



## ELECT EXILES – 1 PETER

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1 Peter 1:1-2

January 3, 2010

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<sup>1</sup>Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,

To those who are elect exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, <sup>2</sup>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.

### Introduction

Today we begin a study on the Book of 1 Peter. We're beginning this series because this book addresses a topic I think we need some help with. The topic this book addresses is Christian Identity. This is basically what 1 Peter is all about: helping Christians understand who we are.

But the Book of 1 Peter doesn't address Christian identity in the abstract. For Christian identity *cannot* really be understood in the abstract; nor do we experience our own identity merely in the abstract. Instead, this Book deals with the issue of Christian identity in terms of *society*: it helps us understand who we are in light of where we live and with whom we live. That is, it deals with Christian identity in society.

For Peter's audience, it was Christian identity in a *non-Christian* society, a pagan society; and this created a variety of challenges for them, as we shall see in the weeks ahead. Ours is not a non-Christian society, since our society has been, and still is in many ways, influenced by the Christian tradition. However, our society is fast becoming a *post-Christian* society. While we are not a non-Christian society, we are increasingly becoming, like much of Europe, a post-Christian society. And this, friends, will mean increasing challenges for our sense of Christian identity.

Many of you have, of course, already experienced the challenges of trying to live as a Christian in an increasingly post-Christian society. You experience the tension every day, whether that's within your own family, or with your neighbors on your street, or at your kids' school, or in the classroom, or with your colleagues at work. In America we don't usually encounter outright persecution; but we can often feel like we're swimming against the current of society, rather than with it.

Those to whom this book was written were experiencing similar sorts of things. Peter's audience had, in fact, become strangers in their own society. They had been "ransomed from the futile ways inherited from their forefathers" (1:18), and "called out of darkness into [God's] marvelous light" (2:10). Therefore, they no longer lived as they once did. Not only did they have a new outlook on life; they had a new way of life as well.

As a result, however, their new faith and their new way of life were met with surprise from those around them, in their society (4:4). And when they realized this Christianity thing was not a passing fad, their surprise gave way to suspicion, and their suspicion eventually turned into scorn, and slander, and social ostracism or rejection. This is the situation of Peter's listeners as he describes it: they are grieved by various trials (1:6), spoken against as evil doers (2:12), slandered for their good behavior (3:16), maligned because they no longer participate in pagan practices (4:4), and suffering because they bear the name "Christian" (4:16). Socially ostracized, verbally abused, marginalized, and slandered in ways subtle and not so subtle—treated like strangers and aliens in their own native land.

## **The Purpose of 1 Peter: Identity Formation**

So, Peter, as he tells us at the end of this book (cf. 5:12), has written to exhort and admonish them to stand firm in the true grace of God—and to neither cower nor compromise in the face of what was undoubtedly intense social pressure to conform to the surrounding culture. And because he understands that social marginalization for the faith can over time have a demoralizing and disorienting effect, Peter tries to bolster their sense of identity as God's people right from the start.

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are elect exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1:1).

You'll note, interestingly, Peter does not address them as "the churches of Asia Minor" or "the saints in Christ Jesus," a familiar Pauline expression. Instead, they are "elect exiles." It's an interesting phrase because the two terms, elect and exile, tend to pull the mind in opposite directions. On the one hand, elect suggests belonging to God; on the other hand, exiles suggests not belonging to society. On the one hand, elect implies privilege before God; on the other hand, exiles implies marginalization in the world. Thus, Peter hits his listeners from the start with a rather unusual phrase that captures the paradoxical essence of our Christian identity: elect exiles.

Now, as a way of further reinforcing their own understanding of their identity as the elect of God, Peter uses three phrases in verse 2 that highlight different aspects of their election. The first phrase deals with the basis of election, the second with the means of election, and the third with the purpose of election. And when all three are taken together, they provide us with a profound description of our identity as it is rooted in God's activity.

In fact, this is what these opening verses have to teach us in a nutshell: *Christian identity is rooted in God. But because Christian identity is rooted in God, Christians feel uprooted in the world.* This is what this passage is about; this is what 1 Peter as a whole is about, as we shall see in the weeks ahead.

## **The Basis: According to the Foreknowledge of God the Father**

But in rooting our identity in God, where does Peter begin? You might say he begins at the beginning, or even before the beginning, for Peter explains that his hearers are elect "according to the foreknowledge of God the Father" (1:2).

Now in many church circles, the mere mention of words like ‘foreknowledge’ or ‘predestination’ or being ‘chosen by God’ has the potential to expose theological fault lines and to spoil otherwise friendly conversation. Regrettably, however, when that happens, we inevitably lose the forest for the trees, and turn an identity-shaping teaching of the Bible into a club to bludgeon others with.

In the Bible, God’s foreknowledge refers not merely to God’s knowledge of the future; it certainly includes that, but it includes more than that. In fact, often when the Bible says that God ‘knows’ someone, the point is that God has already *chosen* that person to play a part in his unfolding plan.

So, for example, when God called the prophet Jeremiah, he said to him: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you” (1:5). God knew Jeremiah before he was even formed in the womb; that is to say, God already had chosen Jeremiah and had a special purpose for his life.

Intriguingly, later on in the Chapter 1 of this letter, we read that Jesus Christ himself was foreknown by the Father as well: “He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for your sake” (1:20). This is, of course, saying more than that the Father simply knew about Jesus before the foundation of the world; rather, it is saying that the Father had a plan well in hand before the creation of the world, but has now let the rest of us in on it.

So, to say that you are elect “according to the foreknowledge of God the Father,” is to say that God has had his eye on you from all eternity past. Before the foundation of the world, God had already included you in his plan. Indeed, God had already placed his affection on you. For that’s what election ultimately is: election is fatherly affection, fatherly choice.

Now, pause for a moment and try to let your imagination take that in. Think way back, perhaps to when you were born. Now add, say, twenty billion years to that—and you’re hardly getting started. Instead, a better approach would be with the eyes of faith to look long and hard into the infinite canyon of the Father’s affection and see him smiling there at you from all eternity past. That is what it means to be elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father. And this is why Peter begins here, since there is nothing like the foreknowledge of God to root Christian identity.

### **The Means: By the Sanctification of the Spirit**

The Father’s foreknowledge is, then, the basis of election. But how does the electing love of God manifest itself in space and time? How does God’s decision, made before the foundation of the world, actually touch your life and mine?

Peter answers this with his second phrase. He tells us we are elect, as the ESV translates it, “in the sanctification of the Spirit” (1:2). Here, however, I prefer the NIV, which has “*through* the sanctifying work of the Spirit,” or the NASB that has “*by* the sanctifying work of the Spirit.” Since I think the point here is about the means by which God manifests or brings about his election in our lives.

But what does it mean to say that one is elect by means of the sanctification of the Spirit? We tend to use the term sanctification to refer to the process of growth in the life of the Christian. While this is a valid sense, it is not the primary way in which the term is used in the

New Testament. More often the language of sanctification or being sanctified refers to being 'set apart' for God's purposes. So it is often tied closely with the act of conversion itself. Speaking, for example, of the Corinthians conversion, Paul says to them: "you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:11). They were set apart for God's purposes.

Now, this is what this passage has in mind when it speaks of us being elect by the sanctification of the Spirit. What God the Father has purposed from all eternity past, God the Spirit has brought to pass in time, by means of setting us apart for God's purposes. And this, friends, ought to have a powerful impact on your own sense of Christian identity.

What sets you apart in society? In our status-oriented, individualistic and yet conformist society, this is an important question. We're always looking for ways to set ourselves apart from the crowd; to identify or acquire something that will distinguish us from others: a title, a degree, a particular income, living in a certain part of town, associating with the right kinds of people, and so on.

As a Christian, however, what sets you apart is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit in your life, and the Holy Spirit at work in your life, transforming your life, changing your life. This is what it means to be elect by the sanctification of the Spirit.

### **The Purpose: Obedience and Sprinkling of the Blood of Jesus Christ**

Christian identity is, then, rooted in God's divine foreknowledge and it manifests itself in space and time when the Holy Spirit sets us apart for God's purpose. But what is that purpose? The third and final prepositional phrase in verse 2 clarifies that purpose, the purpose of our election.

Why has God chosen them from before the foundation of the world and set them apart by the working of his sovereign Spirit? Neither for kicks nor for bragging rights, but, as Peter says, "for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood" (1:2). This, then, is the goal of our election: obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling with his blood.

Now, you'll want to note that the combination of the language of "obedience" and "sprinkling with blood" is almost certainly an allusion to God's establishing his covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai. After having been delivered from Egyptian bondage, the Israelites found themselves at the foot of Mount Sinai. There, they were ready to pledge their obedience to the Lord and enter into covenant relationship with him. Exodus 24 recounts the event; listen for echoes of obedience and sprinkling with blood.

Moses came [down from the mountain] and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the rules. And all the people answered with one voice and said, "All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do." <sup>4</sup> And Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. He rose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel. <sup>5</sup> And he sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the LORD. <sup>6</sup> And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar. <sup>7</sup> Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient." <sup>8</sup> And Moses

took the blood and threw it on the people and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."

Can you picture the scene? The people have pledged their obedience to the Lord, so Moses takes some of the blood of the offerings and throws it against the altar. Then, Moses reads from the Book of the Covenant, and the people once again say: "We will be obedient!" At which point, Moses then takes a basin full of blood and, dipping a hyssop branch into it, begins to throw it over all the people—like Jackson Pollock flinging red paint across a white canvass. And, as he's doing this, Moses is also saying in a grave tone, "Behold the blood of the covenant."

This is the scene we, friends, should have in mind as we hear this third and final phrase. We too, like Israel of old, have been redeemed from slavery and summoned into an obedient, covenantal relationship with the living God. Yet our relationship with God is established and sealed, not with the blood of bulls and goats, but with the blood of Jesus Christ himself. You and I have come, then, not to Mount Sinai, but, in the words of the writer of Hebrews,

[To] Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,<sup>23</sup> and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,<sup>24</sup> and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (12:22-24).

So, then, the purpose of our election is to call us into a new relationship with God through his Son, Jesus Christ; a relationship defined by our commitment to him expressed by our obedience, and by his commitment to us expressed by his blood, shed on the cross for our sins. During our time of exile in this world (1:17), we are therefore to live as "obedient children" (1:14), who have been ransomed from our former way of life by "not with perishable things such as silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish of spot" (1:18-19).

This, then, is who we are as Christians: elect according to the foreknowledge of God, by means of the sanctification of the Spirit, and for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood. These three phrases describe the basis, the means, and the purpose of our election. And thus they root our identity, not in ourselves, but in God himself.

## Two Implications for Christian Identity

Now, let me draw a few of these strands together and make a couple of closing comments about our Christian identity. We'll have opportunity to develop these in greater detail in the weeks to come; but today I set them before you to begin the conversation on the important topic of Christian identity in a post-Christian society.

*First, your Christian identity must be God-centered.* This means you must define who you are in light of who *God* says you are, not who the *world* says you are. Notice that with the phrase "elect exiles," your status with God *precedes* your status with the world. In fact, your status before God is the reason for your status in the world. You are an exile in the world precisely because you are elected by God. What God says about you must come first; and indeed it must explain who you are in the world and how you experience the world, not the other way around.

This is what it means to have a *God-centered* identity: who God is and what God has done—in particular, what *Christ* has done—must be central to who you see yourself to be.

*Second, your Christian identity will be paradoxical.* For as Christians we are and always will be *both* elect *and* exiles. There will always be a tension in the way we see ourselves. We will always be in our element and out of it simultaneously. As elect, we will feel secure in God, yet as exiles we will feel vulnerable in the world. As elect, we will feel confident of our place in history, yet as exiles we will feel insecure of our place right here at home, at work, or among friends. As elect, we will feel in step with the ways of God, yet as exiles we will feel out of step with the ways of the world. As elect, we will experience the joy of being chosen by God, yet as exiles we will experience the pain of being rejected by the world. This is what it means to say that Christian identity is paradoxical. There will always be this sense of tension between being elect, on the one hand, and being exiles, on the other.

## Conclusion

*Christian identity is rooted in God. But because Christian identity is rooted in God, Christians feel uprooted in the world. We are elect exiles.*

But, to all the elect exiles, remember this and take heart: there is an elect exile that has gone before us—Jesus Christ. For he is, as Peter says, “a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious,” (2:4). Our Lord Jesus Christ is *the* Elect Exile: chosen by God, but rejected by men. And our call is not only to find our identity in him, but also to follow in his footsteps. For as we do so, we will experience what Peter prays his hearers will experience: “May grace and peace be multiplied to you.”

Amen.