



**ELECT EXILES – 1 PETER
LONG FERVENTLY**

1 Peter 2:1-3

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Introduction – Half-Hearted Creatures Is What We Are

A half-hearted creature; that's what I am! Half-hearted creatures—perhaps you'll agree that's what we all are. That is, at least, how we'll see ourselves, if look at the life and teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ. When we do that, it becomes clear, as C. S. Lewis has so rightly pointed out, that “our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak.”¹

Contrary to popular opinion, then, our problem as people—and our problem as Christians—is not that we are too full of desire or too filled with longing; instead, our problem is that we fail to long as we ought to long. Our problem is not that our souls are jungles of desire; our problem is that they are deserts that need irrigating. We are, again, in Lewis words, “half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us.”

Yet, as today's passage reminds us, the Christian life ought to be marked by an intense *longing*. “Like newborn infants,” Peter writes, “long for the pure spiritual milk” (2:2).

Longing is, of course, not the only thing that ought to mark the life of the Christian. As we have already seen in 1 Peter, the Christian life ought to be marked by hope (1:13); it ought to be marked by holiness (1:14-21); and it ought to be marked by love (1:22-25). But, together with these three, it must also be marked by longing.

As an elect exile, which is who you are if you are a Christian, you are to long fervently for pure spiritual milk. Your life is to be driven by a particular longing; you might even call it a craving.

Peter gives us a picture of what our longing should look like there at the beginning of verse 2: “Like newborn infants.” And, for those who have spent any time around newborns, especially hungry newborns, you no doubt get the point Peter is making.

The challenge, however, is that most of us do not long like newborn infants. When was the last time you cried, you groaned, you mourned, so to speak, as a result of your desire to feed upon pure spiritual milk? When was the last time we found ourselves saying with the Psalmist:

As a deer pants for flowing streams,
so pants my soul for you, O God.
My soul thirst for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and appear before God?” (Psalm 42:1-2).

Frankly, if we're honest, many of us would say that our lives simply are not characterized by longing, at least not longing for pure spiritual milk.

¹ C. S. Lewis, “Weight of Glory,” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (Eerdmans, 1965), pp. 1-2.

But how critical it is to long like newborn infants! You see, Peter not only gives us a picture of longing, but also tells us the *purpose* of our longing: “that by it you may grow up to salvation” (2:2). Longing is, then, the engine behind growth in the Christian life, growth up to salvation. Pretty critical, then!

So, how do I develop a longing for pure spiritual milk? So often I don’t sense much longing for pure spiritual milk. Why is that? And what can I do about it? Can I increase my appetite for God and for the things of God? If so, how?

Tasting that the Lord Is Good (2:3)

How do we increase our appetite for the pure spiritual milk? The first step is this: we must first *taste* pure spiritual milk. Before we can long for pure spiritual milk, we must first taste pure spiritual milk. For we only crave what we’ve already tasted; we only long for what we’ve already enjoyed. This is why Peter, immediately following his call to long for the pure spiritual milk, says this: “if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good” (v. 3). So, Peter is saying that we should long for pure spiritual milk, if—or, really, *since*—we’ve tasted it already; that is, we’ve tasted that the Lord is good.

Many of us recall that fateful moment when our son or daughter got their first taste of chocolate. For months we’d gotten away with feeding them 2% milk from a plastic bottle or green beans and carrots from a glass jar. Then, not by any fault of our own, they somehow get a sliver of chocolate in their little mouths—and their eyes light up; as if to say, “Mommy, Daddy, how could I have been on planet earth for a year or more and never known that such a thing existed?” Yet now that they know chocolate exists, well, there’s no turning back. Now that they’ve tasted chocolate, they long for chocolate, and there’s nothing we as parents can do about it.

This is Peter’s point. But what exactly does it mean to taste that the Lord is good? Tasting that the Lord is good is a wonderful metaphor; it is a way of saying that one’s encounter with the Lord is both deeply personal and involves the whole person. Tasting is not something one does from a distance; tasting is not something one does in the abstract; tasting is not something someone else does for you. Tasting implies the whole person being wholly involved in the encounter.

But how do we taste that the Lord is good? Well, you will be interested to know that the word ‘good’ in this verse is a translation of the Greek word *chreæstos*. Now, this word *chreæstos* sounds an awful lot like another Greek word you may perhaps know: *Christos*, ‘Christ.’ In fact, a single vowel distinguishes the two words. So, these two sentences are nearly identical in the original: ‘the Lord is *good*’ is virtually the same as ‘the Lord is *Christ*’, which is precisely the point!

How, then, do we taste that the Lord is good? We do so by experiencing the Lord as Christ. We come to taste that the Lord is good when we encounter God’s life-sustaining grace as it is found in the person of Jesus Christ. For apart from Christ, we would taste the Lord not as good, but as terrible and terrifying! For the Lord is holy and just and righteousness, and we in our sin are unholy and unjust and unrighteousness. And were we to encounter the holiness of God in our un-holiness, our sinfulness, we would not find him to be good, but dreadful, frightening, indeed a consuming fire!

Yet, friends, in Christ—and Christ alone—we can taste that the Lord is good. Because God has demonstrated his own love for us in this, that while we were yet sinners, who stood condemned under the righteous judgment of God and were destined for the righteous wrath of God, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. “For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). This, friends, is the gospel by which we are saved; it’s the gospel which we believe; it’s the only way in which a holy God can ever be said to taste good to a sinful wretch like you and me.

So, let me ask you before we go any farther with this message: Do you believe this gospel? Have you embraced this gospel—Jesus Christ’s death on the cross for you and for the forgiveness of yours sins? Have you, that is, tasted that the Lord is good?

Let me here be candid with you. Some of you do not long for pure spiritual milk because you’ve never tasted that the Lord is good. It is very easy to confuse tasting the good things about Christianity with tasting that the Lord is good. This no doubt happens in every church in every age; people assume that the good things they enjoy about church, or the good things they experience in the practice of the Christian religion, or the good things they gain by relating to Christian people, is the same thing as tasting that the Lord himself is good. But it is not.

Some of you are in that position right now. You have been attracted to the church because of something you have seen about the church or Christianity or the Christians you know. Let me use an analogy: You have been drawn into the kitchen by the smell of something good; and now that you are here in the kitchen, you see people enjoying that the Lord is good; and you hear people talking about the fact that the Lord is good. And you yourself are beginning to get a sense for the fact that the Lord is good; you can smell it, but you have never tasted it. Yet because you are around those who have, you assume that you yourself have as well—even though you have not.

But what do you do if you do indeed want to taste that the Lord is good? You must believe; faith *is* tasting! Trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation from your sin—that’s what it means to taste that the Lord is good. To taste that the Lord is good is to taste—to believe with all that you are—that the Lord is Christ.

Throwing Out Contaminated Food (2:1)

Now, if you have indeed tasted that the Lord is good, you nevertheless know that you do not always long for that which you’ve tasted. Why is that? One reason is that we can eat food that ruins our appetite for the Lord. There is a commonsense rule of parenting, one I was raised with, and one perhaps you were raised with: there’s no snacking before dinner. Why? “Because it will ruin your appetite.”

Our appetite for God, our appetite for pure spiritual milk, is similar. We can ruin our appetite by eating; but in the case of the Christian life and our appetite for God, we ruin our appetite with certain kinds of food: food we once used to eat. What kind of food is that? What kind of food ruins your appetite for pure spiritual milk? The answer is contaminated food, toxic food. It is the food referred to in 2:1—malice and deceit and hypocrisy and envy and slander. We sometimes eat that kind of food, and it ruins our appetite for pure spiritual milk. Eating the contaminated food of malice and deceit and hypocrisy and envy and slander ruins our appetite for God’s life-sustaining grace in Christ. This is why Peter is crystal clear about what we should

do with these foods: throw them out! “Put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander,” Peter says (2:1).

But notice what these five practices have in common? They are all highly toxic in relationships and therefore fatal for community. Did you see how this verse flows naturally from the previous passage, where we are called to love one another from a pure heart, with a sincere brotherly love? What is the opposite of sincere brotherly love for one another?—malice and deceit and hypocrisy and envy and slander. These were part and parcel of our life before we knew Christ (1:14); they are characteristic of the way of life we became accustomed to before being born again (1:18).

Yet, now that you are in Christ, do you know how damaging these are to our relationships with others? Do you know what deceit does in a marriage? It can be positively fatal. Do you know what hypocrisy or envy does to a friendship? They are toxic. Do you know, teenagers, what malice toward your mom or dad can do to your relationship with them? Or, brothers and sisters, do you know what slander does to our life together as a church?

But what drives these five relationship-killing practices? They’re all very human attempts to sustain our own lives. Each of these five practices is either an attempt at self-protection or self-promotion. We resort to malice and deceit and hypocrisy and envy and slander when we feel our life is threatened. We feel the need to slander someone, to verbally cut someone down, so that we can boost our own sense of self. We are driven to deceit because transparency is too threatening to our sense of self. We act hypocritically because we need to preserve a particular image of who we are; it would be death to us should people find out who we really are. Or we find ourselves envying another person’s success or status because we are convinced that what they have is essential for our own life.

Now, do you see what lies at the root of each of these practices? What is at the bottom of every attempt at self-protection or self-promotion? What is at root is *fear*. Or, you might say, what is at root is *a lack of faith*. You see, each of these practices is rooted in and flows from fear that I won’t be able to enjoy life, enjoy that which is good, if I don’t do these things; or they flow from a lack of faith in God and his willingness to let me taste that which is good. So, we think we must provide for ourselves because we are not sure God will provide for us; I must advance my cause in the world through malice or deceit because I am not sure God will advance it for me.

You also see, then, why these particular practices are set in opposition to our longing for pure spiritual milk. For what is the pure spiritual milk but *God’s life-sustaining grace in Christ*. Yet if we are busy sustaining our *own* lives through malice and deceit and hypocrisy and envy and slander, we will have no need to long for or hope in *God’s* life-sustaining grace in Christ. We will have taken care of ourselves—our sense of self, our own reputation, or our image in the eyes of others—without really any need for God’s intervention or provision.

We must put away, then, all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Instead, let us by faith tread the path of wisdom, and listen to the words of King David from Psalm 34:11-14,

Come, O children, listen to me;
 I will teach you the fear of the LORD.
 What man is there who desires life
 and loves many days, that he may see good?
 Keep your tongue from evil

and your lips from speaking deceit.
 Turn away from evil and do good;
 seek peace and pursue it.

So, may I challenge us as a church and you as an individual, to commit to *fasting* from these contaminated foods that we so often consume to our spiritual detriment? Just this week I met with one of our elders who serves as an accountability partner in my life. And I laid out several subtle vices that I so desperately want to see banished from my life. One of them was this cluster of respectable sins: malice and deceit and hypocrisy and envy and slander, especially slander. I want to fast from these, so that I can long much more fully for God's satisfying and life-sustaining grace in Christ. Will you join me in fasting from these, as well? Will you join me in putting away, by the grace of God, all these relationship-killing practices so that we can better long for the pure spiritual milk of God's life-sustaining grace in Christ?

Cultivating a Longing for God's Life-Sustaining Grace (2:2)

There is another step we can take in seeking to develop our longing or appetite for God's life-sustaining grace in Christ. Not only do we need to put away that which ruins our appetite for God's life-sustaining grace in Christ, but we must also *actively cultivate* our longing for it. This is the third step in the process of developing a longing for pure spiritual milk: *we must actively cultivate this longing*.

In fact, notice the obvious in verse 2: we are *commanded* to long for the pure spiritual milk! Longing for the pure spiritual milk is not optional; it is required. God expects, indeed God demands that you long for it. God does not simply call us to act *as if we* longed for pure spiritual milk; instead, he requires that this be a very real and living reality in your heart and mine.

So, is it? Are you fulfilling this command of Scripture?

Of course, as we all know from our own experience, we *cannot* simply turn longing on like the oven; nor can we simply turn longing up like the radio. In fact, as we are all very aware, I think, longing is not something you or I can ultimately control.

So, you see, we have got to realize that God is here asking us to do something we cannot do; indeed, he is commanding us to do something we cannot do. This does not seem too fair, does it? Yet it is nonetheless true.

Of course, realizing we are commanded to long and yet cannot control our own longing could drive us to despair, or, it could drive us to faith—faith and prayer and dependence upon the mercy of God. For God alone is the one who can give what it is that we so desperately need. This, then, is where we need to be—thrown upon the mercy of God to make happen in our hearts what we cannot even begin to make happen. No one has perhaps understood this as well as Saint Augustine, who is famous for praying to the Lord this way: “Give me the grace to do as you command, and command me to do what you will!”² Taking our cue from Augustine, we ought in turn to pray in light of our text: “Give me the grace to long for you, O Lord, and command me to long for you just the same.”

Now, having said that, please understand that even though we cannot *create* longing, we can nevertheless *cultivate* it. We cannot give birth to longing; only God can. But we can serve as

² Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, Bk. 10, Sec. 29.

a midwife to the longing God causes to be born in us; we can promote its growth and facilitate its flourishing. We can help nurture longing.

How? In several ways. First, we can cultivate a deeper longing for God by simply acknowledging that we do not long for God as we ought. This is an oft-neglected place to start, but a vital one nonetheless. Unless we are honest with ourselves about where we are, we will never really make strides in our relationship with the Lord.

But, friends, we must be careful we do not make a virtue out of our weakness just because we are honest about it. This is why the very next thing we should do after we have acknowledged our lack of longing for God is to *repent*. We cultivate longing for God by repenting of the fact that we do not long for God. So let us look to the psalmists, let us look to the prophets, let us look to the apostles, let us look to the Lord Jesus Christ, who said “zeal for your house will consume me” (John 2:17)—let us look to each of these and be humbled and repent of our puny longings for God.

The third thing we can do to actively cultivate longing for God is to call upon him in prayer. And after having acknowledged and repented of our lack of longing, we will be in the perfect position for prayer.

The fourth thing we can do to cultivate longing for God is to take advantage of all the ways in which God has so richly provided for us to stir-up our longing for his life-sustaining grace. What are these ways? In the history of the church, they have often been called the *means of grace*, and they all basically revolve around ways in which we can consume the grace of God in the word of God: by reading the word, by hearing the word preached, by praying the word, by singing the word, by seeing the word in the ordinances of baptism and communion, and by sharing the word with others. These are proven ways in which God communicates his grace to his people and thus continually stirs their hearts to long more fully after him.

Finally, just as we can cultivate our longing for God by feeding upon the means of grace, so we can further stimulate our longing for him by fasting from physical food. God has so wired us together that when we abstain from physical pleasure, like eating food, it has the potential to *intensify spiritual longing*. As we refrain from satisfying our bodily appetite, we can increase our spiritual appetite. So, let me encourage you to consider fasting from food for a short season, so that you can long for God with the whole of your life.

Again, let me say that none of these things can create longing in your heart. Only God can create longing by giving you new birth. But these are God’s appointed means of cultivating longing once the longing has been graciously given.

Conclusion – O Taste and See That the Lord is Good

The Christian life ought to be marked by a longing for God’s life-sustaining grace in Christ. It begins with first tasting that the Lord is good. “O taste and see that the Lord is good” (Psalm 34:8). But it requires putting away all the contaminated food we are often tempted to consume, contaminated food that ruins our appetite for the pure spiritual milk of God’s life-sustaining grace. Yet in order to have a life marked by a longing for God, we must also cultivate our longing for God. And God has given us means to do so: his Word. And as we feed on it, we will want more of it—of Him.

I've already mentioned Saint Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo. His *Confessions* is truly one of the great classics of Christian literature. And what makes it such a treasure is watching how he articulates at great length what it means, what it looks like, to long fervently for the pure spiritual milk. May these words from Saint Augustine be your words, be the expression of your heart as you, like a newborn infant, long for God's life-sustaining grace in Christ:

You called me; you cried aloud to me; you broke my barrier of deafness. You shone upon me; your radiance enveloped me; you put my blindness to flight. You shed your fragrance about me; I drew breath and now I gasp for your sweet odor. *I tasted you, and now I hunger and thirst for you.* You touched me, and I am inflamed with love of your peace.³

I have tasted you, and now I hunger and thirst for you. May that be true for you, for every one of us, today—every day.

Amen.

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³ Saint Augustine, *Confessions* (New York: Penguin, 1961), Book X, Sec. XXVII (p. 232).