

Between the Times

Life, Love & Growth by the Gospel

Pastor Matt Mason

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Life, Love & Growth by the Gospel 1 Peter 1:22-2:3

If you would open in your Bibles with me to 1 Peter chapter 1, we'll begin reading in verse 22 momentarily. As you turn, let me just say a personal thanks to all of you for the way that you've welcomed our family these past four months as we've transitioned here. It has been a joy to become a part of this church. We're already experiencing the gift of friendship, and fellowship, and encouragement, and edification, hospitality—the very kinds of things we're going to be talking about from this text this morning. So I know you're already familiar with the content of the message, since you have been effectively preaching it to us through your lives for these past four months.

Having said that, let's dive into God's Word together. 1 Peter chapter 1, beginning in verse 22.

"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. [This will sound familiar to us.] 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.

"So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good," (1 Peter 1:2-2:3).

A few things to note as we get into the text together. We've started in verse 22, so obviously we're joining a conversation that's already in progress. Peter is addressing these believers—you can see right there in verses 1-2 where they are. They're spread throughout the region. They're at the outer edge of the Roman Empire in five territories, these clusters of believers at the edge of the Roman Empire. And you find out something of what the condition of their lives are like when he addresses them and describes them as "elect exiles." There's a flavor of exile about their lives.

Down in verse six he recognizes that. He says, "I'm aware that you've been grieved by various trials." So we're met by the reality of where these believers are in life; what they're experiencing. They are living in a fallen world. They are living in the Roman Empire of the first century. Nero is the emperor; he's on the throne. He will have Peter crucified upside down, tradition says. Within five years he'll have Paul's head on a platter pretty soon here as well. So this is the empire in which they live.

These Christians are seeking to live as Kingdom citizens, though their address is very much in the Roman Empire. There are realities that make this difficult for them to live for the

glory of God in the world in which they found themselves. And though there are some circumstantial differences, obviously, between the first century Mediterranean region and where we find ourselves this morning, there are fundamental similarities.

The world in which we live is not necessarily a greenhouse for growth in godliness. It's a challenge to put on Kingdom ethics in the world in which we live. It's not easy. Growth in the Christian life doesn't come automatically once we become believers. So this text and throughout the letter, is full of exhortations to believers of how to live upside down lives in this world—how to be Kingdom citizens in a fallen world. And yet for all of the exhortations that come at us, one after another in this text, all those exhortations are attached to gospel reality. They're nested in, rooted, the imperatives grow out of the indicatives. The call to be Christians and to live as Christians in this world is anchored to gospel truth—to good news. It's anchored to promises about the power of God's Word to make us this kind of people.

The Gospel's Gift: Soul-Cleansing

God's Word has life-changing power. I think many of us could testify to that reality. There is no reality in the universe as powerful as the spoken Word of God. That is, after all, how all of this got started.

If you look back in Genesis and we meet three circumstances, three descriptions of what was going on in the opening pages of the book of Genesis. There is this vacant cosmos. There is this expanse of darkness and void. And there is the hovering Spirit of God over the face of the deep. And then there are four words that come out of the Almighty God. "*Let there be light.*" And when an Almighty God says, "*Let there be light,*" what happens? The light comes on. And so this God and the power of His Word have marked the testimony, the resume of this God—the one true and living God—from the very beginning. And the stories only begin there.

You can find more and more, as you read through the Old Testament and into the New Testament, of the power of the spoken Word of a self-revealing God. Read Psalm 19. Read Psalm 29, Psalm 119. Read the story of Elijah in the valley of the dry bones and you see something of the power of God's Word. Scripture uniformly speaks of God's Word as having world-creating, life-changing, soul-reviving power. And that's the very power these believers in first century Roman Empire. And that's the very power that we ourselves here this morning need. We need a God Who can speak and change us from the inside out, and equip us and sustain love for our lives.

The subsequent history of the church after the writing of the New Testament bears witness to the power of God's Word. If you read about the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, Martin Luther, commenting toward the end of his life on what just happened in the Protestant Reformation said the following:

"We should preach the Word but the results must be left solely to God's good pleasure. I opposed all papists, but never by force. I simply taught, preached, wrote [that is, translated], God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that never a prince or emperor ever inflicted such damage to it."

This is the confession of the great protestant reformer. He said, "I did nothing; the Word did everything." I did nothing. The Word did everything. And in that sense, I think Luther is just saying, "Amen," to our text.

Yes, that's the truth. The Word changes God's people. The Word creates God's people, sustains God's people, changes and grows and matures God's people. There are four references in our text to God's Word. Four different descriptions. Four descriptions but they're all referring to one thing. He says, for example, see there in verse 22, he calls it *"the truth."* "You've been obedient to the truth." That's a synonym for the Word.

The next time when he's referring to the Word, he's not going to say *"the truth."* He's going to substitute another similar word. He's going to say, *"the living and abiding word of God"* in verse 23. In verse 25, he's going to call it *"the word of the Lord."* All three of these are the same. He's just substituting in another term for the truth, living and abiding Word of God, the Word of the Lord.

And then in verse 25, in the second part of verse 25 he's going to say, *"And this word."* That is *"the truth"* in verse 22, *"the living and abiding word of God"* in verse 23, and *"the word of the Lord"* in verse 25.

Now he is going to give a specific description of what he's talking about. *"This word is the good news that was preached to you."* In other words, he's talking not simply about the Word in general, from Genesis to Revelation. He's talking about the Bible's central message, namely the gospel. Which means that this would be Peter's rendition of Paul's famous saying in Romans 1:16, *"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it [the Bible's central message, the gospel] is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."*

Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1:18, *"For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."* That's similar to what Peter is describing here. So this text really is nothing more and nothing less than a meditation on the power of the gospel to create life in believers the very first day of our conversion, to propel us into love and to produce growth for the glory of God. God's Word has life-creating—so we're talking about life, love and growth—love-propelling, growth-producing impacts on our lives. Right at the outset, in verse 22, Peter takes us back to the first day of our Christian lives, and says, "What happened the first day you came to Christ?" Answer: "You heard the gospel, and that changed everything. You responded to the gospel."

Look at verse 22, *"Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love."* You can hear the command. The imperative is on its way, right? The way that he's even framed that. Having done this, do this. The challenge that's on its way to us in the very next phrase is going to be about Christian love. It says, *"for a sincere brotherly love."* This is love within the household of faith.

After this chapter he's going to move out into the world. He's going to talk about expressions of love in the Kingdom of God as we go out into the world, into government and society and marriages and all these other things. But for now he's talking about Christian fellowship, Christian expressions of love. And this is no softball. The command to love is not an easy command. He's going to raise the bar of love very high before we're done with this text.

The command to love as the all-encompassing summary of the Christian life.

You know, this is not easy. When you look at John and Paul and Jesus, John, Paul and Jesus speak of the command to love as the all-encompassing summary of the Christian life. John, Paul and Jesus speak of the command to love as the all-encompassing summary of the Christian life. In other words, there is no exhortation in the whole Bible that comes to us as believers that at the bottom is not a command to love: love toward God, love toward others.

Motivate love by appealing firstly to the soul-cleansing power of the gospel.

Every exhortation in the Bible is summed up by the command to love. And so Peter is going to urge Christians to love in uncommon ways, but he's not going to seek to motivate that love by appealing to moral willpower. He's not going to seek to motivate that love by appealing to our ability to keep our New Year's resolutions. He's going to motivate love by appealing firstly to the soul-cleansing power of the gospel. He's going to appeal to the soul-cleansing power of the gospel.

You know, the New Testament speaks of purification. *"Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth."* It speaks of purification and cleansing. Indeed, it speaks of sanctification in two different ways, not just in one way. It talks about purification as a progressive, ongoing thing. As we grow in Christlikeness we are being cleansed, shaped, molded, made holy, washed, right? So 2 Corinthians 7:1, *"Let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God."* It speaks of ongoing, progressive cleansing. 1 John 1:9, *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just [today, tomorrow, four days from now] to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us."* Progressive cleansing.

Then there's definitive cleansing. There's not just progressive cleansing. There's won and done cleansing that the Bible talks about. For example, Paul in 1 Corinthians 6. He's talking to Corinth, of all people. This is a carnal church. It's a messy church. It's a self-absorbed church with a whole lot of superiority complexes going on in the gathering. And of all churches, Paul addresses this congregation in chapter 6, verse 11. He lists these various kinds of sins that are engaged in, quite happily, by pagan Corinth around them, and he says, *"and such were some of you, but you [past tense] were washed, you were sanctified."* In this text, in 1 Corinthians 6, he's not talking about "you are being" or "you are being washed." You were washed. You were sanctified. You were justified. There's a definitive aspect, a "won and done" cleansing.

We grew up in the church singing, "Are you washed in the blood—don't leave me hanging—in the soul-cleansing blood of the Lamb? Are your garments spotless, are they white as snow? Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?" That's what Peter is talking about. That's an anachronism, but Peter was singing the song. He was humming that song as he writes this text. He's talking about "have you been washed by the gospel?" There's this cleansing that takes place definitively.

Incidentally, Christian baptism points to this. When you're baptized you turn from sin and you put your trust in Jesus alone and you come down into these waters, and when you go underneath the water, that is making a powerful statement of what happened the moment you turned to Christ for salvation. You were washed. You were cleansed. You came out clean because of the grace of God in the gospel, the soul-cleansing power. The gospel's gift: soul-cleansing power!

The Bible speaks about this definitive work of the grace of God. Paul, in 2 Corinthians 5:17, a very well-known verse, says, *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The*

old has passed away; behold, the new has come." So there is this definitive work that God does in the soul: washing us, cleansing us.

The next question is how? How does this soul-purification happen? This is where we can thank our grammar teachers who are among us, because he triggers that with the word "by." "*Having purified your souls [how?] by your obedience to the truth.*" On the surface of it, if I just said that and that wasn't a verse in the Bible, you might suspect that I'm advocating self-salvation. But I'm not advocating self-salvation. I'm quoting the Bible, and the Bible doesn't advocate self-salvation either. This is simply what God's Word says at this point, is that there's something to be said about the response of faith being necessary. As important as it is to affirm that God is sovereign in salvation—and He indeed is, and it is important to affirm that—that doesn't mean that no response is called for on our part.

Let's back up. Just think about it for a second. Every time you hear the gospel, you are hearing a proclamation of good news for sinners. Good news for sinners. That we have all sinned against a holy God. That we deserve wrath at the hands of this God Who is holy. He can't deny Himself. He can't deny His character, just sweep it under the rug. So we've sinned against a holy God. We deserve wrath from a holy God. And there's no way to get ourselves out from underneath this.

We can't pay back for the sins we've already committed. But we don't have to. Jesus came and He lived a perfect life. He died a substitutionary death in the place of sinful people. He rose from the dead. Through Jesus and Him alone sinful people could be reconciled to a holy God. Not only reconciled, brought into the family, become sons and daughters of God the Father. That's good news. Wesley calls that "music in the sinner's ear." But this is a completely uncontroversial statement.

The fact that that message passed into my ears doesn't mean that I'm reconciled to God. I'm not reconciled to God by simply *hearing* that good news. The good news has an implicit summons. The message of the gospel has a command wrapped inside of it. It is asking those who hear it, "Respond, turn, embrace, trust, submit. Bow your knee to this Lord. Give your life to this One Who saves and forgives. Turn to Him." That is the implicit summons of the gospel.

For those of you who are here this morning and have not turned from sin, from self-rule, from your self-salvation project, from your religion to Christ alone, if this morning, this afternoon when you go home, if you call on the Lord, you call on Him to save you, to forgive you from the heart, you will have heard more than a sermon on 1 Peter 1:22 today. You'll be on the inside of 1 Peter 1:22. You will know what this "*having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth*" is all about. This is glorious, good news.

For those of us who are Christians here this morning, I can't think of anything that would be more tragic than for us to lose the wonder of this part of our story. So maybe for just a moment we can walk down memory lane. Do you remember what life was like before you knew Christ? Before you heard good news? Do you remember being, as the Apostle Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:12, "*having no hope and without God in the world.*" Because whether that was our conscious experience every moment of every day before we knew Christ. That was indeed the truth of the matter.

We were without God, and we were without hope in this world. Remember what that felt like? Do you remember the chains that you drug around with you, walking through life, particularly those who were converted later in life? There was more memory of your life before Jesus Christ came and washed you clean? Do you remember when it began to dawn

on you that you needed a Savior? Do you remember that sweetest of all moments in our whole lives when you realized you had one? A Savior had come for you. He had died in your place. He had bought you, as Peter says earlier in this text, "with his priceless blood ransomed us."

The day that this truth dawned on us that we sing about, "There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Emanuel's veins, and sinners plunged beneath that flood"—once and for all, definitively—"lose all their guilty stains." We have a gospel, friends, to celebrate, to live out of. We have the resources of this gospel to propel us into a life of love. So whether you are aware of the exact moment that this happened, there was a day on which, by grace alone, through faith alone, God gave you a spotless robe. And whether that was when you were 7 years old or 70 years old, you will never need another one. That robe smells like the righteous acts, attitudes, words of Jesus given, credited to your account. And that's good news.

The Gospel's Aim: Christian Love

The question becomes, what's it for? Why has God done this for sinful people like you and me? And the answer that comes from our text may be surprising. "*Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love.*" That's what it was for. What a strange answer. I was washed clean so that I could love you as brothers and sisters. You were washed clean so that we could walk together in unity, in love, as brothers and sisters.

Paul says the following to his son in the faith, to Timothy, "*The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.*" The aim of our charge, of our preaching and of our teaching. If you could ask the Apostle Paul, "Why do you give so much doctrine to the churches in the New Testament?" Paul would in this sense say, "It's all for love. It's to fuel love for God. It's to fuel love for brothers and sisters. Love for the world." All of this theology and this doctrine is to fuel love.

The problem of Christian intellectualism

Biblical doctrines are meant to do so much more than inform the intellect. They are meant to create a kind of people—a kind of Christian. Not just a smart Christian but a happy, holy, trusting, thankful, encouraging, content person, believer. And this brings us really to the problem of divorcing doctrine from love, or what I'm calling here, the problem of Christian intellectualism.

I can say from personal experience, you don't have to be all that smart to get into the trap of Christian intellectualism. I'll tell you how to do it. This is a disclaimer. I'm not wanting you to do it, but I'll tell you how. All you have to do is begin to treat truth like bits of information. Helpful bits, inspiring bits, but bits nonetheless. And my primary goal is to get all those bits and organize them correctly, because that's what it's all about in the Christian life. And so I study. I study, study, study. And I speak with others as though it's all about gathering the right data and having the right data and then moving out from my life to others and making sure they have the right data.

So the sad irony is I can read a book on love, right? I can do that this week, read a book on Christian love inspired by the very text that we're studying this morning, and realize at the end of that book I was only thinking about how I can give this data away to other people who really need to know how to love, because man, their lives are really messed up and

they don't know how to love people effectively. So once I give them this data, everything's going to be awesome. I can end up reading that entire book thinking about that. I can read an entire book on love thinking about how I can plunder and gather quotes for a sermon on love. Do you see how subtle this can be?

In all of this data-gathering for texts on love and truths on love, what is the one thing that I might be ironically neglecting? Actually loving people, right? Human beings, like my wife, like my children, like people in the church that God has put in proximity to our lives. Like people that we're on mission with who might not be in this location but we're called to love and express care and concern and prayer for them.

This is the sad tragedy of divorcing doctrine from love. Sound doctrine wants to run to people. So the doctrine of conversion here in our text is gloriously present all over 1 Peter 1, but the doctrine of conversion is not there primarily to make Cappadocians and Bithynians and Galatians and all the rest that are in chapter one verse one. It's not meant to make Cappadocians smarter. It's not there so that they have a more nuanced theology of conversion. It's not there so that they ace their soteriology exams at Bithynia Evangelical Seminary.

It's there to stir up concrete expressions of love in the body. It's there so that singles serve families and families serve singles. It's there for hospitality and generosity and hugs and holy kisses. It's there so that older believers mentor younger believers, and younger believers are looking for mentoring from older believers. It's there so that we invite each other out for coffee and humbly confess our sin and ask for prayer. It's there so that you don't forget to ask off early in the afternoon from work so you can hold your friend's hand at her husband's funeral.

That's what the doctrine of conversion is all about. It's for love. The aim of our charge is love. "*Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love.*" So when the gospel gets into the heart, it wants to run to people in a thousand different ways. Our love should look different. Our relationships, our marriages, our calendars and our schedules should say to unbelieving Birmingham around us, the gospel makes a difference. We have fuel for uncommon love in a fallen world.

The challenge of love

That's the exhortation. What about the challenges? What about the reality on the ground? This word "earnestly"—"*love one another earnestly from a pure heart*"—is a frightening word. It's the same Greek word that's used to describe the way Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. Do you want to see what love is going to look like when we express it together as members of this faith family? Look at Jesus praying in the garden. This is going to be bloody, sweaty, groaning, "God-please-take-this-cup-away-from-me kind of love." It's real. It's not advertisements and posters. It's the real thing. It is challenges. It is real people.

This kind of love is not going to be easy. It can't be done via the internet or social media. It's real, gristle, face-to-face, hand-in-hand, life-on-life love that God is calling us to. It's inconvenient and it's challenging for two different reasons: (1) the people that are around you, and (2) we, ourselves.

I say them first because in my selfishness, that's how I tend to often think. I'll read a text like this. I'm exhorted to love, and I'll look around at the people close to me and I'll say, "Are you serious? You've got to be kidding me. Do you know what these people are like? Do you know what my parents are like? Do you know what my roommate is like, how difficult it

is to walk with this guy in this season of his life right now? He's upside down. He's in all directions. He's tearing at the very people who are trying to serve and help him." Right. Right. It's challenging. Do you know what it's like to have an adult son who's an addict? Do you know what it's like to have a paper marriage? It's challenging. Earnestly, it's Gethsemane-looking love.

And the second problem is we ourselves. When my love is in neutral, it tends to reveal my self-centeredness. I shall love most where I'm made much of. The world can pull that off, right? The world can love lovely, cooperative, respectful, reciprocating people. No earnestness necessary. No cross, no self-denial. No gospel necessary. No born again necessary. No having been cleansed and purified your souls through the gospel. None of that is necessary unless we have these challenges, and we need the gospel. We need the gospel for this kind of love. It's not going to be easy, but we've been washed and we have a gospel. We have a story of love that is powerful enough to propel us through the obstacles, both personal and around us, into loving relationships. Earnest expressions of costly love in body life together.

The Gospel's Fruit: Life, Love & Growth

This passage is a celebration of the power of the gospel to bear fruit in our lives. The gospel's fruit—life, love and growth. Verses 23-24,

"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," (1 Peter 1:23-24).

You know, in verse 23, "Since you have been born again," Peter is still talking about that moment, that first moment of our Christian lives. But unlike in verse 22, he's looking at it from a different angle. In verse 22, if you will, you were hearing the gospel, wherever that was, and the camera of this text was pointing at you, watching you while you were hearing the gospel, and it zoomed in on your response. In verse 23 it's like he hits the rewind button, goes back to the moment where you're hearing the gospel, but instead of zooming in on you, it zooms in on God. And we find out what was God doing when you were hearing the gospel. "You have been born again."

God creates His people through the Word.

Now it's not going to say, "by your obedience to the truth." No, it's going to say, "You were born again through the living and abiding Word of God." The life-creating Word of God begot you to salvation, birthed you into the Kingdom. God creates His people through the Word. Let me say that again. God creates His people through the Word.

There are certain features of our Christian testimonies that are completely different from one another, absolutely distinct, that reveal the fact that God has endlessly creative ways of chasing people down and showing them His grace. If we could just sit here all afternoon and all night and just have one person after another come up here and share their testimony, we'd say, "Oh, the Lord is endlessly creative in the ways that He shows people His grace." And yet, with all those distinctives, there are certain common features to every single believer in this room. There was a day when you were dead in transgressions and sins,

wholly unresponsive to God. And there was a day when God caused the seed of gospel truth to spring up, and you came alive to God. You were born again.

James says the same thing as Peter says in really a parallel kind of text. In James 1:18, "*Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth...*" So of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, "*that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.*" In a word, that's your testimony. It's not the easiest way to share the testimony, because it might not be understood, but there's a sense in which if somebody asked you, "How did you come to know God," you could say, "of His own will He brought me forth by the word of truth. He raised me from death to life by the spoken Word." Paul relates that. He says, "The very One Who said, '*Let light shine out of darkness,*' in Genesis, '*has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ*', and '*alive we came.*'" Just like when He said, "lights come on," the lights came on. When He said, "in your heart and my heart live," guess what happened? We came alive by the power of God's Word.

So your parents told you the gospel growing up, right? That's my story. Your parents told you the gospel. Or maybe your pastor or your friend or your neighbor told you the gospel, and while they slept, to borrow from Luther, the Word did the work. The Word did the work. It was the power of God's Word that awakened you on day one of your Christian life.

The next question is, what power motivates you and strengthens you and enables you to grow once you are a believer? The answer is the same power that brought you to life causes us to grow. Look at chapter 2 verses 1-2, "*So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, [that is of the Word] that by it you may grow up into salvation.*" The same Word that brought us from death to life through the living and abiding Word of God is the same food that we eat so we can love one another, and so that we can grow in Christ's likeness in a fallen world that is not a greenhouse for growth and godliness. It's the Word! It's the Word from beginning to end. The Word matures and strengthens us. God's Word read and preached feeds and strengthens us.

How not to hear a sermon

Let's talk about preaching for a moment. Since we quote this text on the way into preaching every Sunday, right? "*The grass withers and the flower fades [and we all say] but the word of God stands forever.*" Do you ever come into the moment of preaching, or even into the moment of your private reading of the Bible already discouraged? Sort of pre-discouraged? We say that together, "*all flesh is grass*"—we don't say that part, but "*the grass withers and the flower fades but the word of God stands forever.*" And we say, "*the grass withers and the flower fades,*" and I resonate with that, right?

I know what it's like to wither and to fade, and that's kind of like what my Christian life looked like this past week, to be honest. And now I'm about to hear another sermon and I have flunked in applying the last three sermons, so this is a really exciting moment. I'm about to hear more exhortation of what God calls me to do as a Christian, and I've been flunking left, right and center for the past several weeks. I know what it's all about, Peter, when you say, "*grass withers and the flower fades.*" Amen. That's my life. But we cut him off mid-sentence, don't we? "*The grass withers and the flower fades but the word of the Lord endures forever.*"

Why do we quote this text every Sunday? This text orients us to the reception of God's Word. It orients us. It tells us where the power is. The power isn't in self-initiative. It's not in pulling myself up by my bootstraps again this morning, and I'm just going to do it. "Just

Do It" looks great on a shoebox, but it's a horrible spiritual motivator. It just doesn't work. If you think it does work, then it's led you to pride and superiority of others that you can't understand why everybody else doesn't do it as well as you do. Why can't they respond to the Word? I mean, come on! Just obey. Right? *"The grass withers, the flower fades."*

This text reminds us every Sunday to turn away from self-reliance. It reminds us where the power is for life, love and growth. Our confidence, as we come to hear God's Word—please hear this—must not be misplaced. This is what our orientation should be. *"The grass withers, the flower fades,"* but God alone by His Word is able to make what is dead live.

Loving others in the shadow of the cross

"The grass withers, the flower fades," but God alone by His Word is able to strengthen our love for one another, and for the challenging people in our lives, and for the challenges that we face in our own self-orientation. *"The grass withers, the flower fades,"* but God alone by His Word is able to grow my faith and energize my perseverance. Do you hear? Life, love and growth come by means of the Word and the Word's central message, namely the gospel.

Life, love and growth, not by might or by power, but by the Spirit of God working with what He loves to work with the most, namely the Word. The Spirit and the Word carry the Christian life forward or they don't move forward. We don't move forward. When we are faithless, He remains faithful. I can't think of better news than that. And I can't think of worse news, than to think that His faithfulness takes its cue from my spiritual performance. But it doesn't. *"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of the Lord endures forever."*

So Peter says to this troubled suffering church that feels her weakness, in the very beginning of the letter. He's talking to believers in chapter 2 who are living under Nero's Rome. They're suffering persecution. He's talking to people who are living under taskmasters in chapter 2. He's talking to people in marriages that are withering on the vine in chapter 3. And he's saying to all of them, *"The grass withers, the flower fades, but God's Word is powerful."* In other words, amid the challenges of being a remade people in a fallen world, don't forget the gospel. It's the power of gospel that brought you to life in the first place.

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