Truth for Today
The Bible Explained

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Broadcast : 06/07 December 2025 **No.:** T1436 **Speaker:** Ian Britton

Pairs in Peter
A Holy nation, a people for his possession

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New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]

Introduction
Have you ever had one of those conversations where the other person keeps making cultural references that go straight over your head? Years ago, at work, I used to have a colleague who had seemingly memorised every line of every sketch in the Monty Python TV series! He would make quotations and references that clearly meant something to him, but left me, and others, simply baffled. His conversation relied on a shared memory and understanding that just wasn't there for many of the people he talked with. Some readers of the passage in 1 Peter on which this series of talks is based, might find themselves in a similar position. The apostle Peter was a relatively uneducated fisherman, but the fact that he was a Jew meant that he had been brought up to know what we call the Old Testament scriptures from childhood. He would have learnt them at home and in the synagogue, and his family would have visited the temple for all the important Jewish feasts. Peter may not have had the extra education (Acts 22:3), or the exceptional analytical mind, of the apostle Paul, but his knowledge of the Old Testament was extensive. Paul, writing in Galatians 2:7-8, states that Peter exercised the "apostleship to the circumcised." This means that Peter was the chief speaker to the Jewish nation – "the circumcised."

Peter was writing this first epistle to a largely Jewish audience, whom he addresses in chapter 1 v. 1 as "pilgrims of the Dispersion," that is, the Jewish Christians scattered from Jerusalem and Israel by the persecution recorded in the book of Acts. So, Peter not only knew the Old Testament very well himself, but he also expected his readers to share the same level of knowledge. For this reason, he draws on this Jewish background both explicitly and implicitly throughout this epistle, making very many direct quotations and indirect references from the Old Testament. All eight of the expressions in these four pairs are based on Old Testament references and these are just a few of the scriptures that Peter refers to in this letter.

The Passage Under Consideration
Let's remind ourselves of the whole section under consideration in this series of talks:

> Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. Therefore it is also contained in the Scripture, Behold, I lay in Zion a chief cornerstone, elect, precious, and he who believes on Him will by no means be put to shame. Therefore, to you who believe, He is precious; but to those who are disobedient, the stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone, and a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence. They stumble, being disobedient to the word, to which they also were appointed. But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy

> nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy (1 Peter 2:4-10).

The Context of the Passage
The first three verses of the chapter before this section contain an encouragement to lay aside old behaviours that characterised our lives before we trusted in Christ. Then, because the negative element of stopping doing bad things is never enough by itself, we are encouraged positively to desire God's word, which will make us grow, in the same way that newborn babies desire milk. The eight phrases that make up our four pairs are all collective, that is, they describe what believers are as a group rather than as individuals. As individuals we are saved, children, sons etc., as a group we are the church, the body (since composed of many parts), a holy nation and a people for God's possession, among other things.

So, the things listed in the first three verses need to be laid aside by the individual believers in order for them to function properly within the community of believers that is the subject of the passage we are considering in this series of talks. The growth which is promoted by the word of God is also necessary for individuals to properly fulfil their roles in the church.

The following two verses, 11 and 12 which make up the next section of this chapter, are composed of an exhortation for believers to live out their Christian character as separated from the rest of the world, and as a testimony to that world. This theme continues for the rest of the chapter.

The eight titles which we are considering are also mostly things that separate us from the mainstream of the world, out of which the believers of whom the church is comprised, have been called and won, so we can see how they fit within this context.

A Recap
Living stones and a spiritual house: made up the first pairing that we considered from 1 Peter 1:5. The phrase "a holy priesthood" could have been included here as well. These expressions showed how the church is linked to and derived from Christ, who is the original "Living Stone" and who has been rejected by men but who is chosen by God and precious. Christians as "living stones" are fitted around Him to form a "spiritual house."

Given that Peter's name, given to him by Jesus, means literally small stone, I assume Peter had a special interest in this title! Describing the Messiah as a stone or rock happens frequently in the Old Testament. The "spiritual house" is clearly meant to echo the physical house of the temple, which was the place of both the worship and the presence of God. Acting as both temple and priests, Peter says that the company of believers is to,

> Offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:5).

The next few verses then outline the contrast between His preciousness to both God and those who believe on Him, with the disdain of the disobedient who stumble over Him. In contrast, believers are a …

Chosen race (or chosen generation) and a royal priesthood (v. 9). In fact, this pairing and our pair for today occur as a single set of four in the text. A chosen generation and a royal priesthood present the church as a specially chosen group, appointed to be priests with an outward facing purpose. The first pair then, gave us a temple composed of living stones, alongside a holy priesthood to offer sacrifices to God within that temple. This second pair emphasises the contrast

of the “chosen” believers with those “appointed” to disobedience. The royal aspect of the priesthood highlighted here, is the role of the priests to ‘herald forth’ the messages of God to unbelievers outside the inner circle of those within the temple. The phrase “Royal priesthood” is parallel to the phrase “kingdom of priests” in the Exodus passage I'll read in a moment.

Today’s Pair
Finally we get around to considering the pair that is our specific topic for today: A holy nation and [God’s] own special people! As mentioned above, this pair is closely connected in the text with the preceding pairing of the chosen race and the royal priesthood. Just before I get to them in detail, I want to divert again briefly to look at the Old Testament passage that Peter is basing these phrases on. Let me read Exodus 19:3-6.

> And Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel: 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.; These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel.”

This section from Exodus is found just before the LORD appears in smoke on Mt. Sinai to give Moses the ten commandments. The promises it contains are conditional on Israel’s obedience – “If you will indeed obey My voice…then you shall be a special treasure to Me.” Since Israel never fully obeyed God’s commands they never properly received the blessings described in this passage. The priesthood was quickly restricted to the descendants of Aaron, and the people were far from holy for the majority of the Old Testament period. There is no doubt that the nation of Israel was specially treasured by God, but Peter is wanting to show how the things that were physical and material, and only partially fulfilled in the Old Testament, are spiritual and fully implemented for the church in the New Testament.

Peter’s bases his phrases on the Exodus 19 section with “a kingdom of priests” becoming “a royal priesthood”, “a holy nation” being used directly and “a special treasure to Me above all people” becoming “His own special people.”

Some Unfamiliar Words
Our pairing for today uses, in English, the words ‘nation’ and ‘people’. In Greek these are the words ‘ethnos’ and ‘laos.’ The corresponding Hebrew words in Exodus are ‘goy’ and ‘am.’ There are several other words in both Greek and Hebrew which have very similar meanings including the word ‘Genos’ which is translated in the phrase “chosen generation” or “chosen race” in v. 9.

It is worth taking a step back and considering the usage of the Hebrew words ‘goy’ and ‘am’ in the Old Testament. ‘Goy’ is the singular word meaning ‘nation’ and is regularly used to distinguish the nation of Israel from all the other nations. The plural of ‘goy’ is ‘goyim’ and that is the word the Old Testament routinely uses to denote the non-Jewish nations, which is why the word is sometimes translated into English as ‘nations’ and sometimes as ‘gentiles.’ The fact that Israel was a single nation is highly significant: it set them apart as a nation special to God. That is why the division under Solomon’s son Rehoboam to form the southern kingdom of Judah and the northern kingdom of Samaria was so devastating. This was an action that God took deliberately (see 1 Kings 12, especially v. 24 where God says, “This thing is from Me”), which made it a shocking fracture of the single nation which God had chosen for Himself.

The other Hebrew word regularly used to describe Israel, and usually translated into English as ‘people’, is ‘am.’ This is the word that becomes ‘ammi’ for My people and Lo-ammi for 'not My

people' as we will see in Hosea a little later. Scholars say that there is a very large amount of overlap in the meaning of the two words ‘goy’ and ‘am.’ In different circumstances either of them might be translated as nation or people.

The word ‘goy’ can mean people in a collective sense. It is often used for people who are related politically (possibly ruled by a king), those who come from the same territory, or are related by blood. They may also share a common language and worship the same god. The word ‘am’ also means people. It probably indicates a closer, potentially blood relationship with others. ‘Am’ can also mean “relatives” (e.g., 2 Kings 4:13). Both terms are broad in meaning and can be relatively ambiguous. Put simply, there is no obvious and distinct difference between Israel being described as the nation or the people of God. The important distinction is between those who are God's people/nation and those who are not. The equivalent Greek words ‘ethnos’ and ‘laos’ have a similarly large overlap between them.

Back to Today’s Topic!
All of this is a lengthy way of saying that when we consider the phrases “holy nation” and “His own special people,” the difference is not especially in the distinction between a nation and a people but in the differentiation between being holy and being especially God’s own. Put another way: in the two phrases ‘holy’ is more significant than ‘nation’ and “His own special” is more significant than ‘people.’ But to say that there is not much distinction between the words for ‘nation’ and ‘people’ does not mean that their overlapping meaning is not significant! What does it mean that the church are the nation and people of God? I guess my Christian friends who embrace Covenant Theology would say that it proves that the Church has replaced Israel in the plans of God, and that the church now inherits all the promises made to God’s nation, or people, in the Old Testament! I think that is to misunderstand Peter’s teaching in this whole passage. Does Peter intend his Jewish audience to remember the Old Testament passages which he is referencing, and see the deliberate extended parallels? Of course he does! But he does not want them to see a transfer of blessings from Israel to the church.

Peter’s Purpose in this Section
Peter’s purpose is closer to that of the writer of the book of Hebrews. The purpose of Hebrews is to remind a Jewish audience of how they had left Judaism behind to embrace the ‘better’ things of Christianity. Hebrews works through, in detail, how the physical, and therefore temporary, elements of the Law were just types and shadows of the spiritual and eternal things that the death and resurrection of Christ have brought in for the church. It shows how vastly greater blessings belong to New Testament Christians than could ever be enjoyed by those living under the Law.

The old system pictured what was to come, and those pictures are still very useful in understanding the ‘real things’ of Christianity, but the blessings of the church are heavenly rather than earthly, and they are on a completely different level to the blessings promised to Israel. The church has not inherited the blessings of Israel, leaving Israel, as a nation, excluded from future blessing. Rather, the church has a whole range of blessings, both here and now and for the future, which belong to her alone, and Israel will receive its own blessings in a future day.

Taken together, the two phrases infer a company whose character and role means that they are God’s people by calling and need to be so in practice as well. They are holy, that is, set apart for God’s own purposes and aligned with His character, but also specially chosen by God for Himself – for His pleasure and for His company as well as to do His will.

A Holy Nation
It really is time that I settled down to talk in detail about my actual title for today! What does Peter mean when he refers to the church as “a holy nation?” Remember, he has already talked about a spiritual temple, and holy and royal priesthoods. If God’s people are to be fit to compose such a temple and act in such priestly ways towards God and the people outside the nation, then they are

going to have to be holy. On multiple occasions in the book of Leviticus God says to His people, 'Be holy, for I am holy;" in fact Peter quotes these words in 1 Peter 1:16. Holiness is one of the primary elements of God's character, so it is essential that any nation that wishes to be associated with Him must be holy as well. The words used for holy in both the Old and New Testaments mean something like, apart, different, or other. By extension, this means separate or sacred, that is, set apart by and for God. So, the God who is completely 'other' from every part of His creation, and stands alone in His righteous perfection, sets apart people, in this case the church viewed as a nation, to belong to Himself and to reflect His character.

Israel, from the beginning of their existence, failed to show the holiness that God required. The fundamental weakness of the law was that it demanded perfection of those who were committed to keeping it, but it provided no strength, or power, with which to accomplish that perfection. Christians are given both a new life from Christ and the indwelling Holy Spirit when they are saved. The life of Christ gives us the desire to be holy and the Spirit empowers us to live that way. The Holy Spirit is not only holy Himself, but He is also the power by which Christians, individually and collectively, can live holy lives. This means that now, those that have been built into a spiritual house as living stones, and made part of a holy and royal priesthood, can be declared to be a "holy nation", that is, a group who are strengthened to be what Israel perpetually failed to be, a nation that can reflect the character of God and represent Him in an unholy and ungodly world.

His Own Special People

This is an expression that translators have made a variety of attempts to put into English. The results range through "a peculiar people" (KJV), "a people for his own possession" (ESV), "God's special possession" (NIV) and "His own special people" (NKJV). The most literal translation might be, "a people for possession." It is clear from the context that God is the one doing the possessing, so inserting "God" or "His" helps us to understand what is being said. The "peculiar" or "special" part indicates that in taking this people for His own possession, God is marking them as being specially His own. It is parallel to the expression "A special treasure to Me" from Exodus 19:5 that I have quoted previously. We take possession of things that we regard as being, in some way, valuable or precious to ourselves. What a beautiful thought, that the church is regarded by God as precious and specially valued by Himself!

Titus 2:14 uses a related Greek word when it says,

> [Christ] gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works.

The word translated "special" in Titus is a word with a meaning closer to "chosen" than "possession," but it is a word used by the Greek Old Testament translations to translate the Hebrew word which is translated as "special treasure" in Exodus 19:5.

So, the church is especially God's and a special, treasured possession to Him. It reminds me of the merchantman who paid such a great price for the special pearl (Matthew 13:45-46), and the phrase,

> Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her (Ephesians 5:25).

Nation or People

So far we have considered the implications of the church being holy and being God's special possession, but we have largely skipped over what it means for them to be a nation or a people of God. At first glance, the church doesn't have the characteristics of either a nation or a people, however we define those words. The church is composed of individuals from all the nations, languages and ethnicities of the world. After all, Revelation 5:9 quotes believers as saying,

> You…have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation.

It is one of the beauties of the gospel that it is for "whosoever" and "to all nations" (Luke 24:47). It is a lovely testimony to God's generous grace when a local church contains those who have no national, genetic, social, or cultural connections to each other, but are nevertheless happily united as brothers and sisters in Christ.

But we must remember the spiritual nature of the church's blessings and therefore the spiritual sense in which they are a single nation or people. Every Christian receives their new life from Christ and therefore what I might call their 'spiritual genetics' makes them very closely related to all other believers – we are also all the children of one Father! We all submit to one central authority, that of Christ Himself and we are called to live with the same shared values and purpose. We all proclaim that we share a "citizenship…in heaven" (Philippians 3:20). In short, from a spiritual standpoint, we do have the characteristics of a nation or people, specifically the people of God.

The Purpose of Being Made These Things
According to our text, the purpose of our being,

> A chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, [and] His own special people is, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light (1 Peter 2:9).

This means that we are not just saved and added to the church so that we might be forgiven and receive eternal blessings, wonderful though both of those things are. Nor is the church given a whole series of precious titles just to make her feel special, or to polish her appearance before the world. Rather, we are placed in the church to proclaim the praises of the God who saved us. We were all once in darkness but,

> The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light (Isaiah 9:2 and quoted in Matthew 4:16).

Not only have we seen that marvellous light but we have been called into it and told to walk in it (Ephesians 5:8).

Next time we will change from a reference to Exodus to one from the book of Hosea when we think about how we were: once were not a people but are now the people of God. We could call this another set of four really if we include the following phrases 'who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.' That will reinforce how we have gone from darkness to light in a most remarkable transformation, but I need to avoid borrowing from the next topic and bring this one to a conclusion!

Conclusion
Peter's best known theme in his book is suffering followed by glory, but there are others. One of them is living and lasting things. He speaks about a living hope in chapter 1 v. 3, a living and abiding word in chapter 1 v. 23 and a living stone and living stones in chapter 2 vv. 4 & 5. Peter famously confessed Jesus to be, "the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16, emphasis added), to which Jesus answered, "on this rock I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18, emphasis added). So living things and rocks were part of Peter's history with the Lord. They are also contrasts with the lifeless and temporary natural things of the Old Testament Law. In 1 Peter 1:24, he quotes Isaiah in saying "All flesh is as grass" - but the spiritual things and spiritual blessings are not! We are no longer counted as born after the flesh when we have been saved, so we don't enjoy the kind of temporary rights and blessings that the Jews had. Since we are no longer part of this, "withering"

world, we are to stop any behaviours associated with it. In Exodus 19, from which Peter 'borrows' the phrases we have been considering, the promised blessings for Israel were conditional, based on their obedience: "If you will indeed obey", God said to them. We receive our blessings by the grace of God on the grounds of Christ's obedience.

The theme of grace is further emphasised by the quotation from Hosea that the last pair of phrases is based on. In Hosea, the blessing comes after the judgement of God on the people's sins has fallen. For us, the judgement fell on Christ. Blessing based on grace, rather than human obedience, means that God's intention to bless can never be thwarted, even by human failure and wickedness.

Lord, You have done wonderful things for us, both as individuals and as members of Your church. Strengthen us by Your Holy Spirit to live in ways that reflect Your character, encourage others to turn to You, and then fill our hearts with praise to You as the source of every blessing. Amen.

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk in the series Pairs in Peter, Holy nation, a people for His own possession, talk number T1436.