

Sermon 2: 1 Peter 1:1-2: Our God Given Identity

OUTLINE

Defined as God's people
Defined by God's salvation

INTRODUCTION

We live in the age of identity politics. On the one hand we have the woke left, here is one definition, "'Woke left" refers to a segment of modern progressive politics focused on social justice, identity politics, and systemic inequalities, often demanding proactive dismantling of racial, gender, and sexual hierarchies. Originally rooted in African-American awareness of injustice, it is now largely used as a political label for intense focus on systemic oppression.' Seeing yourself as part of an oppressed and marginalised people defines your relationships to everyone around you, and bottle necks you into certain activities. Then on the other hand we have the woke right, one definition is, 'The "woke right" describes a segment of the political right that adopts tactics similar to the far-left, such as identity politics, cancel culture, and demanding ideological purity, but applies them to conservative beliefs.' I am not here to argue over whether these terms are correct but rather to show that you view about your identity deeply impacts on how you see the world, who your people are, and how you should act. And before any great conflict many a leader has sought to rally the hearts and minds of the people by reminding them of who they are. Peter in the spirit of a leader seeking to aid the people of God in their struggle, as they struggle against the push of increasing persecution; and the pull of their old lives, reminds them of their God defined identity. The opening 2 verses set the tone for the rest of the letter. In v1 Peter reminds these believers that they are God's people, giving them names like elect, exile, dispersion to remind them that they are the Lord's and pointing to how they are to see the world, who their people are, and how they should act. In v2, he reminds them of the great trinitarian work of salvation and how this further defines them.

Peter begins his letter with the name Jesus gave him; and the office Jesus put him into, 'Peter, and apostle of Jesus Christ.' There is much that we could say about the man Peter, a fisherman who became a fisher of men; a man who learnt through his own mistakes and is well positioned to encourage those being tempted with the pressure to deny Christ. But the most important thing for our purposes as we study the book is the fact that he is an apostle. Hand picked by Jesus Christ, one of those who has seen the resurrected Christ empowered and authorised to lay the foundation for the NT church. Someone who is given special revelation by God to order the house of God according to the will of God. The importance of his office is underlined by the fact that this is the only title with the description, 'of Jesus Christ,' added to it. Peter is defined by Christ and so are we.

We live in an age of identity crisis where young people are being made to feel the burden of self-creation. In this age where the psychological self, ruled by emotions and feelings, including sinful desires what we feel is more important than what we are biologically. Under the illusion that our bodies are meat lego parts that we can manipulate to agree with identity we choose for ourselves we deny ourselves being made in the image of God as male or female. In a world where human beings are dominated by sinful desires and lying ideologies God

sets us free to be the human beings He made us to be equipping us to stand against the tide of forces that are lying to us. Peter's opening verses have two key points about our God defined identity. V1 shows how we are defined as God's people; v2 shows how we are defined by God's salvation.

Defined as God's people

V1, 'To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.' Before we look at the words that explain our identity as God's people a quick word about the recipients. We see a number of places listed, these we know are in what is modern Turkey. They cover a vast area of land and are likely arranged in order of the circuit a courier would carry the letter. That question that forces itself upon us as we begin is: are these Jews or Gentiles that are being addressed? The reason this question is important is because the words 'elect'; 'exiles'; and 'dispersion' are words typically used to describe the Jews. But as we read on in the letter we can see that the audience is most definitely predominantly Gentile. Peter would not describe Judaism as times of 'former ignorance', 1:14; or their formerly law keeping practices as 'futile ways inherited from your forefathers'; in 4:2-3 he talks about the lifestyles of the Gentiles they previously lived in and have left behind. Why does this matter? Because Peter is not merely giving incidental descriptors, but theological labels to these people of God. He is inviting them through these labels to see themselves before God and the world in a certain light through these descriptions.

The first of our 'Israelish' flavored words applied to Gentiles because of God's work in the gospel is 'elect.' Technically it is used as an adjective here not a noun to modify exile, so elect exile/chosen pilgrim/selected sojourner/set apart stranger all fit the meaning. The concept of being chosen does feed into the doctrine of predestination, and this will be developed in the next verse when we talk about the Father's foreknowledge, because we are elect exiles *according to* foreknowledge. But the primary emphasis in this adjectival use is to talk about the church as chosen in the same way Israel was chosen in the OT. Deut. 7:6, "'For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.' Peter does this throughout the letter, e.g. 2:9, 'But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.' This is not to be seen in the modern ways in which someone might say you are special as an appeal to ego and self-importance because of a therapeutic view of the self that believes that good self-esteem is the foundation for good behavior. This reality of God choosing us from out of the world underlines our identity as different giving us motivation and permission to lean into this difference, and outlines our purpose in being separate. There is comfort here too though. I am God's; He cares for me; He knows my need; He is not indifferent to my need; He protects and provides for His.

Peter layers up the descriptions that have overlapping connotations, the next is 'exile'. This word describes a sojourner, someone passing through. In Heb 11:13 it is used to describe those whose eternal home is not of this earth and so we live by faith not sight, 'These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.' Peter uses this

reality to reinforce why we do not to give into the desires of our fallen flesh that one will one day be glorified and cleansed, 2:11, 'Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.' David reflecting on life in a fallen world recognizes that this life is not all there is and turns his wounded heart more earnestly to God in prayer while enduring this temporary valley of tears, Ps. 38:12, 'Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear to my cry; hold not your peace at my tears! For I am a sojourner with you, a guest, like all my fathers.' Please notice who he sees himself a stranger in a sinful world but not estranged from God.

This notion of being exiles is incredibly instructive for us. Our envious hearts are grasping and are greedy for the pleasures of this life. But the exile knows his home and treasure is not here and now, and so he can wait patiently. We are able to embrace our lives as temporary residents. We do not put down our roots, we hold lightly to the things we have, no matter how much we lose we will always have more in our true home. What does it mean to be a stranger in the world? Here is a quote from an early Christian to put it in a nut shell, "The world is a bridge. The wise man will pass over it, but will not build his house upon it" (Barclay, 1961:198). Our bodies that daily remind us of their weakness and age are temporary, this isn't who we will finally be, this is just a temporary skin to be replaced with something so much better. Those who love their homes are homesick when away from them, how is your homesickness? Have you forgotten your true home feeling with no longing to be where you truly belong or does this feel too much like home?

However, things are not simple for the believer, so although we are not to treat this place as our home, we are not allowed to withdraw from society altogether and live like monks. We still have responsibilities to fulfill like paying our taxes, and not littering, and being on the parents board of your child's school, and voting. We are a part of the world, but apart from the world. So, although strangers we cannot be disengaged and reclusive.

The third description reinforces these ideas further, 'dispersion.' The dispersion was a word used to describe those Jews were lived outside the promised land after the Babylonian exile. It was a way of reinforcing their part in the 12 tribes and as the people of God. The exile would originally have had connotations of being under punishment, but here it is used as a way of identification when living away from home. Despite being away from home, God is with us, God preserves us; God provides for us, we are still His people.

These notions are helpful for us. There are two paradigms that we can compare. Think about the Israelite living in the land and using the sword to cleanse the land, church and state are combined to build and maintain a theocracy. But then there is the exile mentality where like Abraham/Daniel we are not in the land. We do not have the brief to establish a Christian state; we are called to be faithful witnesses but not avenging judges. We can work for the unbelieving states where we live. We adhere to Jeremiah's advice to exiled Judah, Jer. 29:4-7, "'Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. ⁶ Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. ⁷ But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.' But this is not to establish a permanent dwelling here, our home is elsewhere. This notion of exile enables us to be good

citizens here and now but not to become too invested confusing the kingdoms of this earth with the kingdom of God. In our age of Christian Nationalism where the Great Commission is interpreted as making Christian nations not disciples of all nations, this is a necessary corrective.

These Israelish descriptions also cast light on the question of Israel. Who is the Israel of God? It is very clear from the many descriptions in this letter applied to Gentile believers that Peter does not see the Gentiles as having a separate identity in Christ to believing Jews. There is one olive tree for all believers, there are natural branches, believing Jews and wild branches grafted in, the Gentiles. Israel was a typological son pointing to the obedient Son Jesus Christ. The definition of Israel has been expanded beyond earthly and bloodline connections to Abraham to a spiritual connection to Christ. Eph. 2:18-20, 'For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.'

Elect; exiles; dispersion, these are titles that are theologically think that describe you. They define your relationship to God, the world, one another and instruct us in how we relate to this world.

Defined by God's salvation

V2, '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.' What we are is reinforced by how we are made what we are. We are made God's elect; God's exiles; God's dispersion by the work of our saving Trinitarian God. Peter spotlights some aspects of our salvation that reinforce our identity and calling as God's people. These descriptions seem purposeful to underscore the love and power by which we are saved; and the holy calling and life we are now to live.

God's purposes to make us His elect exiles are grounded in His eternal purposes of predestination. The word foreknowledge here directs us to the sovereign way in which God by His irresistible power has saved us. Now we know there is debate over this word. There are those who want to say that the word simply means prescience, to know beforehand. Trying to make the point that God has a well thought out plan, for there is nothing He has not considered. But limiting this word to a minimalist dictionary definition falls short of the biblical meaning. Many words mean more than an etymological break down of terms. God's foreknowledge is something in keeping with His own being and is greater than the minimalist meaning of its parts. There is a use in the bible that simply means knowing ahead of time like in 2 Pet. 3:17, but when used of God's foreknowledge it means more. The word 'know' has covenantal connotations like in Amos 3:2, "'You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.' God knows all the facts about all things, this is not that sort of know. No rather it is know as in, I never knew you; or Adam knew his wife. Eph. 1:4-5 speaks about how in love He predestined us, this is what know means, we were foreloved. God set His love upon us for salvation. This is not the love with which God loves His whole creation, but a distinguishing love where He loves Jacob but not Esau; where we were chosen before the foundation of the earth, 1 Pet. 1:20. This is not a knowing without God making choices and predeterminations as is clear

from Acts 2:23, 'this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.'

But how can the knowledge of knowing that God chose you according to foreknowledge be helpful to you? Well, firstly the doctrine of predestination reminds us that we are saved by grace and not by works. There are people that believe that God saved them because they are good, or useful, or worthy people. However the Bible clearly teaches that we are saved not because of any good in us, not for any faith that we will or have performed, for no innate value in ourselves. The Bible teaches us that when we were yet sinners God died for us (Romans 5:10), and that it is pure grace that we are saved at all (Romans 9:15). This is a very encouraging doctrine because it means that when you sin, you don't un-earn God's love, you cannot surprise him with how sinful you are. He has made a decision in eternity past to save you and God does not change his mind. The doctrine of election teaches you to believe, that despite what you may be led to believe through your sins and trials, that you can know that God will love you forever, it is the one thing that will never change. This would have been a wonderful encouragement to a group of people who may have fallen into some of the sins of their past lives and were doubting the love of God because they were experiencing trials.

'In the sanctification of the Spirit.' Sanctification here is not talking about progressive sanctification where we as believers become more like Jesus. No this is using the word for its other meaning, to set apart. And that is what the Holy Spirit has done for us he has been at work in us in order to make us Christians. He has separated us from our lives of sin and brought us into a new relationship with God. Without the Holy Spirit it is absolutely impossible to be saved. There was once a man called Pelagius who believed that we could save ourselves and that we did not need the Holy Spirit in order to be saved. He gave birth to a school of thought called Pelagianism which believes that man is not effected by sin in his mind and will, and that without the Holy Spirit man can understand and respond to the Gospel, but of course this is completely unbiblical. The Holy Spirit is involved in our salvation from beginning to end, for we are incapable by ourselves.

The Bible teaches us that man is thoroughly affected by sin, we are told that his mind is affected so that he cannot understand (1 Cor. 2:14), and that his will is affected that even if he did understand he would refuse to submit to God (Romans 8:7). It is because of this that Jesus says in John 6:44 "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day." Without the Holy Spirit a person does not feel the reality of sin, his need for righteousness and judgment (John 16:8). Without the Holy Spirit we could not believe for faith is a gift (Ephesians 2:8-9); and without the Spirit we could not repent, for repentance too is a gift (Acts 11:18).

And now that the Spirit uniting us to the power of Christ's resurrection has caused us to die with Him and the power of sin is overcome within us, we now have a foundation to live the holy life. We have been saved to be holy, this is a theme that will be repeated throughout this book.

'for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood.' The commentaries argue about whether the obedience here is being saved to the obedience of the Christian life; or if the obedience in question is obeying the gospel call and being saved. It is true that we are saved to obey, Eph. 2:10

makes that clear and it is a prominent theme in the book, but I think that obedience to Jesus Christ probably means obeying His call in the gospel. Peter talks about conversion as obedience in 1:22-23, 'Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, ²³ since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.' Acts 6:7 is comfortable talking this way too, 'And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.' Paul in Rom. 10:16 when talking about the Jews who did not believe puts it this way, 'But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?"' His phrase 'obedience of faith' in Rom. 1:5 and 16:26 is likely underlining the fact that the Jews who prided themselves as those who obeyed God's law were in fact disobedient by not having faith but trusting in their own righteousness. We must not take from this that we are saved by works. No, but we must feel the obligation to believe and repent; to forsake all false ways of salvation and accept the only way God has appointed in Christ.

We are foreknown by God, to be set apart by the Spirit to be sprinkled with Christ's blood. But what does this relate to. In Lev. 14:6-7 Lepers were sprinkled after being healed; priests were set apart for priestly service with blood; the nation of Israel was sprinkled with blood in Ex. 24 when God ratified with covenant with them after Sinai. So which is it, does the blood represent cleansing, or commissioning or covenantal consecration, and the answer must be yes. These multiple witnesses and types in the OT are individual puzzle pieces pointing to the incredible work of Christ. The blood of Christ cleanses us from all unrighteousness making us clean; it sets us apart for priestly service; and it establishes us a new covenant people by His blood.

Peter then gives the standard Christian greeting of grace and peace; grace is the goodness of the grace of God in the gospel to us; and peace is the fruit we experience by partaking of His grace.

And so Peter introduces his letter to this people. They are persecuted and tempted, and he reminds them of their God defined identity. He uses words like elect, exile and dispersion to underline that we are God's people and all of what it implies; and that we are foreknown, sanctified, obedient and sprinkled. This is what we need to remember when we too are under pressure as these Christians were.