potos'. It speaks of drinking parties, boozing sessions. It's what happens when a handful of people get together and drink for the sake of drinking and, to a man, they end up the worse for wear. Peter's final inclusion is a reference to the worship of idols and, as we all know, that is an abomination to God. This means worshipping the creature, rather than paying homage to the Creator. We can so easily make an idol out of something or someone, and before we know it, our admiration can quickly turn to worship. When that happens, it's not long before we end up sliding further and further down the slippery slope. What fascinates me is this, so much of what Peter refers to was packaged up and tied up in a ribbon called religion; it was justified as a form of worship to a deity! Isn't it amazing how man always tries to rationalise his vulgar lifestyle? All of these activities describe a whole miserable spectrum of pleasure seeking consumption ranging from wanton substance abuse to wild free-for-all sexual parties. And there we were, we thought in our naïveté that these things represented life in the fast lane of the third millennium! The plain fact is, when it comes to a shameless, pagan lifestyle, nothing is new! Peter says quite explicitly, that's what life was like in the former days, in the bad old days; that's what we were like prior to entering into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. But, thank God, things are different now, God's grace has brought about an incredible and mind-blowing transformation. As Chuck Swindoll says: 'What is so liberating about our relationship with Christ is that he fills the void in our lives that we once tried to fill with all that garbage. With the void filled, the gnawing emptiness that accompanied it is gone too. And with the emptiness gone, we no longer crave the things we used to crave.' That's where the people of God are different from the pagan's in the world, that's where we stand out in a crowd, that's where the light shines in the darkness; and, invariably, the darkness reacts to such a light. In fact, the predictable response of our former friends and companions is quite understandable. Peter informs us in verse 4,

‘they think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you.’ You know, he couldn’t have said a truer word! He hits the nail on the head; if we love the Lord, we’ve all been down that road at one time or another. People think we’re weird just because we no longer do the things they spend their time doing, they treat us as if we have come from another planet, they see us as a bunch of oddballs or misfits in society, they ostracise us and we end up being fodder for their verbal taunts and abuse. I was intrigued to discover that the verb means to be astonished, to be surprised, to be shocked. And, as if to add fuel to the fire, it includes the idea of taking offense. In other words, such folk resent us because we have changed sides. Drawing the line in a new life will antagonise former friends. They will find our new code of conduct bizarre, even threatening. If the truth be told, some of them even go so far as to take it personally and I’m sure some of them end up on a proverbial guilt trip. To them, it doesn’t make an awful lot of sense for they think we’re being downright crazy, it doesn’t add up and no matter how hard they try, they just can’t figure us out! The picture emerging from his vivid language is that of a large crowd running together in a mad, wild race; it’s a kind of melee with people going over the top. The term ‘flood’ which is used only here means primarily the confluence of waters. It has the concept of waters coming together to flow. Some commentators suggest that Peter has in mind the idea of a cistern, other Bible scholars prefer the idea of refuse pouring into a cesspool. I think the second one is a more accurate reflection of what Peter is saying! Dissipation means the state of evil in which a person thinks about nothing but evil; he doesn’t think about his health, he doesn’t think about the state of his finances, he doesn’t think about guarding his personal reputation, he doesn’t think about his character; all he is interested in is indulging his passion in sin. It seems to me from people watching that there is such a burning passion in sin that people are content to live their lives as if there was no tomorrow, they appear to have an irresistible and

irrepressible basic instinct which carries them feet first into the cesspool of dissipation. They're like iron filings to a magnet, there's a pull, there's an attraction. And, so far as Peter is concerned, that is hardly a spa for a Christian, it's hardly the best place for you to be; but, don't forget, remember that's how it was! Now they know a better way, a way that their scornful friends could not imagine. One writer puts it like this: 'Fervent love of brothers and sisters in Christ had replaced lust, alert awareness of the times had replaced drunken stupor, but above all, the joyful adoration of the risen Lord had replaced the folly of idolatry.' The punchline is: no turning back! The reason is: the way you are is different from the way you were! They could sing the words of the song with fresh meaning: 'Past put behind us, for the future take us, Lord of our lives, to live for Christ alone!'

Verse 5 is a stark reminder that God has the final say when it comes to sinful man. The bottom line is, one day they will meet their Maker, they will face the ultimate judgment; they may live their lives on the run down here but there's no hiding place afforded to them in that day of accountability, for we read: 'But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.' Peter has a few words to say about it here; when you fast forward to Revelation 20 you will discover that John is on the same wavelength when he writes about the great judgment morning. The only difference is, he has a lot more to say about it! What emerges is this, the one who will sit in court as our Judge is the one who hung on the cross as our Jesus! This promises to be an awesome moment as sinners stand in the dock before an angry God. T S Eliot, writing about this momentous occasion, cautions the individual to 'be prepared for him who knows how to ask questions.' If men are alive when God calls them to face the music, they will be brought in to appear before the judge of all the earth; if they have died, that poses no problem to the great and mighty God, they will be raised and in God's good time they will be brought to book. I like the way

Stuart Briscoe describes the drama unfolding, he writes: 'The living and the dead who are dead to Christ because they flatly rejected the cross, because they manufactured their own messiah, because they created their own Christ and have absolutely no antidote for their sin will be told by Jesus, "Depart from me, I never knew you".'

Peter's choice of words in verse 5 is hugely significant. When he says 'they will have to give account' he is employing a bookkeeping term. It means to pay back. The baseline is: these folk who are pagan in their mindset, who spend their life casting aspersions on the people of God and who malign believers are amassing a debt that they will spend all eternity paying back. In that day, as it were, they can't plead the poor mouth! God has it on his books and they will have their day in court! Paul writes on a similar vein in Romans 3:19 when he reminds us that every mouth will be gagged and no-one will have a defense. They will be struck dumb before a holy God, before the great white throne of judgment, without defense, without an advocate, and with no excuse! What men don't always realise is that the Lord is ready to judge, he could initiate the process in the next twenty-four hours if he chose to operate within that particular framework; he could start the ball rolling today, tomorrow, next week if he wanted to; the only reason for the apparent delay is to give careless men a further chance to repent of their sin and make their peace with God. I can assure you, the fact that he has not returned as yet must not be taken as an indication of tardiness on his part nor is it a coded message that he has cancelled his original schedule and is now working on plan B; if anything, his temporary delay is nothing more and nothing less than a postponement. That faint glimmer of hope, that flickering light in the darkness is based on the words of Peter in his second epistle when he writes in 3:9 that 'the Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness; he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.' It seems to me that there is another incentive for us to turn our backs on sin and that's what Peter advocates in verse 6. There we read:

'For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to men in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit.'

This is truly a wonderful verse and it is one that is pregnant with gospel truth. It is a verse uniquely marked by the twin pillars of simplicity and profundity. The gospel which Peter makes reference to is none other than the message of Jesus Christ and him crucified, it's the summary statement which Paul spells out for us in 1 Corinthians 15:3,4. This is the saving message of salvation in Christ alone by faith alone through grace alone! We are also informed in the verse that this proclamation was made in the presence of those 'who are now dead'. I believe this refers to those believers who responded positively to the invitation to follow Christ and who are now with the Lord. The chances are that some of them had been martyred, some of them paid the supreme sacrifice; maybe some in the association of those to whom this letter was sent had died for their faith in Jesus. And so, the thought uppermost in Peter's mind is that the authentic believer who is living under the dark clouds of persecution and repression, the person who finds himself in a no-win situation where he is on the receiving end of unjust harsh treatment, the sincere individual who has had more than his fair share of punishment for one reason or another and perhaps even stared death in the eye, says Peter, such a person should be willing to suffer knowing there is triumph because, though he may die in the flesh as a man, he will live in the spirit according to the will of God. The bottom line is, Peter is reminding us that God has an overriding purpose for our lives, he is one hundred percent committed to us, he has promised us that through death we will ultimately overcome sin. It doesn't matter what angle you view it from, that has to be seen as the icing on the cake for the real Christian for that is looking at life from an eternal perspective. When all is done and dusted, Peter has taken us right back to where we started, we have come full circle: all that death can do is bring us into everlasting life in the presence of God! That is tremendous!

Before I hand the microphone back to Nigel, let me just recap on what we have learned in our study today: I want to borrow the candid and refreshingly honest words of John MacArthur when he acknowledges: 'We all battle against the enemy of sin and victory over sin is not some kind of mystical apprehension, it is not some esoteric perception, but simply focusing on the damage and the devastation which it causes. That simply means: if we can ever see it for what it is, we're going to hate it as God hates it! To see what sin did to the Lord Jesus Christ, to see what sin does to God, to see how sin cripples believers and devastates their lives, their marriages and their families, to see how sin retards people from being what God wants them to be. And then, when we understand how sin leads the whole human race into a filthy cesspool of dissipation and ultimately lands you in the dock facing the judgment of a holy God, that should be enough to make us hate sin. And then, when you flip that over and compare the other side, that God has promised us that, in the end, no matter what the unregenerate man does to us, we will live in the spirit unto God forever.'