

Message #2

Kurt Hedlund

1 Peter

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CHRISTIANS AND IMMIGRATION STATUS

1 PETER 1:1-2

I.

You probably haven't noticed anything about it, because there is hardly anything in the news about it, but we have this immigration thing going on with our southern border. It seems to me that the whole issue is rather complex, and there are a number of legitimate perspectives by which we can, and should, look at the subject.

There is a national security perspective. In the age of Islamic terrorism where there are people who want to destroy us and cause terror to reign among us, there is a legitimate concern about keeping terrorists out of our country. In addition to that, I would think that we would want to keep people out of the country who have criminal records, who are bad people.

There is also a fairness perspective. There are immigrants in our country who have followed all of the rules and have waited to meet the requirements to become citizens of our nation. Some of these people resent it that illegal immigrants have not followed the rules, and yet have been able to enter this country and enjoy many of the benefits that come from living here.

Then there is a humanitarian perspective. As Christians, we have an obligation to be concerned about the welfare of people who show up at the border in desperate circumstances. In the Old Testament God stressed that His people needed to care for the strangers and aliens in their midst. Many of the immigrants on our southern border are children. There are reports about children being sold to adults so that they can get into the country. Then there are immigration centers which have been overwhelmed by a huge influx of people. We should not just ignore this.

Then there is a long term assimilation perspective. Countries want immigrants to adopt their national values and culture. Europe is having a problem with this because of an influx of immigrants from the

Middle East. A lot of these people are resisting assimilation. They are insisting that sharia law be practiced among them. They are refusing to accept what might be called Western values.

This week we are hosting a group from Belgium in connection with our church missionaries, the Winstons. Belgium has had a problem for a long time with disunity because it has separate language groups. There is a French speaking group and a Flemish speaking group and a smaller German speaking group. At times there have been efforts made to partition the country into these separate groups. There are also immigrants coming into the country. It has been difficult for the Belgians to establish a common language and culture.

Our country has been blessed to have a dominant national language and a set of common values that are largely based upon our Christian and biblical heritage. But those values are changing and moving away from those Biblical values in areas like sexuality and the sacredness of life in the beginning and at the end. So how are we as Christians to live in a culture like this?

Christians in the first century did not live in a culture that was friendly toward Biblical values. The message that the Apostle Peter had for them was very relevant for people who were often treated like illegal aliens. As our culture drifts away from Biblical values, more of us Christians are feeling at times like illegal aliens. So the message of Peter has relevance for us as well.

Foundational to living in a culture like that of the first century or that of the twenty-first century is understanding who we are. That is the subject of the first couple of verses in 1 Peter. The concern of much of the New Testament is that we believers discover who we are as children of God and what that means about how we should live. So I want for us to consider this morning what God wants us to understand about who we are as we begin consideration of the Apostle Peter's first epistle. Last time we looked at Peter himself and focused upon how his failure of faith led to great spiritual growth and helped make him the Christian leader that he was. Now we will begin to look at the first letter that we have in the New Testament which he wrote.

I.

Let's look then at THE BACKGROUND OF 1 PETER. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE BACKGROUND OF 1 PETER)
When the gospel spread to Asia Minor in the first century under the direction of the Apostle Peter and others, there were drastic changes that took place in the lives of those who became Christians. Some of these Christians (ASIA MINOR), living in what we know today as Turkey, were Gentiles converted from a

background of heathenism and idol worship. Others were Jews who were converted from a complex religious system involving sacrifice and rituals and from a social system that taught that it was bad to have involvement with Gentiles.

Mix these two groups together, add a little persecution, and we have the recipe for a good identity crisis. But these Jews and Gentiles now had to get along together in one church. So the Apostle Peter begins his letter by summarizing for these new Christians just who they are in God's eyes.

Chapter 1 v. 1 clearly indicates that Peter is the author of this epistle, or letter. (ASIA MINOR PROVINCES) We know that he was writing to Christians living in the northern part of Asia Minor. The occasion, or reason for writing, is not certain. We do know that Peter was in Jerusalem for a while after Christ ascended into heaven. We know from the Book of Acts that Peter visited and preached in other parts of Israel.

The Book of Galatians tells us that he spent time in Antioch (JERUSALEM ANTIOCH MAP) in what we know today as Syria. Verse 1 has been interpreted by many Bible students as meaning that Peter did missionary work in northern Asia Minor. There are early writings outside of the Bible that say that Peter ended up in Rome where he was crucified. (ROME ASIA MINOR)

Verse 13 of #5 indicates that this letter was written from Babylon, which is in what we know today as Iraq. (ROME BABYLON MAP) That is possible. The difficulty is that by the first century there was hardly anyone living in Babylon. We have no evidence of a church or any Christians being there. So most scholars today suspect that Peter was using the name "Babylon" in a symbolic sense to refer to Rome. Several early church leaders say specifically that Peter was in Rome when he wrote this letter. For example, an early church historian by the name of Eusebius quotes an earlier church leader Papias as saying that the apostle wrote 1 Peter from Rome. (PROJECTOR OFF) The time of writing was probably in the early 60s AD.

The theme of this book, as I mentioned last week, has to do with how Christians should live in light of Christ's Second Coming. It especially focuses on how Christians should live in light of Christ's Second Coming in the face of suffering. Peter, who had personal experience with trials and failure, is going to talk about suffering and grace and glory.

II.

Let's look then at v. 1 as we consider OUR IDENTITY AS CHRISTIANS: WHO ARE WE? (PROJECTOR ON--- II. OUR IDENTITY AS...) The passage is found on p. 1014 in the black Bibles. Verse 1 reads, **“Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ. To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia...”**

The primary term that Peter uses to address his readers is “elect exiles.” I prefer the word “aliens” rather than “exiles.” To me “exiles” has an emphasis on the idea that the people are from somewhere else, which, in a sense, Christians are. “Aliens” has more of a connotation of being different because of who you are. The original Greek word stresses this difference. “Strangers” would also be a close synonym. These two words tell us a great deal about how Peter viewed these early Christians, and they tell us a great deal about who we are as Christians.

A.

The first word tells us Christians that we are ELECT, or chosen. (II. OUR IDENTITY A. ELECT) This implies that a special privilege or honor is involved. It also implies that there is a chooser. This chooser is God the Father. We are Christians because God chose us.

Now this doctrine of election, or predestination, may cause some of us difficulty. It seems to be unfair. It doesn't fit with the preconception that some of us have about what God should be like. But Peter did not use this terminology to upset his readers. He was writing to Christians who were faced with trials and suffering. They didn't need any more upsettiness in their lives. They certainly weren't in the mood for teaching on some theoretical doctrine that had little practical value. But, you see, the doctrine of election is intended to be both practical and encouraging.

In calling his readers “elect,” or “chosen,” Peter was intending to point out that these Christians were special objects of God's love and that they had ultimate security. They were special people because God chose them. In a world that seems turned upside down we need encouragement that God cares about us. There should be great encouragement that comes from knowing that it is God who cared so much about us that He is responsible for bringing us as individuals into His family in the first place.

The doctrine of election, or predestination, is like one rail of a railroad track. The other rail is the doctrine of human responsibility. These rails are parallel to each other. From our perspective it seems like they don't come in contact with each other. Election and human responsibility seem not to fit

together. But if we try to run on just one rail, our train will go off of the track. If we try to describe salvation strictly in terms of human choice and responsibility, we deny the sovereignty of God and end up with a salvation by human works. On the other hand, if we try to operate only on the rail of election, we will end up with a cold fatalism. The Bible teaches both divine election and human responsibility.

B.

Peter says not only that we are elect but also that we are ALIENS. (I. OUR IDENTITY A.... B. ALIENS) The Greek word that he uses means literally **“those who live alongside a people to whom they don’t belong.”** The word was used in the first century of people who did not hold citizenship in the place in which they resided. Slaves in the Roman Empire were not citizens. So someone might be born in a particular town but still regarded as an alien. The term could also be used of people who came from another place.

“Aliens” will be used of Christians in the rest of 1 Peter in a metaphorical sense. But there is at least one scholar who argues that in this first usage Peter is referring to literal aliens. (Karen Jobes, *1 Peter*) We know that during the rule of the Emperor Claudius (41-54 AD) there were a couple of times when he kicked Jews out of the city of Rome. The early Roman historian Suetonius makes reference to one of these expulsions and says that it had to do with conflicts among the Jews involving Chrestus, which appears to be a reference to Jesus. So it could be that these Christians in northern Asia Minor got there originally because they were kicked out of Rome. We don’t have any early historical evidence that any of the apostles evangelized in these areas. Paul was in southern and central Asia Minor. But he was not in some of these other northern areas identified in v. 1.

However these Christians came to be in these Roman provinces, the term “aliens” had special meaning to the Jews among these believers. As Jews, they knew what it was like to feel not quite accepted by their fellow countrymen. Although they lived in northern Asia Minor, Israel was still, in a sense, their home. Now that they were Christians, they would experience an additional separation from their fellow Jews. For they had now been spiritually united with believing Gentiles into the church of Christ.

All of these believers had become aliens. Their real citizenship was now in heaven. Many of the Old Testament saints also experienced this alien status in their day. In Hebrews #11 reference is made to Abraham and Sarah, Noah, Moses and Rahab. We are told in vv. 13-16 (PROJECTOR ON--- HEBREWS 11:13), **“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 [or aliens] on the earth. (HEBREWS 11:14-15) For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had**

opportunity to return. (HEBREWS 11:16) But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.” These Old Testament believers recognized that they didn’t quite fit in the world in which they lived.

A church leader who wrote a century after the Apostle Peter (PROJECTOR OFF) said, “[**Christians**] **take part in everything as citizens and put up with everything as foreigners. Every foreign land is their home and every home a foreign land... They feed themselves in the flesh but do not live according to the flesh. They spend their days on earth, but hold citizenship in heaven.”** (*Epistle to Diognetus*)

Do you ever feel like you don’t quite belong? Does it ever seem like the world has too many problems, that your unbelieving family members don’t understand you, that your fellow workers never totally accept you, that kids at school just don’t get it, that people around you operate on a totally different wave length, that our culture is straying away from the values that we hold dear? It is only natural that we have those feelings at times because we are aliens. Our real home is in heaven.

God has given us a purpose in being here. We do have a mission. We are to function as salt and light, to spread the gospel, to build up the church, the body of Christ. But because we are aliens living away from our true home, we will never be completely accepted by the world system around us, and we will experience some suffering because of it.

III.

Who we are is a product of where we have come from. Thus in v. 2 the Apostle goes on to explain THE SOURCE OF OUR IDENTITY as elect aliens: WHERE DO WE COME FROM? (PROJECTOR ON--- III. THE SOURCE OF OUR IDENTITY) Peter says that we are a product of the Trinity. Notice that all three Persons of the Godhead are included here and have a part in establishing our identity. Peter completes the sentence begun in v. 1, “**...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.”**

A.

Peter says first that we are elect aliens according to THE FOREKNOWLEDGE OF GOD THE FATHER. (III. THE SOURCE... A. THE FOREKNOWLEDGE...) Our reading of this phrase might cause us to conclude that what Peter means is that God the Father foresaw what individuals would choose to follow Christ and so

worked out events that they would indeed believe. The belief which God foresaw in us resulted in our becoming elect aliens. Such is the interpretation that some give to this.

There are, however, at least three reasons why Peter is not talking about a kind of passive foresight on the part of God the Father. The first reason is that the Greek word for “foreknowledge” implies an intimate, active relationship between the foreknower and the object of the foreknowledge. The verb form of this same word is used in v. 20 of our chapter. Peter says that Christ and His death were foreknown before the foundation of the world. God the Father did not simply foresee who Christ would be and what He would do for mankind. He was intimately involved with Christ, and He was actively planning out the substitutionary death of Jesus.

Foreknowledge does not simply mean “passive foresight.” It connotes an active, intimate relationship. In fact the KJV translates the Greek word for “foreknowledge” in v. 20 as “foreordained,” and the NIV translates it as “chosen.”

The second reason that Peter is not simply talking about a passive foresight on the part of the Father involves the context of our passage. Peter says that Jesus Christ has an active role in giving His life in the sprinkling of blood. The Holy Spirit is actively involved in the work of sanctification. Likewise God the Father has an active role in doing more than just looking ahead to see how people will choose. He was directly involved in determining beforehand.

The third problem with understanding foreknowledge as simply passive foresight is that election and predestination would become meaningless. If all that God the Father is doing is putting His stamp of approval on what He foresaw that we would choose, then He is not really doing the choosing. The initiative for our individual salvation comes from us. We are then no longer saved completely by grace. For if foreknowledge is based upon our choice, then it was some wisdom, some intelligence, or some inherent goodness in us that determined that we would be saved.

(JOHN 6:44) In John 6:44 Jesus said, **“No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.”** John Calvin wrote, **“We shall never feel persuaded as we ought that our salvation flows from the free mercy of God as its fountain, until we are made acquainted with His eternal election...”** (PROJECTOR OFF)

The crime problem that faces our inner cities today is not primarily the result of poverty or drugs or gangs. It is the result of the deterioration of the family. Two-thirds of all babies born in the inner city are born to unwed mothers. Children grow up without having a father around. That situation, of course, is not restricted to the inner city. Without a father figure around to love these kids and discipline them and give them an identity, there is a much greater likelihood that they will not turn out well.

The great news for us as Christians is that, no matter what our earthly family is like, we have a Heavenly Father who has given us an identity. In the face of the trials of life we can be confident that He cares for us and is involved with us. One proof of that is that He chose us to be part of His family.

B.

Not only does our identity as elect aliens find its source in God the Father, but it is also based in THE SANCTIFYING WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. THE SOURCE...A... B. THE SANCTIFYING...) The Greek word for “sanctify” literally means “to make holy,” or “to set apart.” The Bible teaches that there is one sense in which this sanctification thing is a process. There is a lifelong process in which we believers gradually become more holy. We become more godly in our character and behavior. Thus (1 THESSALONIANS 5:23) Paul prayed in 1 Thessalonians #5, **“Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely...”**

In other words Paul was praying that God would work in the lives of the Christians in his audience to make them godly all over. That is a lifelong process that will come to completion only when we get to heaven. (PROJECTOR OFF)

There is another way in which the term “sanctified” is used in the New Testament. Sometimes it is used to describe the position that we Christians have as the result of trusting in Christ. In other words, some passages say that we believers are already sanctified. One noun form of this Greek word “sanctify” literally means “holy ones.” Most often, our English versions of the Bible translate it as “saints.” In several of the New Testament books Christians are addressed as “saints,” or “holy ones.”

So when Peter says that we are elect aliens as a result of the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, he means that we have received sainthood. The Holy Spirit has made us saints. In some of our religious backgrounds we were taught that saints were only individuals who had a uniquely holy life and who had a relationship with God that was achievable only by the greatest of efforts. That is not true. If we have trusted in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit has made us saints.

We may not always feel like saints. We may not always act like saints. But from God's perspective we are. So when we are treated like the scum of the earth, when we are regarded as the enemies of humanity, when we are charged with upsetting the family, when we are labeled as enemies of science for believing in creationism, when we are accused of making problems by quibbling over things like ethics and integrity, when we are accused of being homophobes, we need to remember the source of our identity. We are saints. We are children of God. The sovereign God of the universe is our Father. We can persevere in the midst of difficulties and opposition because we know who we are, and we know where we are going.

C.

The Second Person of the Trinity is also involved in the establishment of our identity. For v. 2 says that we have received THE SPRINKLING OF JESUS CHRIST. (PROJECTOR ON--- III....B... C. THE SPRINKLING...) The literal rendering of what Peter says would be something like this: **“unto obedience and the sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ.”**

The sprinkling of blood points to Christ's death on the cross to pay the penalty for man's sins. Blood in the Old Testament was sprinkled in several situations. It was sprinkled when a leper was cleansed of his leprosy. Leprosy was a picture of sin in the Old Testament. When one was discovered to be a leper, he had to live apart from everybody else. If a leper was cleansed of his leprosy, one part of the ceremony that preceded his return to the community involved the sprinkling of blood from an animal sacrifice.

Then also blood was sprinkled by Moses in a ceremony at Mt. Sinai. According to Exodus #24, Moses wrote down the Law that God gave him. This law was called a covenant, or agreement. When Moses read the Law to the people of Israel, they agreed to follow it. So blood of animal sacrifices was sprinkled on it to signify the agreement of the people to the terms of the covenant.

Then also there were certain utensils and objects that were used for religious purposes in the tabernacle and later in the temple in Jerusalem. Before they were put to this religious use, they were sprinkled with the blood of animal sacrifices.

Finally, blood was sprinkled on the ark of the covenant on *yom kippur*, the day of atonement. Once a year the high priest would bring some of the blood of a bull and a goat inside the holy of holies to make atonement for the sins of the people.

In a corresponding way the blood of Jesus Christ that was shed for us when He died on the cross accomplished the spiritual tasks that are pictured in these Old Testament ceremonies. Christ's blood cleanses us from sin, as the blood cleansed a leper from his leprosy. Christ's blood becomes the basis for a new covenant between God and man, even as the blood in the Old Testament served as a basis for the covenant between God and Israel. Blood sets us apart as holy ones, as saints, even as blood was used in the temple in the dedication of certain objects to holy use. The blood of Christ also accomplishes our final atonement and qualifies Jesus to serve as our high priest.

Christ's death is crucial to our status as elect aliens. It is the basis for our eternal salvation. In relationship to the Father, that salvation was accomplished in eternity past. In relationship to the Son, that salvation was accomplished at the cross. In relationship to the Spirit, that salvation was accomplished at the moment that we believed in Jesus. (PROJECTOR OFF)

My two boys had no choice over the family into which they were born. It was their parents, with God's help, who created them. But it was love that was the motive behind their creation. Much of their identity in life is inextricably linked, for good and bad, to their parents from whom they come.

In a similar way our identity as followers of Jesus Christ is inextricably linked to the Triune God from whom we received our spiritual birth and upbringing. We are elect because He chose us. That choice was made out of divine love and mercy. But because the God who made us and saved us is perfect, the more we become like Him and the more we learn about our identity as His children, the better people we are going to become.

Because this world system in which we live is presently under the control of the Evil One, we are also aliens. God has appointed us to serve Him and to point others to Jesus. But this is not our real home. Our real home is in heaven.

Perhaps you are here today, and you are not certain that you are one of these elect aliens. You are not sure that you are going to heaven some day. You can make certain of that right now, if you so desire.

Everything that we have in life is acquired in one of three ways. It may be purchased, or earned, by us. It may be stolen. Or it may be received as a gift. (PROJECTOR ON--- EPHESIANS 2:8-9) Ephesians #2 vv. 8 &

9 is addressed to Christians. It says, **“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.”**

This passage tells us that eternal salvation is a gift. It cannot be earned. It cannot be stolen. This passage also says that the one responsibility that we have to receive this gift of eternal life is to exercise faith. That means that we need to place our trust in Christ and his death on the cross. In our heart we need to admit that we are sinners, and we need to put our trust in Jesus and His death for us as the only thing that will get us to heaven. We need to accept His gift of salvation by faith. (PROJECTOR OFF)