

NBC Devotional
November 3, 2021
“Participation in the Divine Nature”

“His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires”
(2 Peter 1:3-4, NIV).

I just finished teaching the Doctrine of Holiness class, and so this causes me to think more readily in theological terms and concepts. One of the interesting and sometimes frustrating things about thinking in theological terms is that we can jump ahead to our presuppositions instead of really focusing on what the biblical text says.

In this passage in 2 Peter, there is a phrase that really grasps me and captures my attention. Peter says in verse 4 that because of Jesus’ glorious goodness, he has given us his promises so that we may participate in the divine nature.

I am fascinated by the very strong ideas of participation that run through the biblical text. My doctoral dissertation is actually entitled *Salvation through Participation*. I believe that in Paul’s earliest writings, he portrays salvation as being a result of a mutual participation. Namely, Christ participates fully in our sinfulness and humanity in his life, and ultimately, through his death on the cross, and he achieves victory over sin and death through his resurrection.

At the same time, he invites his followers by faith to also fully participate in his salvation experience, whereby, we die to self and are raised to new life *IN* Christ. In this way, through our identification and solidarity with Christ, believers can participate in Christ’s victory over sin and death by virtue of the fact that believers, as Paul would articulate it, are actually *IN* Christ.

This idea comes up in many of Paul’s earliest expressions and articulations of what it means to be saved. For instance, think of Paul’s powerful words in Galatians 2:20 where he writes, *“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”*

The phrase “gave himself for me” is a veiled reference to Christ’s death. But this is not a “substitutional death” in which Christ died *INSTEAD* of me. No, it is a *participatory* death whereby Jesus died *WITH* humanity a death that our sin and rebellion deserved. Thus, Jesus gave himself *on our behalf* or he gave himself *for our benefit*, so that by identifying ourselves with Christ’s death, we will be raised to new life *NOW ALREADY* with Christ in his resurrection power and victory over death.

The Calvinist idea that salvation *MUST* be defined in terms of “substitutionary atonement” or “penal substitution” is very familiar to all of us due to the prevalence of Calvinist, Reformed thought that we hear all around us. But it is *NOT* a very strong theme that can be found in the earliest writings of the Christian movement as we can see in Paul’s own letters. Paul writes much more consistently about our solidarity with Christ and our participation in Christ than he writes about the idea of Christ “taking our place” in a substitutional way.

On a side note, my Old Testament colleague, Dr. Tom King, is working on writing a book in

which he explores the strong sense of participation that can be found in the O.T. concept of the Day of Atonement. But I'll leave that theme for Dr. King to talk about at some other time. (The commercial for your future book was free, though, Dr. King!).

Let's go back to 2 Peter, though. When Peter says that Christ has made it possible for believers to participate in the divine nature, many scholars jump immediately at the phrases "*participation*" and "*divine nature.*" For you see, Greek philosophical and religious writings often discussed the desire for people to become godlike. Greek dualism (which was very characteristic of the movement called Gnosticism) taught that all existence was divided between the material and the spiritual worlds. Humans were found right in the middle of this divide between that which was purely physical (and thereby evil) and that which was purely spiritual (and thereby "good"). Since the material world (including the body) was considered to be inherently evil, while the spiritual world (including the spirit or soul of a person) was considered to be good, Greek dualism called people to salvation by reaching towards their spiritual self and by pushing away everything that was connected to the physical world.

Salvation then (according to Gnostic dualistic thinking), was attained by one of two ways. It was either attained by a revelation of knowledge at which point the person would realize that deep within themselves they were already part of the divine entity or "Logos" of the world. Or it was attained by working hard to embrace the spiritual world and to deny and punish the physical world, including one's own physical body.

And so here is Peter who begins to talk about participation in the divine nature. And immediately many scholars dive into a full-blown discussion of which part of Greek dualistic thinking Peter is embracing, and teaching, and talking about. Is he calling to his readers to realize that they need to simply embrace the divine spark or the "*divine nature*" that exists in every person? Is he calling them to push forward to the self-realization and self-actualization where a person can find the source and origin of salvation buried deeply inside themselves? Thus, people don't need a Savior. What they really need is to simply have that moment of striking, clear revelation that they just need to embrace that essence of goodness that is already part of who they are as people. If this sounds familiar to you, it is because most forms of "New Age" religion are simply a modern version of ancient Gnostic thought.

Or, other scholars suggest that Peter is calling believers to fight against the material world and to embrace the spiritual world. Thus, by embracing ascetic practices whereby they deprive the body of food, enjoyment, rest, or other "physical desires," the person can earn salvation through their deprivation of the physical world that is represented in their body. By doing this, they will reap the self-benefit of having the human soul or human spirit be released by the evil grips of the physical body, and they will be "saved" by being reunited to the "Logos Spirit" from which Greeks thought that all creation came into being. So, which is it? Which Greek philosophical idea was Peter promoting here?

Well, would you believe that he promotes neither idea? Greek philosophical thought taught that participation in the divine nature was either innate (in other words, the divine nature is already buried deep inside each person, and they just need to look inside themselves in order to find it and be "saved") or participation in the divine nature was attained by effort by punishing and denying the physical body in order to release the spiritual soul. But Peter doesn't teach either one of these ideas, even though he uses the Greek philosophical phrase "*participation in the divine nature.*" Instead, Peter describes participation in the divine nature as a gift of Christ. It is a gift

of Christ that is free, undeserved, and unmerited. In other words, it is Christ's gift of grace to the believer. In fact, Peter reminds us in verse 3 that Christ's divine power "*has given us everything we need for life and godliness.*"

We need to think about this truth for a moment. Christ's divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness. The expression "*life and godliness*" is a Greek idiomatic phrase that can more properly be translated as "*godly life.*" In other words, in God's plan of salvation for humankind in Christ, God ensured that Christ's power and victory would supply us with everything we need to live a godly life. He has provided everything we need, and he *gives it to us*. Praise his name.

Our participation in the divine nature has practical and moral implications. In other words, this is not just some kind of spiritual "high" that does not actually touch our daily life. On the contrary, it affects *every aspect* of our daily life. Peter says in the last phrase of verse 5 that our participation in the divine nature or our participation in Christ is the means by which we can escape the corruption of the world and the corruption of evil desires. Those who teach that people are doomed to continue in their sin, even after they have been forgiven, overlook the clear promises of Scripture that are given here in this passage as well as in many other passages of Scripture. They want to argue that this kind of freedom from sin and evil desires is only possible after we die and go to heaven. But this is not what Peter says. Peter's emphasis on living a godly life which is in contrast to evil desires makes it very clear that this participation in the divine nature enables believers to renounce and overcome sin, NOT just in a future existence in heaven, but it refers to victory over sin now already, in the present.

Hilary of Arles, who lived in the 5th century, wrote, "*Just as God stepped out of his nature to become a partaker of our humanity, so we are called to step out of our nature to become partakers of his divinity*" (Bray 133). As we identify ourselves with Christ, we die to self with all its evil desires, and we are raised to new life in Christ with victory over temptation and sin.

But this victory over sin, this participation in the divine nature, is not the "final goal" of the Christian life. Instead, it is only the beginning. As participants in the divine nature, Christ enables us to participate in his holiness and righteousness in this life. Indeed, his divine power has given us everything we need for living a godly life. As participants in the life of Christ, this godly life will not only be a life that loves God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, but the godly life of Christ will also enable us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

I know that this devotional has been pretty heavy on the theological side of things. But as I am learning as I teach our Doctrine of Holiness course, we need to be reminded of the promises of God that often fly in the face of the Calvinist flavored "pop theology" that swirls all around us. What God has made possible for us in and through and because of Jesus Christ is not only the forgiveness of sin, as great as forgiveness really is. But Christ's victory over sin and death and the outpouring of his Holy Spirit provides us everything we need to participate in his victory over sin NOW, in this life already, as Christ lives in our lives and allows his Spirit to cleanse our heart of the evil desires of inbred sin. Praise the Lord for full salvation! God's great and precious promises do not only include our justification and forgiveness of sins, but God's promises also include the cleansing of our heart and our entire sanctification by his Holy Spirit.

I will say it again, Praise the Lord for full salvation! Amen.

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