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Church

...to make and mature more followers of Christ

Elect Exiles

1 Peter 1:1–2

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series: Exiles: Hope Between Two Worlds

There are some things about our nation that might still point to the fact that we are and always have been a Christian nation. Of course that's what many of us were taught when we were growing up. We were taught our Founding Fathers believed in God and the nation they created was founded on Christian principles. Still, to this day, on our money it says: "In God We Trust." When we pledge allegiance to the flag we say, "One nation under God." When we attend a Sunday afternoon Giants game everyone stands and sings "God bless America" during the seventh inning stretch. And later this week, at our Presidential Inauguration, our new President will place his hand on a Bible and swear an oath of allegiance to the United States of America.

But the reality is most of us know, regardless of how our nation was founded, we're no longer a Christian nation. All the things I just mentioned are vestiges of a past most people no longer take to heart. Our money might say, "In God we Trust" but most of us trust in the **god** of money. More and more this is reflected in what's become the law of the land. Long ago we did away with school prayer. Then in 1973 it was *Roe vs. Wade* and the legalization of abortion. In 2013 it was the Supreme Court decision to impose a same-sex marriage mandate in all fifty states. Even in our recent election in California we voted to legalize marijuana, which we always considered at the very least a gateway drug.

It seems today our real religion has become one of tolerance for all beliefs. The worst heresy a person can adhere to today is the idea there's actually something called absolute truth; that some things are true and others are false; that some things are right and others are wrong, all of which has a foundation in our Creator.

All of this has caused a lot of anxiety, confusion and unrest in the Christian community. More and more we feel alienated from our culture. We struggle with how to respond to these challenges. We're concerned about a generation of young people growing up in this environment. But it begs the question, How should a follower of Christ respond to all of this?

Introduction to 1 Peter

Today we're starting a new study of the NT letter we call 1 Peter. Peter, who wrote this letter, was one of 12 apostles chosen by Jesus. His original name was Simon, but Jesus changed it to Peter, which means "rock." Peter was an uneducated commercial fisherman, but he was the first to understand Jesus as Messiah, the Son of the living God. For that reason, Jesus called him a rock

because on that foundation of Jesus as the Son of God he'd build his church. But Simon Peter wasn't always so rock-like. He was also the one who denied Jesus three times. Later, as they sat by the fire on the shores of Galilee, Jesus restored him and called him to shepherd his flock. Along with Paul, Peter came to be one of the primary leaders of the early church. Paul was mainly assigned to reach Gentiles while Peter ministered mainly to Jews.

Peter wrote this letter from Rome towards the end of his life to a diverse group of both Jews and Gentiles living in an area called Asia Minor, which is modern-day Turkey. The Emperor at the time was a man named Nero, and Nero was becoming increasingly suspicious of Christians. This would soon turn into outright hostility and persecution. Peter himself would be martyred in Rome around 64 AD. But the people he was writing to were feeling the heat starting to turn up. Over and over he talks about how to endure suffering because a "fiery ordeal" was about to begin (4:13). And so the purpose of this letter was to prepare these people to live in a culture at odds with their faith.

Scot McKnight says this: "The issue facing the Christians in Asia Minor was disturbingly simple. How should we live in this context of social exclusion and persecution? Should we escape into a more sheltered world? Should we withdraw from society? Should we turn a cold shoulder to our world? Should we denounce society in poetic and prophetic tones? How then should we live? Peter's letter is a window into a situation that even throws light on our world, his letter is one of the first struggles in the church with society. It formed some of the conversation that continues to this day, and in our examination of it, we will reap great reward."

How **should** we live? In this letter Peter doesn't tell us to blend into our culture, living you might say as chameleons just blending into the world around us. Nor does he tell us to withdraw or separate from society, gathering in our little holy huddles, living in silent protest against the evil around us. Nor does he tell us to go to war with it, fighting for our place at the table, demanding change. Instead, Peter calls us to what Russell Moore labels, "engaged alienation, a Christianity that preserves the distinctiveness of our gospel while not retreating from our callings as neighbors, and friends, and citizens."

Today as we look at Peter's opening greeting we're going to see this begins with an understanding of who we are. And who we

are bound up in just two words: elect exiles. That's our core identity as dislocated people in a post-Christian society.

We are Elect Exiles

Listen to God's Word as he speaks through Peter.

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,

To God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood:

Grace and peace be yours in abundance.

(1 Peter 1:1-2)

Notice those two words: elect, exiles. Those two words don't seem to belong together. It's like an oxymoron. It's almost like saying we're millionaire refugees. "You're at the same time the most despised and looked down upon in all the world and yet the richest and most blessed in Jesus Christ of anybody on the face of the planet." Elect exiles. That defines who we are as Christ-followers in this world.

First of all, we're God's elect. What does that mean? It certainly doesn't mean we're somehow better than others, as if God chose us because of our superior qualities. The word makes no room for elitism or arrogance. Jacob was chosen over his twin Esau before he was even born, and he turned out to be quite a scoundrel. God told Israel he didn't choose them because they were better or bigger than other nations. In fact, it was quite the opposite. To call the roll of the chosen is to abandon any idea the reasons for the choice lay in the person's themselves. To say we're chosen reminds us of the initiative of God, that we're children of God because he acted first out of grace and love. We may think we're seekers but the fact is we're the found. He set his love upon us. Why? Just because... And to know that, in the midst of a world that alienates and rejects us, is of the greatest comfort.

You see, we're not just God's elect, we're also exiles. Some translations use the word "aliens" but that sounds as if we're from Mars and that's not what he means. Other translations use the words "strangers" or "sojourners." However you translate this word, it refers to people who are temporary or transient residents in a land not their own. Peter isn't saying these believers in Asia Minor are exiles in a political sense. He's saying because of their faith in Jesus they'd been marginalized by the society around them. Because their values and way of life under King Jesus was so different from the world around them, they were dislocated, and their true citizenship was in another place. In this sense all of us as followers of Jesus are exiles because we don't fit into the world around us. We don't hold the same values. We live differently. We live according to the norms of another country because our citizenship is in heaven.

Here is my passport. The last time I used it I traveled to Cameroon. What if while I was there I lost it and I couldn't get home? What if I was forced to live in Cameroon for a year? I'd be out of place, like a stranger. The customs, the language, the way of life would be foreign to me. I'd do my best to adapt when possible, but I'd still be an American citizen and my identity and way of life would stick out.

That is us, living in this world. Think about a high school student who wants to follow Christ. She graduates from high school and goes to a secular university. How will she be looked at in the classroom as a person who believes there's only one way to salvation through Jesus? How will she be looked at as a person who believes a dead man came to life after three days? How will she be looked at as she determines not to engage in a culture of drunkenness and serial hook-ups? Hopefully, she'll find some fellow believers to identify with. But, believe me, she'll be socially, morally and intellectually excluded. Even when I went to college that was true. The only "C" I ever received in college was from a philosophy professor who as a personal policy gave all outspoken Christians that grade. And what's true of Christian university students is true of all of us.

But, what a comfort and encouragement to know we're not just exiles, we're elect exiles! We're the objects of his grace and love. We belong to him! That's so important to Peter he goes on and expounds on that with three phrases, describing what it means in greater detail. It's like he's peeling back the onion to show us more of what this means. And what he says is stunning because he shows us how all three persons of what we call the Godhead or Trinity were involved in this. It's like God pulled out all the stops; he ganged up on us to bring our election about.

Chosen according to the foreknowledge of God

First, he says we've been chosen according the foreknowledge of God the Father. This means we were the objects of the Father's loving concern from all eternity. And make no mistake, he **is** our Father. We use that term so freely today we sometimes forget what a privilege it is to call him Father. As our Father, he had his eye on us and chose us before we were even created.

Story-teller Garrison Keilor recalls the childhood pain of being chosen last for the baseball teams. He says, "The captains are down to their last grudging choices: a slow kid for catcher, someone to stick out in right field where nobody hits it. They choose the last ones two at a time—'you and you'—because it makes no difference. And the remaining kids—the scrubs, the excess—they deal for us as handicaps. 'If I take him, then you gotta take him,' they say. Sometimes I go as high as sixth, usually lower. But just once I'd like Darrel to pick me first and say, 'Him! I want him! The skinny kid with the glasses and the black shoes. You, c'mon!' But I've never been chosen with much enthusiasm."

Did you ever think about the fact you're so loved by the Father he chose you early—with enthusiasm. In fact Ephesians 1:4 says, *"For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight."* That's just astounding!

Sanctified by the Spirit

Then the Holy Spirit gets in on the act. Peter says this election happened "through the sanctifying work of the Spirit." To be sanctified means to be set apart as holy. Sanctification in the Bible can refer to our conversion when the Spirit convicts and then regenerates us. It can also refer to the ongoing work of sanctification in our life as we grow in holiness. And it can refer to our future when God will make us holy completely and for eternity. Here I believe he's talking about our initial sanctification by the Spirit. When you and I came to faith in Christ, there was more happening than simply that we heard the gospel and believed. The Holy Spirit was involved in that. He opened your heart and shed the scales from your eyes so you could understand. I grew up in the Catholic Church chanting the words, "Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." But it meant nothing to me. Then one day the Holy Spirit opened my heart and I understood that he died for me! Remember what Jesus said, *"That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit"* (John 3:6). And Titus 3:5 says, *"He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit."*

To be obedient to Jesus and sprinkled with his blood

And the purpose of all this, Peter says, is "to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood." So we've seen the role of God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. Now we have God the Son. In putting obedience and sprinkling together Peter may be thinking of Exodus 24 and the covenant between God and Israel. Israel declared to God their desire to obey him, and then they were sprinkled with the blood of the sacrifice to seal the covenant. But, as history progresses, their desire to obey was sabotaged by the inability to obey. The law could not transform their hearts from desire to reality. Here Peter writes of a new obedience and sprinkling as it relates to Jesus. Jesus' death on the cross and what we call the New Covenant makes possible the transformation of our lives so we might obey him from the heart. Not only that, his sprinkling assures us of forgiveness and grace when we fall short.

So we see here Father, Spirit and Son all worked together to bring about our election. It's kind of like this: Say a family is trapped in a forest fire, so a helicopter team undertakes a rescue. One fireman flies the helicopter over the smoky blaze to coordinate the operation and see the big picture. A second fireman descends on a rope into the billowing smoke below to track down the family and stand with them. Once he locates the family, he

wraps the rope around them, attaching them to himself, and they're lifted up together into safety.

In this rescue operation the first fireman looks like the Father, who can see the whole field unclouded from above to sovereignly orchestrate his rescue plan. The second fireman looks like the Son, who descends into our world to find us and identify with us in our humanity and even in our sin. The Spirit is like the rope, who raises us up with him—from sin and death into the presence of the Father.

Of course, like all analogies, this one falls short. The Spirit is a person, not a thing (like the rope). And Father, Son, and Spirit aren't separate individuals but the one God, sharing a divine nature and essence as one being. But our rescue required the interdependent action of all three persons of the Godhead. Each has a distinct and necessary role. And yet, zooming out, they're undertaking one united, joint action: our rescue from sin and death. The Father, Son, and Spirit work together in a united, joint action for our redemption.

Grace and Peace

Then Peter finally gets to the actual greeting, "Grace and peace be yours in abundance." This is like a word of blessing, more than a wish but a prayer. In many ways these words are typical of a first century greeting. But for Peter and for any believer these words are infused with new meaning. "Grace" means God's favor, his unmerited blessing, God's yes to you and me in Christ. "Peace" comes from the Hebrew idea of shalom, which means harmony in our inner life, or harmony with others, or even harmony with God.

If you're a person living in exile, where do you get grace and peace? How can grace and peace possibly be yours in abundance? You can't possibly get it from this world. No! You only get it from knowing you're not just an exile, but you're an **elect** exile. You were chosen by God the Father from all eternity, sanctified by God the Holy Spirit, all for the purpose of being obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood.

I started this message by asking the question, How should a follower of Christ live in a world where we feel more and more dislocated? The answer for us is to know who we are. We're elect exiles called to live in engaged alienation. We don't retreat. We don't make accommodations and blend in. And we don't protest. Instead we hold fast to the gospel while not retreating from our callings as neighbors, friends, and citizens. Our end goal isn't a Christian America, either of a made-up past or a hoped-for future. Our end goal is the kingdom of Christ, which will be made up of every tribe and tongue and nation.

An early Christian document known as the *Epistle to Diognetus* written some time between 120–200 AD describes well what we're called to:

Christians are indistinguishable from other men either by nationality, language or customs. They do not inhabit separate cities of their own, or speak a strange dialect, or follow some outlandish way of life... With regard to dress, food and manner of life in general, they follow the customs of whatever city they happen to be living in, whether it is Greek or foreign.

And yet there is something extraordinary about their lives. They live in their own countries as though they were only passing through. They play their full role as citizens, but labor under all the disabilities of aliens. Any country can be their homeland, but for them their homeland, wherever it may be, is a foreign country. Like others, they marry and have children, but they do not expose them. They share their meals, but not their wives.

They live in the flesh, but they are not governed by the desires of the flesh. They pass their days upon earth, but they are

citizens of heaven. Obedient to the laws, they yet live on a level that transcends the law. Christians love all men, but all men persecute them. Condemned because they are not understood, they are put to death, but raised to life again. They live in poverty, but enrich many; they are totally destitute, but possess an abundance of everything. They suffer dishonor, but that is their glory. They are defamed, but vindicated. A blessing is their answer to abuse, deference their response to insult. For the good they do they receive the punishment of malefactors, but even then they, rejoice, as though receiving the gift of life. They are attacked by the Jews as aliens, they are persecuted by the Greeks, yet no one can explain the reason for this hatred.

That says it so well. But how can live that way today? Only by knowing who we are: We are elect exiles.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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