

EXPLORING CHRISTIAN LIFE THE CHURCH

BEFORE THE TALK

Welcome the course participants – the wording below is intended only as a general guide.

Welcome to the weekend / day away. I'm so pleased you've made time to do this.

If you have arranged for someone to begin this session by sharing his or her testimony, introduce that person at this point. Ideally, their testimony should last no more than 3 minutes.

There was an old man who made his living by organizing dogfights. He had two dogs, a white one and a black one. Every Saturday he would let them fight each other and he'd take bets on who would win. Some weeks the black dog would win, and other weeks the white dog would win. But the old man always guessed right. His friends began to ask him how he did it, and eventually he admitted: "During the week I starve one and feed the other. The one I feed always wins because he is stronger."

Now, the Bible tells us that there are two natures struggling for mastery within us: the spiritual nature and the sinful nature. So which one will dominate us? The spiritual nature or the sinful nature? It depends on which one we feed.

And that's why it's so important to understand the role of the church, the Holy Spirit, prayer and the Bible in the Christian life. All these things work together to feed our spiritual lives. We'll be looking at all four of these during our time together, and I'd like us to start by exploring the role of the church.

THE TALK

Deliver the talk. The wording below is intended only as a general guide. The aim of the talk is to explain why the support of other Christians is vital in the Christian life.

When the Bible talks about "the church," it's not referring to a building or old-fashioned institution. It's simply talking about all those who have put their trust in Christ. And God wants these people, this "church," to be a support to one another.

In Hebrews chapter 10, verse 25, we read this: "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another." The writer knows that, without this mutual encouragement, it will be hard to persevere in the Christian life. Very hard indeed. Because we often feel that we're on our own.

That's the background for a letter that Peter wrote. It's called 1 Peter and you can find it on page ... of your Bible. So let's start by looking at what Peter says about the Christian life.

Read aloud 1 Peter 1:1–7.

Peter wrote this letter from Rome, in the early sixties AD, when the emperor was a young man called Nero. Now, I don't know what you were up to on *your* seventeenth birthday, but in AD 54, Nero became ruler of the world: the head of the most powerful empire on the planet, the Roman Empire. This wasn't an ideal state of affairs. At seventeen, you can be a bit impetuous. And whereas most of us were probably in school, or stacking shelves on a Saturday morning, Nero was indulging his lust for power by murdering everyone he thought was against him. As Nero's reign continued, his venom increasingly turned against Christians.

In AD 64, a fire destroyed half the city of Rome and word got around that Nero was responsible because he wanted Rome cleared to make room for a massive building project. Nero, sensing that public opinion was turning against him, passed the blame onto the Christians. He claimed that they had brought a curse on the city because they wouldn't worship the Roman gods. As a result, people who insisted on their allegiance to Christ were arrested, imprisoned and executed, often by being thrown to wild animals. Indeed Peter, who wrote this letter, would one day be martyred – crucified upside down because he refused to die as Christ did.

So that is the context of this letter. Peter wrote it as the Roman Empire became more and more violently opposed to the Christian faith. And the Christians Peter is writing to here were those who had fled from the persecution in Rome and Jerusalem. So ironically the message of Christ, the good news of the gospel, was actually spreading throughout the Roman world because of persecution. And the places the Christians had fled to were now following Nero's lead and becoming increasingly hostile.

So, in verse 1, Peter addresses himself to: “God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia ...”

These Christians are “strangers in the world” because they find themselves surrounded by people who have no idea why they believe what they do. And the same is true of Christians today. If you decide to follow Jesus, there is a degree to which you do become a stranger in the world. In the office, the word can go around that you've gone religious, and – if you stand up for Christ – you can find yourself politely frozen out. You could even lose your job. You can also find the same thing happening in your family. They may not understand what has happened to you. They may start asking, “Wasn't our upbringing good enough for you?” Friends may decide that they don't want to spend time with you anymore, because they feel awkward around you. It can be terribly hard being a stranger in the world.

At this point, you might want to ask one of the group leaders to give a testimony illustrating what it means to be a “stranger in the world.”

So why not just blend into the background? Isn't it better not to be too enthusiastic and committed rather than be misunderstood, rejected and frozen out?

Peter's letter addresses this issue head-on. Whatever the pressure, remember *who you are*. Look at verses 1 and 2 again: "To God's elect ... who have been *chosen* according to the foreknowledge of God the Father ..." So who are you? You are God's elect, God's chosen people. These verses remind us that we become followers of Jesus not just because we make a choice. We become followers of Jesus because *God* chooses *us*. So when you are rejected by people, and that can be so painful, remember that you've been chosen by God.

And remember *what you have* because God has chosen you. Look at verses 3 and 4.

Read aloud 1 Peter 1:3–4.

Because God has chosen you, you have a living hope. You can be certain about your future because of Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead. He got through death himself so he can get you through death and give you eternal life. And this is an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.

The problem with the life we're living now is that *everything* perishes, spoils or fades. You buy a new car and it rusts, you're excited about your promotion at work and the excitement fades, you buy a new shirt, spill something on it, and that's it – it's spoiled. We can choose to invest in the things of this world, which perish, spoil and fade. Or we can invest in the things of the next world, which don't.

This future with Christ in heaven is not something that you can lose, and it's not temporary like the life we're living now. No, this inheritance is certain and eternal. God has chosen you and given you that certain future. And look at the next verse: "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials."

Now let me stop here and make one thing clear – if it isn't already – 99.9% of the blessings of the Christian life are in the world to come. And if you think that sounds like an exaggeration, see if you still feel the same way in a thousand years. Or ten thousand years. Don't get me wrong, I love being a Christian now; it's a life of such purpose. It is a great joy to know Christ and his forgiveness. But nevertheless, 99.9% of the blessings in the Christian life are in the world to come.

The Christian life is full of trials, but one way of persevering through them – and even rejoicing – is to remember the inheritance that God himself has provided for you. And it is vital to remind ourselves of all these truths by spending time with the church, with those who understand and share your trust in Jesus.

Peter tells us how we should treat those in the church. Look at verse 22.

Read aloud 1 Peter 1:22.

Peter says that this love must be “sincere.” Literally, the word means “not hypocritical.” And the word “deeply” in the Greek means “strenuously.” It’s not to be pretended; it is to be something genuine.

Peter is commanding Christians to “love one another deeply.” He’s not talking here about human affection. He’s not talking about loving because we find another person lovable or attractive or because they love us in return. No, this sort of love is being commanded because the church is the Christian’s family. He’s saying that because God is your “Father,” other Christians are your brothers and sisters, so you must love them. And, of course, it works both ways. It’s tremendous to be loved and supported by other Christians.

Here is a quote written by a non-Christian in AD 125 about the Christian community: “... they walk in all humility and kindness, and falsehood is not found among them, and they love one another: ... and he who has gives to him who has not, without grudging; and when they see a stranger they bring him to their dwellings, and rejoice over him as over a true brother; for they do not call brothers those who are after the flesh, but those who are in the spirit and in God.”

Proverbs chapter 13, verse 20 says this: “He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm.”

We are deeply affected by our friends. I don’t suppose that comes as a surprise to you, but it is an easy truth to forget. The values, convictions and morals of the people you walk closely with will find their way into your own life. So, if you’re walking with people whose judgements are faulty, then they’ll cause you to suffer harm.

So if you’re a Christian, it’s very important to find a church where the teaching is faithful to God’s word, where the people you meet welcome and support you, and where you are able to serve others. Sadly, not every church you visit will do these things. So don’t be afraid to keep looking until you find one that does.

Whatever you do, don’t go through life walking alone.

AT THE END OF THE TALK

Let me leave you with the following questions for your groups:

Display the following questions and read them aloud.

- “He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm” (Proverbs 13:20). Do you think this is true in your own experience?
- “... love one another deeply, from the heart” (1 Peter 1:22). Do you think this is realistic?

Allow 30 minutes for groups to work together through the Study Guide section called GROUP DISCUSSION.