

“ELECT EXILES”

I. INTRODUCTION

Today we begin a new sermon series in the book of 1 Peter. This book is so named because it is the first of two New Testament letters written by the apostle Peter. Peter wrote this letter from Rome in the mid-60's AD. Peter identifies himself as “an apostle of Jesus Christ.” The apostles were those whom Jesus had invested with his authority for the work of establishing his church. They were appointed by Christ to teach on his behalf. They were Jesus' authorized interpreters of the gospel. It was because of his identity as an apostle that Peter could write with such confidence and authority in chapter 5:12: “I have written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it.” The apostles laid the foundation upon which Jesus builds his church. And this is why the only true churches are those that are apostolic, churches that are faithful to the pattern of sound teaching set forth by the apostles.

Peter wrote this letter to a group of churches in northern Asia Minor (which is modern-day Turkey). Judging from the subject matter of this letter, we can infer that these Christians were beginning to face persecution on account of their Christian testimony. One of the reasons why Peter wrote this letter was to encourage them to persevere in the face of opposition. *Ryken's Bible Handbook* summarizes the purpose of 1 Peter in these words: “To instruct believers about living and enduring as Christians in a society that is

hostile to their values and lifestyle and to encourage Christians who are suffering for their faith.” (p. 601) While we may not face much in the way of outright persecution for our faith, we all agree that our culture is becoming increasingly hostile to biblical values and a biblical lifestyle. Like these Christians in 1st century Asia Minor, and like Christians in all times and all places, we are called to endure suffering for the sake of Jesus Christ and his gospel. The message of 1 Peter is just as relevant for us as it was for its original recipients.

Two other features of this letter bear mentioning before we begin our study of the text itself. First, this letter is saturated with references to the Old Testament. In one sense, this is to be expected, since Peter was a Jew. However, the churches to whom Peter was writing were predominantly Gentile, and this makes his use of the Old Testament a bit surprising. We know that these churches were mostly Gentile because of Peter’s description of their former way of life as Gentile idolaters in 1:14 and 4:3. Peter uses the Old Testament to help these Gentile Christians understand their identity as the people of God. He wants them to see themselves as the heirs of all that God promised to Israel in the Old Testament. He is showing them that Jesus, and the church that bears his name, is the fulfillment of all of God’s promises to Israel. All throughout this letter, Peter refers to these Gentile Christians in language that the Old Testament uses to describe Israel as the people of God. Peter could not be more clear in making the point that the church is the true people of God; the true Israel.

The last thing to point out by way of introduction is that this letter can be characterized as a letter of basic doctrinal instruction. It is concerned with laying out the foundational elements of Christian belief and behavior. In fact, some commentators think that it is reflective of the kind of teaching the early church would have provided in preparing converts for baptism. Whether or not that is the case, it is very clear that this letter provides us with a concise summary of what it means to live as a follower of Jesus Christ.

In the passage we are studying today, Peter begins his letter by giving a concise theological description of the identity of the Christians to whom he is writing. In these verses, the Lord shows us the essence of what it means to be a Christian. The main body of this sermon will focus upon five things that these verses tell us about Christian identity: (1) Christians are God's elect; (2) Christians live as exiles in this world; (3) Christians have been foreknown by God; (4) Christians are set apart as God's people by the power of the Holy Spirit; and (5) Christians obey the gospel and are cleansed of their sins.

II. CHRISTIANS ARE GOD'S ELECT

We begin by talking about election. Peter says that Christians are God's "elect." If you are a Christian, it is because God has chosen you to be one of his people. The only

reason why we are able to choose to believe in Christ is because God has first chosen us.

Paul describes this in his letter to the Ephesians, where he writes:

^{ESV} **Ephesians 1:3** Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,⁴ even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love⁵ he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will,⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.

These verses tell us several important things about the doctrine of election. First, the elect are chosen “in Christ.” God ordained certain people to salvation by entering into a covenant of grace with them through Jesus Christ, who represents them as their head. We are elect in Christ. Second, the elect were appointed for salvation “before the foundation of the world.” Before anything was created, God set his affection upon the elect and predestined them to be his children. And third, this election is entirely by God’s grace. God did not appoint the elect on the basis of anything within them. Instead, he chose them according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace.

The doctrine of unconditional election is absolutely essential if it is true that salvation is by God’s grace alone. By “unconditional” we mean that election is not based upon any

condition that is met by us. If election were not unconditional, if instead we were chosen on the basis of something that God foresaw in us, then salvation would not be by God's grace alone. We would have something to boast about, since it was something within us that made the difference with regard to whether or not we would be saved. But the Bible clearly teaches that God appoints people to salvation on the basis of his grace alone. That is what it means to be "elect." It means that you are one upon whom God freely set his affection before the beginning of time.

III. CHRISTIANS LIVE AS EXILES IN THIS WORLD

Peter also refers to Christians as "exiles of the dispersion." While the term "elect" refers to a Christian's status before God, "exile" describes his relationship to the world. An exile is someone who is displaced from his true home. He is living in a foreign land. Peter places further emphasis upon this by saying that we live in the "dispersion." This was a term that was used in biblical times to refer to the Jews who had been scattered across the world after the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon in 586 BC. Even though many Jews returned to Palestine in the years after Jerusalem's fall, there were still many who were living outside of the land of Israel. In fact, in Peter's day, it is estimated that there were about one million Jews within Palestine and two to four million outside of it. Israel was still a dispersed and scattered nation. And Peter used this language, language that had strong associations with the nation of Israel, to refer to a predominantly Gentile

group of churches. He is saying that the church stands in continuity with the people of God in the Old Testament. The church is the true Israel.

All Christians live as exiles of the dispersion. We live as pilgrims in this world because this world is not our true home. The church is dispersed throughout all the nations of the world until that day when our Lord returns and gathers us to our true home in the new heavens and new earth. But until that day, we are a pilgrim people, and the Lord works through our witness to gather his elect from all the nations of the world. This is one reason why Peter places so much emphasis in this letter upon the holy conduct to which we are called as Christians. The Lord works through his dispersed people to call others to repent and believe the gospel.

IV. CHRISTIANS HAVE BEEN FOREKNOWN BY GOD

Verse 1 tells us that Christians are elect and that Christians live as exiles in this world. Now, in verse 2, Peter uses three prepositional phrases to tell us three more things about our identity as God's elect people. The first of these tells us the ultimate cause of our election: we are elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father. We are elect because God foreknew us. What does this mean?

It does not mean that God foresaw, before the creation of the world, who would believe the gospel and then appointed those people as his elect. If that is what the Bible means by foreknowledge, then we have to conclude that salvation is not by grace alone. If that is what foreknowledge means, then the elect are saved on the basis of a decision that they make, a decision that those who reject the gospel fail to make.

But this is not what Peter means when he speaks of God's foreknowledge. It is certainly true that God foresaw everything that would happen before he created the world, but that is not the basis upon which he appointed the elect to salvation. Instead, "foreknowledge" refers to the fact that God has personally known and loved the elect from before the foundation of the world. This is consistent with 1:20, where Peter writes this about Jesus: "He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for your sake." Peter does not say that God foreknew what Jesus was going to do. He says that God foreknew Jesus; God had personal knowledge of Christ from all eternity. This is what foreknowledge means in verse 2. Peter is saying that God personally knew his elect and set his love upon them before the foundation of the world. Edmund Clowney writes, "The expression *foreknowledge* does not mean that God had information in advance about Christ, or about his elect. Rather it means that both Christ and his people were the objects of God's loving concern from all eternity." (*The Message of 1 Peter*, p. 33) When the Bible says that the Lord foreknew the elect, it means that he graciously set his affection upon them before time began.

**V. CHRISTIANS ARE SET APART AS GOD’S PEOPLE BY THE POWER
OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**

The second prepositional phrase in verse 2 tells us the means by which the Lord calls his elect to himself within time. He does so by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. In this passage, the term “sanctification” refers to the Spirit’s work of setting us apart from the world and making us God’s holy people. This is the basic meaning of sanctification: to be set apart from a common use for a holy use. Peter’s emphasis here is not upon sanctification as the lifelong process by which Christians are made increasingly holy. That is certainly one way in which the Bible uses the term sanctification. But in this passage Peter is talking about the definitive sanctification that takes place when the Holy Spirit effectually calls us, regenerates us, and unites us to Christ by faith. From that point on, a Christian is a holy person. He is a saint. He has been set apart from the world to belong to God. And he is called to live as such.

**VI. CHRISTIANS OBEY THE GOSPEL AND ARE CLEANSED OF ALL
THEIR SINS**

The third prepositional phrase in verse 2 tells us the purpose of our election: God has elected us for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling by his blood. The order in

which Peter lists these qualities may seem at bit strange at first glance. We might expect Peter to speak first about our need to be cleansed by the blood of Christ, and only after that to speak of the call to a life of obedient discipleship. But Peter reverses the order. Why?

When Peter speaks of obedience in this passage, his emphasis is not upon a Christian's ongoing life of obedience to Christ. He certainly believes in this, as we see throughout this letter. But that is not what he means when he speaks of obedience to Christ in this verse. Instead, he is talking about our initial act of obedience as Christians; our obedience to the call of the gospel; our obedience to the call to repent and believe. This is consistent with how Peter uses the term "obedience" in 1:22, where he describes Christians as those who have "purified your souls by your obedience to the truth." In both of these passages, Peter is referring to faith as an act of obedience. When we place our faith in Jesus Christ, we are submitting to the call of the gospel. This is why faith itself is a gift of God's free grace. It is something that the Spirit of God works within us. Otherwise, no one would submit to the call of the gospel, because we are all dead in our sins.

But when we do respond to the gospel with the obedience of faith, we lay hold of the redemption that Christ has secured for us. We are sprinkled by his blood; we are washed and cleansed of all of our sins. Forgiveness of sins is only possible by having your sin-

stained soul stained soul sprinkled with the blood of Jesus Christ. And the only way to be sprinkled with his blood is to lay hold of Christ by faith. You must obey the call of the gospel, the call to repent and believe, if you want to receive the benefits of the gospel.

VII. CONCLUSION

This is just the introductory portion of this letter. Yet it provides us with a powerful definition of who we are if we belong to Jesus Christ. If you are a true Christian, then these things are true of you: you have been chosen by God; you live as an exile in this world; you were foreknown by God before time began; you have been set apart as holy to the Lord; and you have submitted to the call of the gospel and been sprinkled with the blood of Christ. If you trust in Jesus Christ as he is presented in the gospel, then that is who you are. That is your identity. Your identity is found in Christ, not in anything within yourself. Listen to these words from Thomas Boston:

“When through deadness and darkness of spirit, whether arising from some conscience-wasting guilt, or otherwise, your faith of the promise is failed, and you cannot again fasten your gripe upon it, because you can see no good in you; embrace Christ again, and the promise in him; notwithstanding of your seen and felt sinfulness and utter unworthiness; and by no means stand off from the promise until you be in better case; but say with the Psalmist, ‘Iniquities prevail

against me: as for our transgressions, thou shalt purge them away,' Psalm lxxv.3.

For as the goodness in you was not the ground of the promise; so the evil in you doth not overturn it, and make it of none effect. The foundation of the promise stands sure in Christ, whatever alterations the frame and case of a believer's spirit do undergo. It is established as the moon, (Psalm lxxxix.37.), which is still the same in itself, notwithstanding of the variety of its appearances to our sight, one while waxing, at another time waning." (Thomas Boston, *A View of the Covenant of Grace*, p. 95)

God's promise to his elect is grace and peace in Jesus Christ. This is the grace and peace that Peter is speaking of in his blessing at the end of this passage. And notice what he says about that grace and peace: "May grace and peace be multiplied to you." A Christian is someone who has grace and peace for all his days, and he has them in increasingly measure. You will have God's grace and peace multiplied in your life to the extent that you remember your identity in Jesus Christ. Yes, you live in this world as an exile, but that is only because you have been elected by God to have an eternal home in his kingdom.