

Beloved Strangers

1 Peter 1:1-2

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1 Peter 1:1-2, a massive section of Scripture this morning. As you turn there, why is it that we have decided as a pastoral team to turn to the Book of 1 Peter? It is because it is a great way to build a bridge from where we've been over the last number of months as we've looked at the prophets. The prophets, as we looked at Jeremiah and Ezekiel, were describing the people of God, the southern kingdom of Judah, some six hundred years prior to the coming of Christ—of what it looked like to be in exile prior to Christ. Now what we look at is what does it mean, then, to be a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ now in exile after Christ has come? How are they different? How are they the same? What does it mean for us? If you are a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, this passage calls us to the reality that, indeed, we are not yet home. We are in exile, for different reasons than was the nation of Israel. But the reality is still the same. And how we live and follow the Lord Jesus Christ in this context makes all the difference.

So what is that to look like? That's what we're going to spend the next few weeks and months on as we go through this book. It is a very important book for even those of us in this time—not that it wasn't important for other generations; it has been. But for us, it is an important time. Because as I've mentioned in weeks prior, that in many ways, for some it might even be debatable—I being one of them, don't believe we've ever been a Christian nation. But I do respect those who believe at one times perhaps we were. But even if you do believe that the United States of America was at one time a Christian nation, we all could at least agree that it certainly isn't any longer, and that the church isn't considered central to the life of an American citizen. Yes, it may hold influence in certain sectors, but culturally speaking, it has little or no influence at all. So the church of Jesus Christ in the west is in cultural exile. What does it mean, then, to live as a Christian living in the United States in 2016? These are some of the themes that we will unpack as we go through this book. It is an important book. Let's turn now to 1 Peter 1:1-2.

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,
To God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout 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,
for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood:
Grace and peace be yours in abundance.

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

Now, Lord, we pray that by the power of your Holy Spirit, through the living and active Word of God, through the words of your apostle Peter, may you equip us, may you feed us, strengthen us, and show us what it means to follow you. Help the teacher. In Jesus' name. Amen.

It is a remarkable thing that this letter was ever written by Peter. If you at all are familiar with the story of Peter, you'll be familiar with something very important, and that is there is a very clear growth for Peter. When Jesus announced that he was going to the cross and be taken into custody and to give his life as a ransom for many, Peter would have none of it. And he said to the Lord's face, "This cannot happen. You cannot do this." And Jesus's response was, "Get thee behind me, Satan." And then Peter would be called by the Lord and predicted that you will deny me three times, even after you've committed your faithfulness to me. You're going to deny me before the morning. Peter says, "Absolutely not." And he did, all three times. He was then reinstated after the Lord's resurrection. The Lord pleaded with him, "Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?" as the Lord brings Peter to himself. And then Peter would be called a Rock, as the one who would be the preacher and first church planter—not that he was distinct from the other apostles, but he was part of the foundation. He is an apostle.

And then as he goes about, first and foremost, preaching to his fellow Jews, he had a small problem with ministering both to Jews and to Gentiles. He lived life one way among the Jews, and then he would live life another way among the Gentiles. Paul would call him to account for that. And so, after all of that, this is Peter who writes these words not to Jews, but to a Gentile audience. And he's giving them, if you will, a—it's almost a—he's going to open up a treasure box. And when he opens it up, he's just going to bring out a few pieces, precious jewels. Because he's then going to unpack all the rest of these jewels in the letter. So this cannot be exhaustive. But he's setting up everywhere he's going. And you see in your outline the elect, strangers, blessing. Elect, strangers, and blessing. Because he wants these Gentiles to know that they are indeed beloved strangers in the world. So let's now, then, turn to what Peter wants us to understand, how we're supposed to live it, and by what means. That's another way of looking at the outline. Who they are, how they're to live it out, and then by what means.

So first, let's look at the elect. You'll see here—the great thing about preaching the whole counsel of God is, everybody, regardless of how you understand the word “elect,” you can't avoid the fact that it's here. And so what you see is he says, “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,” called by the Lord among the twelve, he says now to them, “To God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia.” That, he is referring to modern-day Turkey, some three hundred thousand miles that those to whom he is speaking are scattered. And this letter would be circulated among the churches almost in a circular fashion.

And so Peter describes to them in verse one, that first part, when he says, “to God's elect.” And then what he does is, in verse two, he then has three prepositional phrases that explain what he means by the word “elect.” So “elect” is the governing adjective, and then these three prepositional phrases he uses to describe. And these are three prepositional phrases that set out the rest of his book. So let's look together at this idea of elect.

First, the word “elect” most certainly needs to be understood Scripturally speaking. Because remember, he is a Jew speaking to Gentiles, and he's using a very covenantal Jewish phrase. That word “elect,” *eklektós* in the Greek, and another word which I'm not going to try to pronounce for you in Hebrew. This is used over and over again to the people of God to the nation of Israel, stretching all the way back to the deepest reaches of the Old Testament, and how it was used by God to speak of his covenant people as his elect people. So it was the key adjective.

And what's remarkable is that, for Peter, he now has grown so much in his understanding of the gospel, he has no problem in using “elect” and using it to describe a group of Gentiles or a group of Jews. He's telling us something about the nature of, what is true Israel. True Israel here is all of those to whom the Lord has elected and called to himself. So therefore, it is not by blood, it is not by parentage, it is by God's sovereign act in the work of salvation—Jew or Gentile. And so this is remarkable, because they now understand that they as Gentiles are being brought into all of the promises of God stretching all the way back that God announced to his people when he said, “I will be your God and you will be my people.” All of those promises are yes and amen for those who are in Christ Jesus.

And so then he uses these three phrases, first to describe what it means to be God's elect. The first phrase, verse two, “who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father.” According to the foreknowledge of God the Father. What he's referring to here is God the Father's election according to foreknowledge. That is, God discerns according to his wisdom and foreknowledge those whom he will draw to himself in the work of salvation.

Now, here we can take foreknowledge, as it often is, into two different directions. And depending on which direction you take it in, you're going to have a very different gospel. By that I mean this. Does God the Father's electing and drawing to himself according to foreknowledge—is that foreknowledge advanced knowledge on the part of God as to who will obey him? Is it according to God's foreknowledge of looking through the corridors of the future from all eternity, looking into the future when Christ will

come and bring to himself a people, a nation, a people called his body, called the church—and he looks at it and he says, “These are the ones who will receive the gospel. They are mine,” because he had advanced knowledge. You see what I mean? If that is the case, you’re going to end up with something very different than an alternative reading.

The other way you take foreknowledge is this—that it’s not advanced knowledge of how people are going to respond—though God most certainly knows all things from beginning to end; he is the Alpha and the Omega; he knows the beginning from the end, the end from the beginning—but does foreknowledge speak of something else? In other words, God’s fore-ordained purposes. From all eternity, his intentions and plan to draw to himself a people that he will call his very own, not according to how they will respond or what they will do or what kind of people they are or where they’re from, but according to his plan.

Depending on which way you take this word “foreknowledge,” you’re going to end up in two different gospels. Why? Because if you take it with the first definition of foreknowledge, that is God’s advanced understanding or knowledge of how you’re going to respond or who you are, then that means who’s in the driver’s seat? Not God, but you. That God makes his decision from all eternity based on how you’re going to respond, who hasn’t even been created yet. The other way, which I believe is the biblical way, which I believe is the way in which Peter understood it, which is the way all the biblical writers understood it from beginning to end, is that this is not according to how you are going to be or what you’re going to say or how you’re going to respond; it is according to God’s fore-ordained, all-powerful, and sovereign choice.

It is God’s elected, fore-ordained, precious love that he calls you out and calls you to himself. It is not based on our ethics. It’s not based on our ability. It’s not based on our intellectual receptivity. It’s not based on our upbringing. It’s not based on anything other than God’s sovereign, loving, gracious choice—the God who is without sin, the God who is the Judge and impartial, the one who has created us according to his image. God has placed his love on us.

Now, some will say, “You see, that’s the problem. That is not fair.” And yet nobody I’ve met who’s ever said to me “that’s not fair” would ever do the following. Now follow the metaphor. You’re at a wedding, and you’re sitting in the audience. You, an attractive female, let’s say. You’re sitting there and you’re single. You’ve been invited as a guest. And you’re watching this man take this woman to be his wife. And he proclaims his love. He takes the vow. He makes a commitment. And you stand up and you run to the front and you look at him and you say, “That’s not fair! You chose her over me. Why did you do that? I mean, I was perfectly available. I mean, I’m trying to look my best. Don’t I look good?”

It’s absurd to point out an absurdity, and that is this. When we see another human being love another human being so powerfully that they are willing to throw logic to the wind and spend the rest of their living days with another human being, not because they can predict any future behavior—right, husbands and wives? Can you predict the future behavior of your spouse? Can you predict how beautiful your spouse is going to be in twenty, thirty, forty years? No. Can you predict in thirty, forty—are they going to keep you happy? Are they going to be ready to hug you at a moment’s notice as soon as you walk through the door, have all the gifts you’ve ever wanted? No. We don’t marry someone based on future performance. You marry them because, beyond all logic, you love them, and even when they’re unlovable. Yes, in the moment you tie the knot, you can’t imagine that that person could ever be unlovable. Except for that guy. I don’t know who that is. I’m totally kidding. But you get my point.

So what we’re saying is that when God says, “I have the capacity not to call one person to me, but I have the capacity to call a legion of people, beyond number, to myself—not based on their future performance, not on who they are or where they’re from—because I love you.” How could that ever be unfair, when you recognize all of us are a bride who are unworthy to be married, who have been unfaithful to the groom, who are sinful, who have already proven that we will be unfaithful? And yet God

in his electing, fore-ordained, wonderful, overpowering, will-change-everything love, says, “I love you.” That is God’s electing, fore-ordained, foreknown purposes.

But I have the rest of a sermon to preach, so I need to get going. The second prepositional phrase is he says, “Okay. Who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father through”—this is the second prepositional phrase—“through the sanctifying work of the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ.” Now, that’s important because in many ways, depending on how you read the English—unfortunately English has commas in places that they are not in the Greek, so therefore it makes it sound like we have a couple of different things going on here. So when it says “through the sanctifying work of the Spirit,” comma, “for obedience to Jesus Christ and the sprinkling by his blood,” it sounds like that the sanctifying work of the Spirit is not tied immediately to obedience. At least, first and foremost.

What is being spoken of here is that it is God’s electing, fore-ordained, all-powerful love that will seek the purposes of drawing people to himself. But he does so through the agency of the Holy Spirit. And that sanctifying work, yes, does have envisioned what it means to live a life as a Christian obedient to Christ—but that’s not what’s envisioned here. What’s envisioned here is when one comes to Christ, how one comes to Christ. How is that possible when you realize by the Spirit’s activity in your mind and in your heart and in your will that that electing will of God the Father is placed on no one other than you, and you receive it as a gift, and the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit enables you to obey, to respond, to Christ.

I celebrate thirty years as a Christian this year, and I remember the moment as if it were yesterday. I had heard the gospel for nearly four or five months at that point, every week. I’d been challenged with it numerous times in those previous four or five months. I had come to a conference. I had heard it for the first three days. Until finally, finally—and this, I will testify to you, though it is a mystery, it is a mystery in which I am called to proclaim—in the mystery of a moment, finally I decided that I wanted to hear what was being said.

That was not Randy Lovelace deciding upon my own will first and foremost. It was because the Spirit was enlightening my mind and opening my eyes and giving my heart the ability to receive, “Oh, wait a second, this Christ died for my sins and for me.” And in that moment, I knew it was time. That was the Holy Spirit working in me. Yes, I decided to obey and to respond to the gospel that I was being called to, but I was enabled to do so because the Spirit was sanctifying, setting me apart, working on my reason, working on my heart, working on my history. And all of a sudden, my life just became bare before a holy God, and I couldn’t do anything other than to say, “Lord, have mercy upon me, a sinner.”

That is the sanctifying work of the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ. So it wasn’t that he was directing my attention to him. He was directing my attention to Christ, which is where Peter goes next. So it’s the Father’s fore-ordained, electing, choosing love, through the agency of the sanctifying work and power of the Holy Spirit, for what? Obedience to Jesus Christ in responding, and—now, this is on what basis all of that happens—the sprinkling by his blood. It is foundational that Peter is now saying these things have happened because the sprinkling of Christ’s blood for our sins has happened. Now, why does he use the word “sprinkling”?

This does not refer to baptism, by the way. Because nowhere is baptism by water associated with the sprinkling of blood. Those don’t cross. Where it does cross is that this is a Jew reaching all the way back to Exodus 24, where Moses led the people of God in a covenant renewal ceremony where Moses offers a sacrifice, takes the blood, sprinkles it on the alter, and then—I recognize it’s Sunday morning and it is the morning, but here you go, it is the Scriptures—he takes the blood of the sacrifice, and he sprinkles it on the people of God. And what he’s saying is that the blood of the sacrifice makes you clean.

But the reason why we no longer do that is because the sprinkling of Christ’s blood, who is a sacrifice once and forever, it is finished. And the sprinkling of Christ’s blood in paying for our sin and washing us clean through the act of the cross, enabling us to receive forgiveness in all of our sins, taken

upon himself—therefore, on that basis, the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit enables us to obey, to hear the gospel, because of God’s fore-ordained love. Do you see how it works together?

And this is the beauty of what Peter is teaching us. Because you notice, he never talks about the Trinity. But all three members of the Godhead are involved—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is what he wants them to know as a people who have obeyed the gospel and responded, who are now scattered throughout modern-day Turkey, who are undergoing a great degree of persecution because of the name of Christ. He reminds them first and foremost, this is who you are.

And he then tells them, and you are strangers in the world. They know they’re strangers. Yes, they have a place to lay their head. They have cities that they live in. Clearly, they’re listed here. They have day-to-day lives. But he’s telling them something about their status. They’re strangers with a home, and that home is the relationship with their God. That yes, they have a place where they live, but they are sojourners. In other words, they are passing through.

Now, a couple of things we need to say about this sojourner status. Again, do you remember the covenant renewal ceremony that I referred to from Exodus 24? What’s interesting about this is what’s getting ready to happen to the people of God. They’re getting ready to experience what it means to be in exodus. They’re leaving Egypt and have left Egypt. And what does it mean to follow the Lord? So now what is being referred to is that the work of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit has now freed a people from not an Egypt, but a different kind of exodus. He’s freeing us from our sin, that is, the real master. And we’re being freed from its curse. So as sojourners in the world, he’s saying to these Gentiles, it’s as if we’re experiencing a second exodus. You have been freed from sin and death.

But there’s also something else going on here, and that is there is a second exile. You see, we’ve been talking about this over the last number of weeks, but the key is this: the exile, you remember, as we were looking at in Jeremiah and Ezekiel, was because it was judgment for their disobedience. This exile is not based on God’s people’s disobedience. It is because they are not yet home. They are home with the Lord. They’re renewed by the work of Christ. But this place and what we’re doing will not stand for all eternity. And so what is the key description, the key identifier, the key adjective, is, well, you’re beloved strangers saved by grace who happen to live in the United States of America.

Now, let me be clear. This doesn’t mean that we—we obviously take up residence here and are called as we are in exile, as those who have been purchased by the blood of Christ, to love our neighbor, to care for the widow and the orphan, to feed the poor, to proclaim the gospel, to live an alternative society, an alternative community of gospel living. But we recognize that this is not the end of the story, that there will be a new heaven and a new earth. And when the Lord comes again, we will be returned out of exile to a new heaven and a new earth where the Lord will reign supreme. And we are working towards that as we follow the Lord together. We’re not strangers in this land and don’t care for it. As you will see throughout the Book of Peter, he will tell us, what does it mean, then, to live as those who live in a nation like this? How do we treat our rulers? What are our duties? But the United States of America doesn’t identify us first and foremost; Christ does in his work.

The final thing is blessing. He says, “Grace and peace be yours in abundance.” I will use this today as the benediction to the service, and not just the end of my sermon, because it is a blessing. We don’t often understand blessing in the way that Peter would have understood blessing. Because what he’s doing is he’s just told them who they are, where they live, and what their status is. But now he’s getting ready to tell them how they do it. And how they do it is by this—by the peace and grace of God. And when he announces “grace and peace be yours in abundance,” he’s saying that in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and all that he has accomplished for you, having done so by his grace and love, may God give you all the grace and peace to give you strength and courage and faithfulness to walk in this life and in this day as those who have been bought with a price, who are called beloved strangers. And he

says, "Grace and peace be yours." And he can say that because of what Christ has done, what the Father has done, and what the Holy Spirit has done.

How has Peter made it this far? Because of the grace and peace of Christ. What reinstated Peter? The grace of Christ and the peace made by his blood. What has enabled Peter to preach the gospel and to plant churches? The grace and peace of God. What will enable Peter to be crucified and given a death sentence because of his proclamation of the gospel? The grace and peace of Christ. And so before he goes anywhere else in unpacking the rest of the letter, he wants to make sure they know, and I want to make sure you know, incase you're doubting today, regardless of where you are and in what condition you find yourself, I can say with all authority in heaven and on earth in the name of Christ: grace and peace be yours in abundance. Let's pray.

Now, Lord, we ask that you would give us the strength, courage, to walk this day, because it is a day you have given us, as those who rest in the wonderful work of grace of Christ, and the peace that that brings us with you. Now, Lord, we pray, equip us for following you as beloved strangers. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.