

“Strangers in Strange Lands”

I Peter 1:1-2

¹Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,

To those who are elect exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, ²according 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.,

HOPE

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

PORTSMOUTH, NEW HAMPSHIRE

Mr. Thomas Powell

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Introduction

It has been said that letter writing is a dying art, that the Internet, email, and text messaging have killed what once was a vital form of communication and replaced it with terse chatter that has absolutely no ability to communicate subtlety or nuance. However, I doubt that even the most verbose Victorian could have penned an introduction such as we find opening our passage for today. Sure, letter writing in its more recent heyday could get the content thing down, but their introductions are downright curt compared to our passage. “Dearest William” or whatnot is undeveloped compared with Peter’s “to those who are elect exiles of the dispersion...”

Of course part of this is style. The three part construction of Author, Audience, and blessing is found in almost every early Christian letter for several centuries, including nearly all of the NT epistles.

However, just because it is convention doesn’t mean that it doesn’t contain information that is of value. Structurally, in just these two verses we find the broadest definition for the whole letter. It is from the apostle Peter, but it is to multiple churches. It is by nature, an encyclical, that is a letter meant to be circulated amongst a number of churches. The audience is those in dispersion, diaspora, or scattering depending the translation, however the point is clear, this is for gentile Christians throughout the five Roman provinces that make up much of modern-day Turkey. These five provinces occupy some 300,000 square miles of area vary in every type of terrain type and city size – in short, this letter is for any Christian. The definition given is not one unique to the residents of first century Asia minor, but characteristics shared by all Christians.

Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* famously begin with these words: “Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid Wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected together by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other.” Today’s passage gives us knowledge of ourselves, knowledge that you can bank on. How can I say that? In principle, it is because Christians, through what I will highlight shortly, are restored to a full humanity by the work of the Trinity. So asking who are Christians is a way of saying, what is a true human like?

Our passage has a second point of address, namely, who is this God who saves Christians? So, in a way, we find Peter’s introduction to be a good place to look for what Calvin called “true and solid wisdom.” Here we can find, in just two verses, tucked at the beginning of a letter, some meaty, deep, and true things to say about God and ourselves.

Since our passage is basically the address label for the letter, we’ll begin with who are Christians? And move on to the question, who is this God who saves Christians?

So then who are Christians? Elect.

Depending on your translation this might be a little hard to spot, some translations move it to the end, but the first word in Peter’s address is that they are *elect*, it is the first word describing the audience of the letter. Some translations move it to the end for the sake of clarity or flow in English, but it is important to remember that this was not written in English. The Greek text puts the word for *elect* as the first aspect of the audience of the letter and in Greek word order is very important. Peter is being intentional. This is the ground for the rest of what he is going to say about those to whom he is directing this letter – They are elect, chosen by God. The grounds for a Christian’s confidence lies not in something inherent in them, but in God’s choosing. This is

the primary means of a Christians identification, that they are chosen by God. This includes identification from outside, such as Peter’s audience, but also from the inside. Our chosen status is also our self-identification. We are no longer our own, but have been chosen by God to be his. This also places our confidence in the chooser not the chosen, God is the sovereign Lord of the universe, and He chose people for himself. His power serves as our confidence in his might act of election.

Who are Christians? Aliens.

That same election has created an interesting status. That of exiles and aliens. We become exiles in our homelands. This letter was written to gentile Christians. There was no Christendom, no Christian nation. In electing some from a world of sin and death to eternal life, it is God who creates aliens. As those chosen by God we become strangers in our own homelands. Exiles and aliens in their own houses. Because of God’s choice we become strangers in strange lands, but these lands that have been our home since birth. We are not aliens because we’ve chosen to separate from the world, or that the world has chosen to separate from us, we’re primarily aliens because God has chosen us.

Aliens and exiles are not promised an easy life. In becoming Christians we aren’t guaranteed that we will have cake and pleasantries in our daily lives. We’re instead told (just in this letter) that as aliens we will likely be:

- 1) Subject to various trials (1:6)
- 2) Subject to passions of our flesh which wage war against our souls (2:11)
- 3) Subject to suffering, with Christ as our example. To follow in his steps (2:21)
- 4) Subject to slander and revilement while doing good (3:16-17)
- 5) Subject to being maligned because we no longer participate in a life of sin (4:3-4)

6) Subject to a fiery trial that will come upon us (4:12)

7) Subject to insult for the name of Christ (4:14)

As aliens, exiles, and strangers in this world we find ourselves rejected by it. In a way that is the very essence of being an alien, rejection. The place where we find ourselves finds us different, and therefore treats us differently. And that different treatment isn't better treatment, but harsher treatment.

So before you go “thanks a lot, but that doesn't sound like much fun,” I'd like to remind you that the grounds for our stranger status is that Christ has chosen us. This is Peter's point. It is in being chosen to be adopted as son and daughters of God that that we are led to being alienated amidst the selfish sinfulness of a fallen world. Peter's point is that our main identity is as a chosen people, an elect people. The necessary corollary to that is that we become aliens.

It is to this fact that Peter intends us to know that while we are aliens, we are elect aliens, chosen strangers. He's clear about this as the primary identifying factor of his audience, which as I've said before, are universal attributes shared by all Christians.

Because this is a letter to a particular set of people it has their location on it, but the status as aliens and residents in those 5 Roman provinces is one that is shared by Christians to this day. I could pen a letter, if it was in style to do so, with an introduction much the same. Imagine writing to the churches in this part of NH. Substitute Portsmouth, Rye, Hampton, Durham and Dover or any other geopolitical designation you want – the reality is – all Christians are elect aliens, chosen strangers.

Transition

Our passage then describes the condition of our election: 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. Our condition on being a Christian, on being a chosen stranger, is on God. Not us. So we turn our eyes to God. But I’m going to parse this out to set the stage, just briefly.

We’re a people of God’s choosing. We’re wrapped up in something bigger than ourselves. This can be very scary. American culture is one of control. We want to have no surprises. This passage says to Christians: God is in control. However it also says, he gives you what you need to be Christ-like in all situations. God prepares us for his calling. He elects us as an eternal act, but as an act applied to us by the Spirit. Sanctifies us by the Spirit. Some translations might read consecrate. The idea is a combination of the two meanings in English. The Spirit makes us holy which seems clearer with the English word “sanctification,” but it also sets us apart, which seems clearer when using the word “sanctification.” This isn’t a purposeless sanctification, but one that in making us holy and set apart also brings us into obedience with Jesus Christ – it is this obedience that realizes itself in the moment of conversion, a moment when we experience that third act of God, the cleansing and holiness applied to us by means of the blood of Christ.

God is an electing God, but as it is clear in this quick survey, God acts as a Trinitarian God. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all involved. The Father elects, the Spirit Sanctifies, the Son’s blood sprinkles. Our status as elect aliens is one wrought by the working not of an impersonal deity, but of one that works intimately in us to prepare us for our conditions which we will encounter as God’s people. We’re not in control of this. And that’s a good thing.

So who is this God who elects Christians? The Father is foreknowing!

As Peter moves on to describe the grounds for our election, he writes that it is “according to the foreknowledge of God.” So, plainly, our status as elect aliens is because of God’s

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foreknowledge. But what does that mean? Does it mean that we really elected ourselves because we can say, as the Stuart Smalley character on Saturday Night Live used to, “I’m good enough, I’m smart enough, and doggone it, people like me.”? That is that God just knew I’d be so good, smart, and likable that he had to pick me, as though I was head and shoulders above all the rest of the poor shlubs? No! As we heard Pastor Chris reminded us in his sermons several months ago on that “Vital Vintage Union,” it is because, quoting Jesus, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you” (John 15:16)

God isn’t a cosmic watchmaker, he’s not just sitting back watching the gears spin on his toy universe nor is he a frantic tinkerer doing his best to keep things from completely going haywire. His foreknowledge isn’t a kind of functional fore-knowing that keeps him from making mistakes. It is instead something a little bit deeper. Foreknowledge is language regarding intimacy. At first you might balk. How can this be intimacy? Let me tell you. The word foreknowledge, to have knowledge of something before it exists is about the kind of knowing that God does. So what kind of knowing does God do? He does intimate knowing.

A quick example, Isaiah 41:8-10:

[8] But you, Israel, my servant,
 Jacob, whom I have chosen,
 the offspring of Abraham, my friend;
[9] you whom I took from the ends of the earth,
 and called from its farthest corners,
saying to you, “You are my servant,
 I have chosen you and not cast you off”;
[10] fear not, for I am with you;

be not dismayed, for I am your God;

I will strengthen you, I will help you,

I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

This is intimate friendship. Ceaseless, chosen, benevolence. He loves them absolutely because he chooses to love them. Hence that beautiful chain of events described by Paul in Romans 8:28-30:

[28] And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. [29] For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. [30] And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

(Romans 8:28-30 ESV)

Our loving of God is not the result of our choosing to love him, but of his choice of us. We are wholly, radically, dependant on God. The repeated language of the Psalmist, which occurs no fewer than 4 times, is of a God who knows us and prepares us in our mother’s womb. The language is intentional. Our dependence on God is absolute, from first to last. When we were feeble and squirming, just drawing breath – God was there, loving. When we are fit and in our prime – God is there, loving. When our bodies again turn feeble and failing, God is there, loving. Electing. Bringing about his good purposes in us. He does this by knowing us at an intimate level. He knows us even before we are born. There is no word deep enough to describe the complete known-ness we have before our creator. However, we should keep in mind that this is not some impersonal knowing, but a highly personal one. The triune God has known you, and is knowing you, and is working out good things for you. He is sanctifying you, he is loving you

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to the point of death on a cross so that you might be made pure and holy, blameless, and with great joy! This is Good News, God saves people! And he doesn't do it through an impersonal machine, but through the Son of the Father with the power of the Spirit. Good News!

So who is this God who elects Christians? The Spirit is worker of Sanctification!

The Sanctifying Spirit, the Holy Spirit, who dwells in you (Rom 8:11) works to make you Holy.

You aren't pulling yourselves up by your bootstraps and make a holy and separate person out of yourself. You can't do that. No more than a child making mud pies can hand one to me and make it a real pie. The mud's still mud, it doesn't matter how hard you try to convince me it is rhubarb pie. But with God, who is a Sanctifying Spirit, who was over the formless deep at the beginning of creation, the power that created from nothing all that is... with God... nothing is impossible. The Spirit works in believers making them Holy. Now the mud-pie is no longer a mud-pie, it *is* a strawberry-rhubarb pie. What does a human being look like who is being made Holy? In short, they are looking more and more like Jesus Christ. Holiness and obedience go together. There is not such thing as being Holy and disobedient. For the Christian this is a painful process. We were sons and daughters of disobedience. The Spirit is destroying our disobedience in making us Holy. This hurts. Just as a child who has played outside in the mud all day requires extra scrubbing to get out all the mud from every nook and cranny, so we too, day in and day out, are scrubbed clean by the work of the Holy spirit, making us Holy and obedient.

God rescues us. God cleanses us. God enables us for a life of obedience. One last thing.

So who is this God who elects Christians? The Son sprinkles you with his blood!

This part might seem the strangest to some folks in our day and age. Sacrifice seems barbaric. Indeed some might agree with what we have said so far and nod their heads, but get

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squeamish with these last few words. You see, even though we might say... Hey, I've got the Holy Spirit, God's election, all's good right? No. We've sinned. Lots. We've been selfish, stolen, looked lustfully, made idols of things that aren't God... we've got a list at least ten items long of these acts that we do, and even keep doing as the process of sanctification works itself out... these sins have a cost. The wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23).

So is God simply going to elect you, make you Holy and obedient and then whack you in the end because you weren't perfect. Well, without this last little bit of sprinkling, yes. Yes he would. And you'd deserve it. You'd deserve punishment. But you see, the same God who elects, who works sanctification and obedience, is the same God who bore the penalty for sin. The Son was the sin sacrifice that set you right with God, he was counted in your place. Although this might be jumping ahead a little bit, Peter is explicit about the importance of the Sons sprinkling, in 1 Peter 3:18, “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit,” Righteous in the place of unrighteous. He's the sacrifice. His blood sprinkles us. His blood is the blood that makes us at peace with God.

Without the blood of Christ, we are alienated, but with it we are restored. The chosen are not chosen because they are innately good, but because God loves them intimately and prepares them for all that they will encounter. The triune God, Father, Spirit, Son, works in you to bring about that which he willed to do. And he does this on a personal, intimate level. He brings the dead to life, pays the debts of sinners, and makes holy and obedient the rebellious. Good News!

Conclusion

The Triune God prepares and equips the elect aliens. If you're a believer, this needs to be treasured. The work of God described in just this short little introduction gives us the compass

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rose by which to understand the world in which we find ourselves. As exiles and aliens you will encounter trouble. Life isn't going to be easy. You will be tested, but know that none of this is occurring that you are not already equipped by the sovereign God of the universe for. God has given you what you need. For a time you are as aliens, citizens of Christ's coming kingdom, light in a dark place – but God has placed you here. You are salt and light, by doing good to those who persecute you in the imitation of Christ, in keeping faithful and loving you declare the good news in the midst of a land that can seem, at times, oh so dark.

Take comfort. The Father elects, the Spirit Sanctifies, and the Son sprinkles you with his blood. The Triune God prepares and equips the elect aliens.

May Grace and Peace be multiplied to you.

AMEN.

Benedictory Prayer

Heavenly Father, grant us that the words of Jude, the brother of Jesus Christ, might be applied to us,

[24] Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, [25] to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever.

Amen.