

# Our Uniqueness And Time

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In 1974, three events occurred that had significant impact on my mind. Each of them bears on the theme of this article, as well as being a theme of the Day of Pentecost. Two were movies. One I observed at Ambassador Auditorium, its subject concerning the Pygmy tribes of Africa. The second, a documentary about natives of New Guinea, I viewed on television.

The Pygmy movie presented a people who made good use of their environment. They were a surprisingly moral people, but at the same time, by our standards, sanitation was almost non-existent. Their diet was appalling, consisting of virtually anything that moved, including giant cockroaches! They were a peaceful people; tribal warfare occupied very little of their time. Nonetheless, as the ravages of disease took their toll, the Pygmy people's life spans were quite short compared to ours.

The movie on the natives of New Guinea showed a people degenerate even by Pygmy standards. One scene showed them eating a wild pig almost raw, and cannibalism was still practiced to some degree. Their dwellings consisted of nothing more than a crude hole carved out of a hillside and roofed by leafy branches to keep out rain. In comparison to the Pygmies, who made good use of their environment, the New Guinea natives developed almost nothing. They had very short life spans, and preparation for war with neighboring tribes and the warfare itself seemed to be their constant occupations.

The third event made a connection with Pentecost. It was a newspaper article in the now defunct *National Observer*, a publication of the Dow-Jones Company. The subject concerned the high-achieving astronauts involved in the space program. In stark contrast to the Pygmies and the New Guinea natives, they represented the epitome of technological human development. The article was titled, "What Do You Do After You've Gone to the Moon?"

What a starkly vivid contrast it presented to the Pygmies and the New Guineans! The article specifically dealt with the psychological developments in the lives of the men who had actually gone to the moon, whether they had in fact landed and explored for a short time or had simply flown by it in preparation for landing on the moon somewhat later.

The author described Neil Armstrong as enigmatic, unemotional, and withdrawn. He related that Buzz Aldrin, after returning to earth, had an emotional breakdown, and that Al Bean was the father of a withdrawn son that he could not "reach." He wrote that Pete Conrad developed radical right-wing views, and Jack Schmitt was involved in parapsychology experiments dealing with sending thoughts to another person's mind telepathically. Edgar Mitchell and John Young both divorced. Finally, James Irwin found God, was embroiled in family problems, went looking for Noah's Ark, and died before his fiftieth birthday. The article did not claim the moon directly caused any of these problems; instead, it pointed to the intensity of the entire space program as a major contributor to their unstable, post-moon lives.

Each of these three groups is in some way unique from all others on earth: The Pygmies because of their extreme lack of physical stature yet fairly successful use of a rugged environment; the New Guinea natives for their wild lifestyles and almost non-existent cultural development; and the astronauts as the product of a highly developed technological program.

Were those technically advanced astronauts from our Western culture, who had trained to function in space and actually traveled to the moon, any better off psychologically than the Central African Pygmies or the New Guinea natives? If we were God, what level of community development would we tend to call people from to prepare them for our Kingdom? God refers to those He calls as "special" and at other times "peculiar." Both of these terms imply a degree of uniqueness.

Two of the three groups were occupied for almost their entire short lives with merely surviving from day to day. It clearly took a toll, evidenced by the short life spans. In addition, their lives were focused almost exclusively on what was immediately before them; they had no long-range direction toward a great goal.

The astronauts did not have day-to-day survival concerns to such an extent, but their lives were psychologically scarred by the intense pressure of succeeding in an environment of high scientific achievement. Their trials of survival had little or nothing to do with daily food necessities, but surviving the academic pressures and the potential scorn of their peers at NASA, which they may have felt if they thought they were perceived as failures. However, they did have a great, long-range goal in life.

Astronauts are unique. They are the only ones who have ever left the confines of this planet, gone to the moon, looked upon the earth from that height, and then returned to tell others about it. This achievement separates them from all others who have ever lived.

Uniqueness is not limited to these categories. God's incredible intelligence in His ability to create differences among vast numbers of people is displayed widely in His creation. A particular uniqueness is of great, far-reaching importance to us.

Everybody is physically unique from all others on earth. Everyone knows that, like snowflakes falling from the sky, every person's fingerprints are unique to one individual among the almost seven billion people on earth. However, that is not all that is unique about each person—so are one's eyes, voice, and gait. Each person's uniqueness is much more encompassing than these traits because everybody's DNA is different from everyone else's—even different from anyone who has ever lived!

Therefore, everybody on earth has a measure of physical uniqueness. But two of the terms mentioned above touch on the understanding of Pentecost and our *spiritual* uniqueness. They are things we should be aware of, take pleasure in, and allow to motivate us because we are so blessed.

### **A Special Possession**

Paul writes in Titus 2:14, "[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." Peter adds in I Peter 2: 9, "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 marvelous light."

In both of these verses, the word "special" replaces "peculiar," as used in the King James Version. *Peculiar* was not used in the sense of "odd" or "weird," but as being "distinctive" in a singular, good way. It is likely due to a desire to avoid the suggestion of "odd" that modern translators have changed it to "special," which carries a more positive implication.

A person may be distinctive because he is nine feet tall and sports purple hair—and therefore odd. On the other hand, a person might be exceptionally handsome or have an engaging accent. Perhaps an individual's distinctiveness lies in an artistic, athletic, or mathematical ability. Maybe he or she has a photographic memory or has overcome a debilitating affliction.

However, none of these distinctions matter in terms of why Christians are peculiar. In Titus 2:14, Paul uses the adjective form of the Greek word translated "special," while in I Peter 2:9, Peter uses the noun form of the same word. Paul also uses the noun form in Ephesians 1:14, writing, ". . . who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory." Here, it is translated as "purchased possession," which actually comes closest to its literal meaning: "an acquisition, an obtaining, a possession."

In Titus 2:14, the Greek term literally means "one's own" or "one's own possession," which is why His people are special. They are God's own, and so are therefore distinctive because nobody else owns the called-out ones. In I Peter 2:9, some modern translators have replaced the King James word "peculiar" with an expanded version, something similar to "His own special possession," implying the same specialness and distinctiveness due to ownership.

*Special* means "surpassing what is common or usual; exceptional; distinct among others of a kind." We have been made unique, separate from others, peculiar, distinctive, and special from God's point of view because He has obtained, acquired, or purchased us with the blood of Jesus Christ. It is who purchased us, our purchase price, and His reason for purchasing us that motivated the translators to use the word "special." It conveys the sense of uniqueness.

The *New Testament Commentary* remarks that "His own possession" or "a people, His very own" appears so often in Scripture in somewhat different forms that it ought to be considered as part of its technical phraseology. It is a point God clearly wants to impress on us through sheer repetition.

### **Redeemed for a Special Purpose**

Why has God gone to this trouble and expense, an expense that cost Him the most precious of all prices? The last phrase in Ephesians 1:14 succinctly states why: "to [for the purpose of] the praise of His glory." I Peter 2:9 and Titus 2:14 say essentially the same thing. However, Philippians 1:9-11 states more specifically and expansively how His special people offer praise:

And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

We, the called-out ones, are unique because of who owns us, because of the price He paid to redeem us from our former owner, and in that we, the purchased possession, are to glorify Him. In the

context of Ephesians 1:14, glorifying God has an intriguing twist, which verse 13 helps to make clear: "In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise."

God's promised Spirit seals us after we believe. Clearly, receiving the Holy Spirit is something that happened in our past. We received it upon faith, repentance, baptism, and the laying on of hands. Verse 14 clarifies that this occurred in the past, saying that what we received was merely an earnest, an installment guaranteeing that more will be given. The sense here is similar to Romans 8:32, where Paul writes that God's giving of His Son is our guarantee that He will withhold nothing that we truly need.

The word "until" in Ephesians 1:14 further clarifies the time-element by stating that this will not happen "until the redemption of the purchased possession" occurs. Have we assumed that we were redeemed when we believed, accepted Jesus Christ, and were justified by His blood? But, notice, Paul writes that this, too, is yet future!

There is a future reception of more of God's Holy Spirit and a future redemption! The Scripture cannot be broken (John 10:35). The apostle is teaching us that redemption, like salvation, is a process that has begun but has not yet reached its conclusion. Both of these processes began when we believed and accepted Jesus Christ, but they will not end until we receive God's Spirit in full measure and are glorified in His Kingdom.

Thus, just as we know that we do not now have God's Spirit in full measure, we have to realize that we are not yet fully redeemed. As used in the Bible, *redeem* means "to deliver one by means of paying a price." The price has been paid in full, and we are even now the recipients of merely the beginning of its blessings. In addition, it also places us under obligation to glorify God and show forth His praises, as we are able.

Paul writes in II Corinthians 3:18, "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are *being* transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord" (emphasis ours throughout). Transformation is a process, as is redemption. We should be able to understand this fully from our own experiences since being converted. We know that we are not completely free from Satan and this world.

I Corinthians 13:12 adds clarity to this claim: "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known." This verse indicates a process of transformation to everything concerning salvation. Human nature and this world have their hands upon us, and we have to fight them off. We know that if we do not, we will conform to them and their ways. Gradually, as we learn and overcome, the veil is removed, but a time is coming when we will have fullness of everything promised.

Paul relates his experience in Romans 7:23, "But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members." He writes that the law of sin brought him into captivity. A person in captivity is not free, is he? In verse 24, he continues, "Who shall deliver me [redeem me completely] from this body of death?" A person in need of deliverance is not free. Even as a long-time apostle, Paul was not truly as free as God fully intended him to be.

We see this pictured in the children of Israel in the wilderness. They were physically free—that is, they had fled beyond the boundaries of Egypt—but they were still not free from Egypt's influence, which they carried right with them in their minds and displayed in their conduct and attitudes. This is why God urges us to flee Babylon (see Jeremiah 51:6; Revelation 18:4). We cannot physically escape from its borders because Babylon's influence is worldwide, but we can escape spiritually by not permitting it to influence our conduct and attitudes.

All this means that we will not truly be redeemed until we fully come into our inheritance. Then we will be completely released from all the effects of sin, and it will be plain to all that we are indeed God's peculiar treasure. How will we do this?

I Corinthians 6:19-20 begins to build a case: "Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's." Romans 14:8 carries this concept a bit further: "For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's." Finally, Isaiah 43:20-21 projects this responsibility out into the future:

The beast of the field will honor Me, the jackals and the ostriches, because I give waters in the wilderness and rivers in the desert, to give drink to My people, My chosen. This people I have formed for Myself: they shall declare My praise.

This prophecy concerns Israel being regathered after the Tribulation. Right now, the ones God is forming into a people, a family-nation—His own special purchased possession—is the church. Its members are the redeemed children of God, and their responsibility, regardless of when God chooses them for His purpose, is to glorify Him in their lives.

### **Firstfruits in a Pressure-Packed Time**

Notice another interesting concept. Paul writes in Romans 8:23, "Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body." The apostle uses the word "firstfruits" in relation to redemption, and he employs "Spirit" in the same general sense as "guarantee" of the Spirit as in Ephesians 1:14. *Firstfruits* here literally means "a beginning," indicating a start has been made and more will follow.

The word translated *guarantee* in Ephesians 1:14 ("earnest," KJV) in reference to the Holy Spirit means "a pledge," "a security that more will follow." In this sense, "firstfruits" and "guarantee /earnest" are virtually interchangeable. What is more, they define matters more clearly: The receipt of the earnest of the Spirit creates what God calls "the firstfruits." Since Pentecost in AD 31 when God performed those marvelous works (Acts 2), the firstfruits are God's peculiar or special possession who have been purchased and are being transformed to glorify Him to the utmost. The firstfruits are the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16), the church of God.

Luke 21:28, from the lips of Jesus Christ, clinches the argument on our future redemption: "Now when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near." This is part of Jesus' Olivet Prophecy, where He predicts conditions before His return—and our redemption is still future!

The conclusion is clear: Sanctification is a process; conversion is a process; and growing and overcoming are a process. We go—proceed—on to perfection, and now we see that redemption is also a process. We do not become completely free of our captivity to Satan and this world in one giant leap. Liberty is produced incrementally, one step at a time. We are indeed the firstfruits of God's great purpose, but we are most assuredly *not* a finished product—yet. We are under construction, being transformed and brought "to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13).

What is of immediate importance to us is that Jesus is alerting us, giving us a "heads up," that when we see these conditions existing, it is time to adopt a greater sense of urgency about our spiritual responsibilities. For instance, He admonishes us in Luke 21:8-11:

Take heed that you not be deceived. For many will come in My name, saying, "I am He," and, "The time has drawn near." Therefore do not go after them. But when you hear of wars and commotions, do not be terrified; for these things must come to pass first, but the end will not come immediately. . . . Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be great earthquakes in various places, and famines and pestilences; and there will be fearful sights and great signs from heaven.

Is this not where we are at this very moment? We are living in the only time in mankind's history since Christ when awareness of these things has been possible. The conditions He describes are worldwide in scope. From the manner in which He says them, it is implied that the church, His brethren, will be able to know of them almost instantaneously, as they are occurring. Until the telephone, then radio, television, the computer, and perhaps most importantly, the Internet, such immediate knowledge was not possible.

Luke 21:13-19 contributes to this confluence of conditions:

But it will turn out for you as an occasion for testimony. Therefore settle it in your hearts not to meditate beforehand on what you will answer; for I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. And you will be hated by all for My name's sake. But not a hair of your head shall be lost. By your patience possess your souls.

This is the next set of conditions on the horizon. Surviving this will require a great deal of trust in God's loving faithfulness. Jesus urges us to take action right now in yielding to God because these conditions will deceive large numbers of people. Changes will occur in such a gradual way as to make it appear as though conditions are really not all that bad.

Luke 21:34-36 adds another admonition that we must "be on our toes," or the times may seem to be not as threatening as they truly are:

But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth. Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man.

A snare is a device designed not to be detected easily. Satan is a master of deception, so Christ's warning is that the times can easily be misinterpreted even by us. Matthew 24:37-39 reinforces this point:

But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be.

Jesus is saying that, at the very time people should be most concerned about events and conditions around them, they may be totally unprepared, living life normally. II Peter 3:1-12 adds that, not only will there be those who are totally oblivious, but also those who may be vaguely aware of what is going on but are so anti-God and anti-Christ that they willfully mock and ridicule to discourage those who are fully aware.

### Points to Consider

Revelation 3:17-19 warns:

Because you say, "I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing"—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent.

This article has stressed two main points: First, that, like the Laodiceans, we cannot afford to allow ourselves to slip into the destructive belief that we are a finished product. Doing so will surely blunt our works. We may never directly say, "I am rich and increased with goods and have need of nothing," but our conduct will reveal deficiencies in Christian discipline and character, proving that we are Laodicean in attitude. Second, Christ's return and the Tribulation are imminent, and we show that we are blind, ignorant, and careless when we fail to heed Jesus' warnings to be urgent about the times.

Jesus' Parable of the Ten Virgins appears in Matthew 25:1-13. To us living in the end time, the major point of His instruction is not that the unwise virgins went to sleep, since the wise also went to sleep, but that the unwise virgins *frittered away their time*. Both sets of virgins had the same opportunities to use their time wisely. The unwise, however, so severely blunted their transformation that their redemption became impossible.

Ephesians 3:14-19 records Paul's prayer for the Ephesians, and we can see it as his prayer for us as well:

For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded

in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ, which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

The apostle highlights that we are a special people, and in that context, he mentions the Spirit and his fervent desire that we might be filled with God's fullness. God so desires to have us in His Family Kingdom that He has given us the first installment of His Spirit to enable us to submit to Him and His way—and thus begin to experience a little bit of what He is.

### **The Time Is Now**

Paul writes in I Corinthians 13:12: "For now, we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known." One translator describes what "we see in a mirror, dimly," as "a riddle and an enigma." Paul suggests that now we do not see God nearly as clearly as we would like, but the time is coming when we will see Him in startling and bold clarity. He is illustrating a time-consuming process of change that gradually transforms.

The important element for us is that now, because of His merciful revelation of Himself to us, we do see a portion of His eternal glory, even if imperfectly. Others are totally blind to even the part we see imperfectly. We are in the process of becoming just like Him, and we will share His very life in glory, as I John 3:2 assures us: "Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is."

Jude 24 provides measureless encouragement if we will believe what it says: "Now to Him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy. . . ." We will be without spot, blemish, or wrinkle; we are going to experience perfection.

This is what is promised to us to enjoy when we see Him as He is, when we have the fullness of His Spirit, when we are fully redeemed. Moreover, because of the gift of God's Spirit, we are also promised a small foretaste in this life. We can know something of the joy of holiness and the hatred of sin as Christ knew them. God wants us to experience the love, joy, and peace that passes all understanding. At the time of our full redemption, God will wipe away all tears, and our joy will be unmeasured and unmixed.

Do we love God and our brethren? As the apostle John teaches, they go together; they cannot be separated. We have our failings on both scores. Because we belong to Christ, we can experience that love. Its fruits are just budding, but in the Kingdom of God, we will experience it in full flower.

Ephesians 5:13-17 prods us to take advantage of the riches of knowledge God has given us:

But all things that are exposed are made manifest by the light, for whatever makes manifest is light. Therefore He says: "Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light." See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is.



Verse 13 encourages us to understand that God is purposely exposing our sins to us for our eternal good so that we might share life in His Kingdom with Him. Therefore, He urges in verses 14-17 us to wake up and take advantage of this, for if we continue in sin, we are as good as dead. But because it is His desire to save, He exposes our sins to us so that we can repent.

Doing our part by overcoming is necessary if we want to experience the fullness of our redemption from sin. We must take advantage of the great gift of His Spirit, using every opportunity that comes our way to confront our weaknesses and drive on to perfection. He implores us not to let what has made us special to Him slip from our grasps.

Thus, in verse 17 especially, He urges us to follow wisdom through clearly understanding His will for us. He wants us in His Kingdom, experiencing life as He lives it, but a measure of responsibility for responding in submission falls directly on our shoulders. We know what we must do—we must take the time and make the effort to take advantage of our uniqueness before Him. Time is running out, so let us do it!