

## “Elect Exiles”

The first in a series of sermons on 1 Peter

*Texts: NT: 1 Peter 1:1-12; Exodus 24:3-8*

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**P**resumably, most of us here are US citizens—either by birth or by naturalization. American citizenship entitles us to all the benefits and privileges of living in the United States. Yet, our national citizenship also carries with it the responsibilities of being an American—we vote, we pay taxes, we may be called to serve in the military, etc. But in addition to our US citizenship, Christians possess another kind of citizenship. If we trust in Jesus Christ and possess the Christian passport (baptism), we are also citizens of Christ’s kingdom—we hold a dual citizenship. Just as our natural citizenship provides us with certain benefits, and places certain responsibilities upon us, so to does our citizenship in Christ’s kingdom. The purpose of Peter’s first epistle is to spell out both the privileges and responsibilities of our membership in Christ’s kingdom, even as we dwell in the midst of the civil kingdom with its many blessings, its numerous duties and obligations, and its soul-threatening dangers.

We begin a new series on three of the seven so-called “catholic epistles” or “general epistles” found in the New Testament. The three epistles we’ll be covering in this series are 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter, along with Jude. The reason why these letters (along with James and the three epistles of John) are called “catholic” or “general” epistles is because they are addressed to Christians in general, and are not addressed to specific individuals or churches as is the case with the letters of Paul. The general letters come out of the very heart of the apostolic circle: Peter—the chief apostle; James the half-brother of Jesus and the leader of the Jerusalem church as well as one of the first Christian martyrs; John—the author of the gospel bearing his name, three epistles and the Book of Revelation; and Jude, another half-brother of Jesus. So, the general letters are very important if too often overlooked.

Reformed Christians often view themselves as students of Paul—because in our own history the doctrinal debates we have faced often deal with the question of how sinners are reckoned as forgiven and righteous before God (justification). Our theologians write books on Paul and especially his commentaries on Romans and Galatians—with good reason. We need to properly understand the gospel in order to share it with others, and to live in light of the countless blessings secured for us by Jesus Christ. While the battles over justification are important, and we do need to be thoroughly conversant with Paul and his letters, I suggest that American Christians must now also fight on a second front—the ever-growing challenge of secularization. The two letters of Peter and the short letter from Jude provide first century Christians with very specific instructions about how Christians are to live as exiles in a foreign land. For the original recipients of these letters, this meant the diaspora of the Greco-Roman world of the first century because the Christians receiving this letter had been forcibly removed by Roman authorities from the cities in which they had been born and raised.

While I am at home in the land of my birth and find much here of value and joy, as I get older I am also aware that the land in which I live is becoming increasingly hostile to the things I believe about the meaning and purpose of life, the values I hold dear, as well as those things I believe as a Christian as expressed in the Apostles Creed. In many ways, I feel like a foreigner in my own country—not a foreigner in the sense of race, custom, or culture, but a foreigner in light of how my neighbor sees the world, how they live their lives, what they think important, and how they make decisions about right and wrong. I simply do not believe the same things about the meaning and purpose of life which most of my neighbors

do. Part of the reason is I have a dual citizenship and they do not.

I know from listening to many of you that you are experiencing the same struggles. In light of our membership in the kingdom of Christ, there is a real and profound sense in which we are resident aliens in the civil kingdom (biblically speaking). We wish to be good American citizens and we strive to be salt and light among our neighbors, yet as Christians we feel more and more as though the culture in which we live is increasing foreign (if not hostile) to us. We are not the first to feel this way, as we will see when we begin working our way through these three letters of Peter and Jude. In these letters we find instructions to Christian exiles—people who possess a heavenly citizenship and yet are also exiles and sojourners in the midst of a pagan culture. In our case, there are pagan elements around us to be sure, as well as some remnants of the Christian (or better, religious) culture of the American past. But I’m not referring to a decline in Christian culture and a desire for a nostalgic return to a time when America was “Christian.” America has always been a religious nation, but has never been and cannot be a “Christian” nation in the true evangelical and biblical sense of the term.

Make no mistake about it, we live in an increasingly secularized society in which many of our neighbors live their entire lives from cradle to grave without giving any consideration or showing any concern whatsoever, about the existence and nature of God, the reality of human sinfulness and evil, or the need of divine grace to rescue us from our predicament. We live in a world where people’s personal opinions and experiences have replaced truth. When someone declares “I feel,” that trumps any logical argument or Bible verse you can muster. These secular folk still need a Savior, but never even stop to consider why, or who that Savior might be—because they feel no need of such a thing. This is what it means to be “secularized.” The irony is that many such people still claim to be spiritual, but the more spiritual they claim to be, the farther they are, it seems, from the kingdom of God.

As our time in 1 Peter unfolds, we’ll be surprised, I think, by how much Peter has to say to us under such circumstances, encouraging us to keep our heavenly citizenship before our eyes as we live in a land which is our home for the number of years of life God grants to us, but which is but a blink of the eye in light of eternity. Peter will teach us to renounce the *carpe diem* (“seize the day”) motto of the Nietzschean pagans around us. The Apostle will contend that Christians don’t “seize the moment.” Rather, we live *Carem Deo*—we live our lives in the civil kingdom before God in the light of eternity. As citizens of Christ’s kingdom, Peter tells us, we must believe specific doctrines and conduct ourselves as God commands, all the while we live as exiles and sojourners in this secularized age. This is why I have chosen to spend the next couple of months working our way through 1 Peter, followed by shorter stints in 2 Peter and Jude. These letters have much to say to Christians in a secularized society such as ours.

As with any other New Testament letter, the way to get the most out of our time studying 1 Peter is to understand who wrote this epistle and when, and then consider the historical circumstances under which it was written, so we can draw proper application for our own circumstances. We’ll do that before we spend the balance of our time looking at the salutation in verses 1-2.

The first matter to deal with then is the question of who wrote this epistle. Right off the bat, the author identifies himself as the Apostle Peter—“Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ.” Critical scholars—those who reject the miraculous elements in the New Testament—universally argue against Peter’s authorship. For such scholars, apostolic authorship is always guilty until proven innocent—which is exactly backwards when considering ancient documents which should always be given the benefit of doubt unless and until there is reason to question such things. It should be duly noted that in 1 Peter 5:1, the author claims to be an eyewitness to the life and ministry of Jesus. “So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and

*a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed.”* The assumption made by critical scholars that a student or follower of Peter wrote this letter in Peter’s name long after Peter was dead and gone was never a common practice as critical scholars claim, and anyone who claims to be an eyewitness to the sufferings of Christ and who was not, would be considered a liar a fraud—not someone whose obviously false claims were subsequently canonized and treated as Scripture.

Critical scholars usually reject this epistle on the ground that 1 Peter differs greatly in style and in the quality of its Greek from 2 Peter (which few scholars accept as being an authentic letter from the Apostle). How could an uneducated fisherman, it is argued, compose a letter like 1 Peter in such “cultivated” (educated) Greek? But this objection collapses when we consider the likelihood that Peter employed a professional secretary to compose the letter (just as Paul employed Tertius to write down his letter to the church in Rome). This was a common practice in the first century because an author had to ensure that the letter being composed actually fit within the space of the available parchment.

Preparation of such letters required great care and skill, and professional scribes were widely employed to compose letters as dictated by their authors. Some have argued that Silvanus—a known associate of Paul (2 Cor. 1:19; 1 Thess; 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1), and who is mentioned as the courier of this letter in 1 Peter 5:12, also may have served as Peter’s secretarial scribe after Peter had been imprisoned in Rome.<sup>1</sup> There is no direct evidence for this, but this is far more plausible than contending that this letter was written by someone writing in Peter’s name, fraudulently claiming to be an eyewitness long after Peter died.

Furthermore, the external evidence supports that Peter the Apostle is indeed the author of this epistle. The church father Clement—writing his first epistle from Rome in about 90 A.D. where Peter was known to have been martyred by Nero in the late 60's—likely alludes to it. Polycarp’s letter to the Philippians (written about 112 A.D.) uses language taken directly from this epistle, indicating that 1 Peter was well known in the early church. Later church fathers cite it directly as coming from Peter. More important is that there is nothing in this letter which conflicts with what we know of Nero’s persecution of Christians in Rome in the latter portion of his increasingly despotic rule. Given the fact that Nero had Peter put to death at some point before Nero’s own demise in 68 A.D., there is every reason to believe that this letter was written in Rome between 64-66 A.D. by the Apostle Peter, who was an eyewitness to the sufferings of Jesus. Peter then employed a scribe to compose the letter which appears in our New Testament.<sup>2</sup>

As we answer the second question—under what circumstances was this letter written—we will also find additional evidence of Peter’s authorship. After identifying himself in the opening words, Peter goes on to speak of “*those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.*” These elect exiles (more on this in a bit) are from the five regions in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) in which both Christians and Jews had been uprooted because of an edict by the Roman emperor Claudius, who ruled from AD 41-54. Claudius ordered that the entire region be re-colonized by retired

<sup>1</sup> Peter H. Davids, The First Epistle of Peter, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 5-7.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the authorship of 1 Peter see: D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, An Introduction to the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 421-431; Thomas R. Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, vol. 37, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), 3.

Roman soldiers.<sup>3</sup> These men were given land throughout Asia Minor after their service in the Roman army was completed. You devote twenty years to the service of Rome and you get a tract of land—land which the Christians and Jews receiving this letter may have owned before it was taken from them.

This fact is important for our study of 1 Peter for two reasons. The first is this puts this letter in the right time period to support a date of composition in the mid-sixties of the first century—a few years after Christians and Jews were forcibly uprooted by the Romans. The second is this establishes the fact that this letter is being sent by the Apostle Peter to downcast Christians (both Jews and Gentiles) who now find themselves as aliens and strangers in a land which they once called home.<sup>4</sup> It would be like Mexico defeating the United States in battle, and then giving land in California, Arizona, and Texas, to Mexican citizens thereby displacing all those who moved into these areas after this land was ceded from Mexico to the US in the 1840's, people who have owned the land for over 150 years, and now find it taken from them. To the victors go the spoils.

Peter is writing to people who may come from established families and communities now living as foreigners and aliens in their own land. Some in the original audience were slaves, freedmen, tradesmen, and even social outcasts. They are not only political exiles—they are, as we will see, theological exiles, people exiled because of their faith in Jesus Christ. The people who would be most easily displaced by the Romans are Jews and Christians. Both groups would be despised by the locals and oft-times and were already on the receiving end of loathing and prejudice from their pagan neighbors, who would only be too glad to point out Christians and Jews to Roman officials who then confiscated their land and property. Such people—the elect exiles—are in desperate need of both instruction and encouragement, and this is what Peter's first epistle offers to them. It offers the same to us.

Before we turn to the first two verses of this letter, we need to briefly consider the remarkable contents of this brief but theologically packed letter. As one commentator has written, “probably no other document in the New Testament is so theological as 1 Peter, if we understand ‘theological’ in the strict sense as teaching about God.”<sup>5</sup> The only New Testament writing which speaks of God with greater frequency is 1 John. Peter emphasizes divine attributes and prerogatives throughout as a brief survey will show.

Peter speaks of God as the “living” God (1:23), whose will is accomplished (2:15; 3:17), who foreknows those who are his (1:2), and whose word stands forever (1:25). This God is our Father (1:2), he is holy (1:15) as well as the judge of all (4:5). He is the faithful creator (4:19), and the God of all grace (5:10)—grace, by the way, is a major theme in the epistle and is mentioned 10 times. In him, we have the new birth and a living hope (1:3), we are his people (2:10), who are identified as the family of God (4:17), as well as God’s flock (5:2) of whom we are servants (2:16). If we are to remain faithful while living as exiles, then we must know God, and understand who he reveals himself to be.

Peter also speaks extensively of the sufferings of Christ—our Lord’s passion (*paschō*) is mentioned twelve

<sup>3</sup> G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic; 2007), 1015-1016.

<sup>4</sup> Beale and Carson, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament, 1015-1016.

<sup>5</sup> Ralph P. Martin, New Testament Foundations: A Guide for Christian Students, 2 Vols (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975-78), 2.344.

times in 1 Peter, more than any other book in the New Testament. Peter speaks of Christ’s “sprinkled blood” in the introductory verses, and of its preciousness—worth more than much silver or gold (1:18-19). Peter identifies Jesus as the Passover lamb in these same verses, and speaks of Christ as being chosen to be the Savior of sinners from before the foundation of the world (1:21). Peter tells his readers that Jesus is an example to us in our suffering (2:21), and that he bore the guilt of our sins in his own body on the tree (2:24). Peter reminds us that Christ suffered bodily (4:1), once for all, as the righteous for the unrighteous (3:18). We could go on, but as you can see, this epistle is absolutely packed with doctrinal content—this is why it is important for you to read through this epistle regularly as we work our way through it in the coming weeks.

One other thing to notice is that Peter stresses the great tension all Christian exiles and pilgrims feel between “the already,” those benefits we presently possess in Christ and the “not yet,” those benefits to be realized only upon our completion of our time in exile. We have been born again Peter says, with an imperishable seed (1:23), yet our final salvation is ready to be revealed in the last times (1:5) and that the end of all things is near (4:7). Because we are members of Christ’s kingdom we are to love one another (1:22; 2:17), we are to turn away from evil desires (1:14), and we are to live as Jesus instructed us in the ethical section of the epistle (2:13-3:12). For Peter, the church of Jesus Christ is the true Israel, composed of both Jews and Gentiles who have been called from darkness into the light of Christ through the preaching of the gospel. And all those who are Christ’s and members of his kingdom are as much exiles and sojourners in a foreign land, as are those receiving this epistle from Silvanus, which was to be read in the exile churches scattered throughout first century Asia Minor.

With this background information in mind, we can now turn to the opening two verses of this epistle (the greeting). *“Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: May grace and peace be multiplied to you.”* Several things jump out at us from the introduction.

First, the greeting is overtly Trinitarian. Peter speaks of the foreknowledge of God (his intimate knowledge of his redeemed people reading/hearing this letter). Peter speaks of his readers/hearers as obedient to Jesus Christ because they have been sprinkled with his blood, and because they have been sanctified (or set apart) by the Holy Spirit to be the recipients of the saving benefits of Jesus Christ. Those whom the Father foreknows—and the word “foreknow” means much more than merely to know in advance what will happen, it means something more like “foreloved,” i.e., those people whom God has known in advance), are those washed by the blood of Christ, which is applied to them by the work of the Holy Spirit. Chosen by God, we are saved from the guilt of our sins and delivered from its power by the Triune God. Christian exiles are Trinitarian, not merely theists.

Second, Peter identifies himself as “an apostle of Jesus Christ.” Peter is not merely a messenger bringing news to exiles, he brings this news with the authority of Jesus Christ himself, because as an apostle, Peter is affirming that it is Jesus who calls him to this office, and it is Jesus who commands him to speak to the churches with Christ’s authority. This epistle then is not just advice and encouragement from an apostle to suffering Christians. It is Jesus Christ’s word to them, through the agency of Peter. Therefore, the epistle comes with the authority of Jesus himself. What is taught in this epistle is to be believed. What is commanded in this epistle is to be obeyed by exiles sojourning in a foreign land.

Third, Peter is writing to “elect” exiles. Those hearing or reading this letter are people who are *parepidēmois*), “strangers,” “exiles” or “foreigners.” To the original audience, as we have seen, this is

literally the case. Countless Jewish and Gentile Christian have been displaced throughout the regions mentioned by the Apostle. These followers of Jesus are rejected and despised and now exiles because they worship the one true God, who has revealed himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and who pay the price for rejecting the pantheon of Roman gods and pagan deities worshiped by their neighbors. These Christian exiles may speak the same language as their neighbors, they have the same history, culture and customs, and they have the same DNA. Yet, because they obey Jesus, they are foreigners in their own land—different not in history, culture, and custom, but different in how they see the world around them, and how they chose to live their lives. They may be hated by their neighbors, but, as Peter reminds them, they are the beloved of God, chosen (“elect”) in Christ.

In a certain sense all Christians are foreigners in whatever land in which they reside. In Philippians 3:19-21, Paul makes the same point Peter does here. *“Their end [the enemies of Christ] is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.”* Christians may be exiles, aliens, and sojourners in this life, but this is because we also possess a heavenly citizenship which non-Christians can never understand. The civil kingdom has been ordained by God as the realm of common grace, where we share the joys, duties, and dangers of this life with all of our non-Christian neighbors. But we are also citizens of Christ’s kingdom and we await a Savior to come—this gives us a completely different perspective on this life from that of our neighbors. For non-Christians, this world and this life is all that there is. This world is, as Calvin puts it, the grand theater of God’s redemption. Yet, it cannot be our final home until every hint and trace of sin is purged from it on the day Jesus returns—a point Peter makes in chapter 3 of his second epistle when he speaks of a new heaven and earth as the home of righteousness.

Fourth (and finally), the good news of which Peter reminds his struggling hearers (and us) is that despite the scorn and hatred we will receive at times from our non-Christian neighbors, which is the inevitable consequence of being exiles in a foreign land, we are nevertheless, “elect” exiles, chosen by God to be the recipients of the greatest blessing of all—we are sprinkled with the blood of Jesus Christ, through whom God’s grace and peace are multiplied. When Peter speaks of the sprinkling of sacrificial blood, he is clearly referring to Exodus 24:3-8 (our Old Testament lesson).

The language there is covenantal. The idea is that the representatives of Israel have been called up Mount Sinai for the establishment of God’s covenant with Israel, and so they “pledge their obedience, and then they are sprinkled with the blood of the sacrifice. So also here: Christians have been chosen ‘for (the purpose of) obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ.’” When God calls us (his elect) into covenant relationship with him through faith in Jesus, “we pledge our obedience while the covenant is sealed by Jesus’ death.”<sup>6</sup> To put it another way, God has chosen us in Christ to be his elect exiles on the earth (we are a new Israel living in the wilderness), and because God has done this, we receive all the saving benefits of Jesus Christ, and we pledge our obedience to our Savior.

This is what marks us out as elect exiles while we sojourn in the civil kingdom. Christianity is not a culture. We eat the same foods, wear the same clothes, celebrate the same national holidays, enjoy weddings, birthdays and graduations, as do our non-Christian neighbors. Christians do not wear special clothes or abstain from certain foods like Jews and Muslims. At a glance, you cannot tell non-Christians

<sup>6</sup> Beale and Carson, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament, 1016.

apart from Christians—with exception that Christians are modest and stive to live in peace with their neighbors. What distinguishes us from secularists is that as elect exiles we follow (and we obey) that one in whom we are granted our heavenly citizenship—Jesus Christ. He has sprinkled us with his own blood, washed away our sins, and through the work of the Holy Spirit, he sanctifies us (sets us apart) unto himself and for his purposes.

Although we live, work, and raise our families in the civil kingdom, we do so as followers of Jesus and as citizens of the heavenly kingdom. We possess a dual citizenship. What sets us apart from the unbelievers around us is what we believe and whom we obey. We are to be good citizens in the civil kingdom—Peter tells us to honor the authorities, marry in the Lord and raise our families in accordance with God’s word, and fulfill our vocations as unto the Lord. Yet, because we are Christ’s and members of his kingdom, we are elect exiles in a land which is our temporary place of residence, but is not our final home. It is in this sense that we exiles, sojourners, and pilgrims in a foreign land can identify with those elect exiles in Asia Minor who received this letter from the Apostle Peter.

So to the elect exiles in Anaheim, Peter says to us, “you have been chosen *according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: May grace and peace be multiplied to you.*” Amen.