

**“LIFE TOGETHER IN CHRIST”**

We come now to our final sermon on this first letter of the apostle Peter. Next week, I will begin a new series on the Gospel of Mark, the same Mark who is mentioned in today’s text. But as we conclude this series on 1 Peter, I want to take a moment to reflect upon one of the overarching themes in this letter: the encouragement that it provides for Christians as we live in a hostile environment and experience various kinds of trials in this life. Peter has repeatedly described Christians as God’s elect people, the people whom he has chosen and called out from among the world to live in fellowship with himself. And Peter has also laid emphasis upon our hope of glory, the eternal inheritance that is being kept for us in heaven. As I have said numerous times in these sermons on 1 Peter, this world is not our home; our life here is a life of pilgrimage. In the words of Samuel Rutherford, “Ye are from home while here; ye are not of this world, as your Redeemer, Christ was not of this world.” Of, in Peter’s own words, we are “elect exiles,” and “sojourners.” Peter wrote this letter in order to help Christians know how to live as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ in a world that is often opposed to us; a world that cannot provide us with any lasting comfort.

It is important that we understand the significance of this. For one thing, it reminds us that the Christian life is never lived out under “ideal” circumstances. The things in your life that hinder and frustrate you in your walk with Christ form the very context in which the Lord calls you to work out your salvation. They are God’s providential

circumstances, intended to keep you trusting in him as you sojourn through this world on the way to your eternal home.

I will return to that theme of pilgrimage in just a moment. As we turn our attention to this passage, where Peter concludes his letter to his fellow pilgrims, we get a picture of the common purpose, the rich communion, and the warm and genuine love that is shared by believers in Jesus Christ. Here we have an example of what the NT means when it says that the Christian life is a real participation, with our fellow believers, in the life that is found in Jesus Christ. The Christian life is a life of fellowship in Christ.

And this fellowship is a fellowship of pilgrims. We see yet another emphasis upon this theme in the greetings that Peter sends from the church in Babylon, the city from which he wrote this letter. But where was this Babylon? Was it that great city in ancient Mesopotamia? Was it the same city that was the capital of the empire that oppressed Israel, destroyed their temple, and carried them into captivity in the sixth century BC? Was Peter writing from that Babylon? Well, it is highly unlikely that he was. By the time Peter wrote this letter, the city of Babylon had been largely abandoned.

Furthermore, there is no evidence that Peter or any of the apostles ever traveled to Babylon, or that there was even a church there at this time.

Instead, most interpreters agree that Peter is using the name Babylon in a metaphorical sense, describing the city of Rome. And it was by no means unheard of to speak about

Rome in this way. The apostle John does the very same thing throughout the book of Revelation, and some of the Jewish literature of this period also refers to Rome as Babylon. Rome came to be identified with Babylon because Rome was the oppressive power over the people of God in the NT, just as Babylon was the oppressive power over the people of God in the OT. Also, Babylon was the place of exile in the OT, and exile is a key theme in 1 Peter. The Christians to whom Peter was writing were living as exiles and sojourners in cities that belonged to the Roman Empire. So it is not very difficult to understand why Peter would refer to the capital city of that empire as Babylon.

This is a metaphor that we can apply to our own situation as well. To the extent that our nation, our culture, and our world set themselves against Christ and his kingdom, they too are Babylon. Every Christian lives amid the kingdoms and cultures of this world as an elect exile. And this means we need to be very careful. We need to do exactly what these first century Christians needed to do: we need to stand firm in the grace of God. We need to fill our minds with the truth of God's Word, meditating on it and allowing it to be our comfort, our counselor, and our guide. For if we fail to do that, we will be conformed to the pattern of the Babylon in which we live.

We are living in exile. At the same time, we also need to remember that we are never alone. We belong to a family that stretches across the globe and across the span of history. As we see from Peter's closing greetings, there was a familial kind of connection between these first century churches and the Christians who belonged to them. Silvanus

is not merely a co-worker, but a brother. Mark is a son in the faith. The church at Rome sends her greetings to these churches in Asia Minor, even though most of these Christians did not know each other personally. And Peter tells the Christians in these churches in Asia Minor to greet one another with a kiss of love, which was the way family members greeted one another in that culture. These are not just formalities. They are genuine expressions of Christian love. It is true that Christians do not belong to this world. We are exiles. And sometimes, if our family members are not Christians, believers even have to live as exiles in their own families. But we are never alone. In the body of Christ, we have bonds of love that cannot be severed. In the church we have true belonging, true membership, true community, true family. Brothers and sisters, let us strive more and more to live in light of this reality. Let us live as members of one another in Jesus Christ; let's show our love for each other in tangible and encouraging ways; let's be a family.

In the remainder of this sermon, I want to call your attention to three individuals: Peter himself, and to the two men he mentions in these verses, Silvanus and Mark. It is clear from the Gospels and the book of Acts that Peter was an extremely important figure in the NT church. In fact, Peter's significance is probably only rivaled by the apostle Paul. In the Gospels, Peter seems to be the disciple who was closest to the Lord: he was a member, with James and John, of Jesus' inner circle of disciples; he was the disciple who first professed that Jesus is the Christ; and he was the disciple whom Jesus singled out as representative of all of the apostles when he declared him to be the rock upon which he would build his church.

At the same time, we also know that Peter failed miserably at the very beginning of his career as an apostle. Just after being called the rock upon which Christ would build his church, Peter rebuked Jesus for teaching that he must suffer and die in his ministry as the Christ! And this caused Jesus to rebuke Peter, saying: “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.” (Matthew 16:23) And then, at the Last Supper, when Jesus predicted that all of his disciples would soon abandon him, it was Peter who was quick to assert his unwavering allegiance and to swear that no matter what might come to pass, he would never, ever deny his Lord. But then, later on that same night, Peter denied Christ three times, just as Jesus had predicted.

After the resurrection, Jesus appeared to Peter, and he forgave him and restored him. Now, those events took place about thirty years before Peter wrote this letter. But you can be sure that Peter never forgot them. Through those experiences, the Lord opened Peter’s eyes and gave him a much more accurate glimpse into his own soul. He had been humbled. As with the apostle Paul, the Lord brought Peter to his lowest point before he made him into the instrument for the kingdom that he intended him to be. Peter needed to see that he really was only a clay vessel before the Lord would use him to hold forth the treasure of the gospel to others.

In his career as an apostle, Peter did not work on his own. Like Paul, he relied on other believers to assist him in his ministry. One of these was Silvanus. Silvanus is a longer form of the name Silas, the same Silas who accompanied Paul on some of his missionary journeys. The NT does not provide us with very much information about Silas, but from what it does convey we get the picture of a man who was a well-respected leader in the church. In Acts 15, Luke calls Silas a leading man among the brethren in Jerusalem, and he also tells us that Silas was one of the men sent to the Gentile Christians with the letter from the Jerusalem Council. In addition, Silas was singing with Paul in that prison at Philippi when the earthquake struck that provided them with the opportunity, not to escape, but to lead the chief jailer and his household to saving faith in Jesus Christ. And then right here, in this passage, Peter says that he regards Silas as a faithful brother. Imagine having the apostle Peter say that about you! Peter did not say this in order to inflate Silas' ego, but to commend him to the recipients of this letter. Peter was entrusting Silas with the message that he wanted to deliver to these Christians, and he wanted them to know that Silas was a reliable messenger.

It is interesting that both Silas and Mark are mentioned in these verses. There is a connection between these two men. It was Silas who replaced Mark after Mark abandoned Paul on one of his missionary journeys. Unlike Silas, the Scriptures show us some of Mark's faults and failures. It is likely that Mark was the young man described by Mark himself in chapter 14 of his Gospel. This was the man who was following Jesus after he had been arrested and who, upon being seized by the authorities, struggled out of

his garment and fled, naked, in terror. That is what Mark tells us. It is not a very flattering story. And then there is the case of Mark's abandonment of Paul in Pamphylia – what would seem to be another instance of Mark's cowardice and lack of fortitude. And Paul did not quickly forget Mark's failure. In fact, Luke tells us that Paul was so dead set against reinstating Mark when he wanted to re-join him that Paul and his missionary partner Barnabas ended up parting ways because of their disagreement over Mark. Barnabas took Mark and went his own way, and Paul took Silas and went his own way.

But that is not the end of Mark's story. Paul was eventually reconciled to him, as we see in his very last letter, 2 Timothy. In that letter, when Paul knew that he would soon be put to death, he made this request of Timothy: "Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry." (2 Timothy 4:11) And then, of course, it was Mark who wrote the Gospel of Mark, for which the apostle Peter was his chief source, as we will see in next week's sermon.

Peter, Silas, and Mark. Here is a good picture of the Christian brotherhood, the Christian family. There are within the church great heroes of the faith; men and women who far surpass us in both duty and devotion; men and women who serve as a great challenge and a great inspiration to us. We look at Silas' faithfulness and his good reputation and we are put to shame for our neglect of our Christian duties. But then there are also examples of people who only proved to be faithful after failing the Lord in significant ways. We

look at Peter and at Mark and we find comfort in the patience, grace, and mercy of our God.

Silas was faithful. Mark was useful for ministry, despite his failures. Is that what you aspire to be? Do you want to be faithful? Do you want to be useful for ministry? That is what I want, both for myself and for you. And I hope that it is what you want as well, because if you are a Christian, that is what God wants for you. He wants you to sing:

*I love thy kingdom, Lord, the house of thine abode,*

*The church our blest Redeemer saved with his own precious blood.*

*I love thy church, O God: her walls before thee stand,*

*Dear as the apple of thine eye, and graven on thy hand.*

*For her my tears shall fall, for her my prayers ascend;*

*To her my cares and toils be giv'n, till toils and cares shall end.*

I hope also that you can find in this passage the same encouragement that I find in it: that, all throughout the history of redemption, God has been using and continues to use people just like you and me as the living stones out of which he is building up his spiritual house, his church, his kingdom. You and I: our lives and what we do with them; our love for one another and our service to the body of Christ: these are the

materials out of which the Lord is building his temple. This is the place where his presence dwells. This is the place of blessing.

*Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!*

*It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard,*

*on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes!*

*It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion!*

*For there the LORD has commanded the blessing, life forevermore. (Ps. 133)*

That blessing, the blessing of peace with which Peter concludes his letter, is not the peace of this world. It is the blessedness of the age to come. It is the blessedness of our eternal home. And yet, here is the amazing thing: in the fellowship that we share in the body of Christ, we have a foretaste of that blessedness right now. Listen now, as I conclude, to this description of Christian fellowship by J. Gresham Machen, the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Presbyterian minister and scholar:

“There are congregations, even in the present age of conflict, that are really gathered around the table of the crucified Lord; there are pastors that are pastors indeed. But such congregations, in many cities, are difficult to find. Weary with the conflicts of the world, one goes into the Church to seek refreshment for the soul. And what does one find? Alas, too often, one finds only the turmoil of the world. The preacher comes forward, not out of a secret place of meditation and

power, not with the authority of God's Word permeating his message, not with human wisdom pushed far into the background by the glory of the Cross, but with human opinions about the social problems of the hour or easy solutions of the vast problem of sin...Is there no refuge from the strife? Is there no place of refreshing where a man can prepare for the battle of life? Is there no place where two or three can gather in Jesus' name, to forget for the moment all those things that divide nation from nation and race from race, to forget human pride, to forget the passions of war, to forget the puzzling problems of industrial strife, and to unite in overflowing gratitude at the foot of the Cross? If there be such a place, then that is the house of God and that the gate of heaven. And from under the threshold of that house will go forth a river that will revive the weary world." (*Christianity and Liberalism*, pp. 179-180)