

# **ELECT EXILES**

Part 1: “Resurrection Hope in a Time of Suffering”

1 Peter 1:1-12

Sunday, May 3, 2020 (Easter Season)

By David A. Ritchie

## **Scripture Reading**

*“Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, 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. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look” (1 Peter 1:1–12, ESV).*

## **Introduction**

The words we read today were written by the Apostle Peter. This is the same Peter who was an original member of the twelve disciples of Jesus. Peter (also known as Simon Peter) heard Jesus teach the word of God. He beheld Jesus perform miracles, signs, and wonders. And he was an eye-witness to Jesus’s resurrection from the dead.

This is the same Peter who was once a fisherman on the sea of Galilee until he met Jesus (show images of St. Peter in art). He is the same man who denied Jesus three times but was then restored by Jesus after the resurrection. It was Peter who stood alongside the other apostles on the day of Pentecost, filled with the Holy Spirit, who preached a sermon that led three thousand people to become followers of Jesus (cf. Acts 2).

Now, Peter has come to Rome, the capital city of the Roman empire. Here, he is a key leader of the church of Rome, where he continues to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Somehow, he hears word that there are several churches in the region of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) who are beginning to suffer hostility due to their faith in Jesus and hardship due to the chaos of the world around us. So, Peter writes them a Holy Spirit-inspired letter of pastoral encouragement.

We call that letter *1 Peter*.

I believe that the message of 1 Peter is just as relevant today in the twenty-first century as it was in the first century. We live in an increasingly secular age, during which Christianity is often misunderstood and maligned. Now, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, we live in a cultural moment of turmoil, confusion, and fear.

*In short, we live in a time of suffering. But it is in that time of suffering, that the Apostle Peter, inspired by the Holy Spirit, invites us to see our special identity as God's people – elect exiles – in a world that is fractured by sin, but yearning for redemption. Peter invites us to see our lives in the pageant of God's story of redemption that gives us a living hope.*

As author Kathleen B. Nielson writes, *"We do well to look suffering in the face and learn how to talk about it biblically. We come to God's Word not to forget about suffering for a little while; we come because we know that the good news we believe speaks right into the suffering, with the greatest hope."*<sup>1</sup>

Today, we have read a passage that functions as the introduction to 1 Peter. As we delve into this passage today, I want to show you three major ideas that Peter will come back to throughout his letter. Those three ideas are: *1.) Our Identity as God's People, 2.) Our Hope in the Gospel, and 3.) Our Glorious Salvation.*

### **1.) Our Identity as God's People**

Peter writes to Christians living in Asia Minor, but he does not refer to them as Christians, Christ-followers, or even disciples. He calls them "elect exiles" (ἐκλεκτοῖς παρεπιδήμοις). This is a biblically and theologically loaded phrase that will take some time to unpack. But it is a phrase that helps us understand our unique identity and role as the people of God.

*Firstly, God's people are an elect people.* Another word for the word "elect" is "chosen." Later this year in November, we will have a national election, wherein we cast votes in order to *choose* who will lead our nation in the coming years.

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen B. Nielson, "Born Again to a Living Hope (1 Peter 1:1–12)," in *Resurrection Life in a World of Suffering: 1 Peter*, ed. D. A. Carson and Kathleen B. Nielson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 38.

All throughout the New Testament – in Matthew, Mark, Luke, Romans, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, and the letters of Peter and John – God’s people are identified as the “elect,” meaning that they are God’s *chosen* people. Now, for the very first Christians – who were all Jews – this wouldn’t have been surprising. After all, Israel had always carried the privileged status of God’s chosen people.

But now, Peter is writing to a group of Christians in “*Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia*” (1 Pt 1:1). These regions are all located in modern-day Turkey. From clues that we have elsewhere in this letter, most scholars agree that Peter is writing to a primarily gentile audience, meaning that the majority of the people he is talking to are not ethnically Jewish.

Nevertheless, Peter wants these Christians to view themselves as being grafted into God’s people (cf. Rom. 11:11-24). He astonishingly and unashamedly applies the language of Israel to Gentile Christians.<sup>2</sup> In fact, throughout his whole letter, Peter never even uses the word “church.” He simply views Christians – whether they are from Jewish and Gentile background – as the continuation of Israel.<sup>3</sup>

He is saying that despite whoever you once were, if you believe in Jesus, you have now been accorded the rights, stature, and privileges of God’s chosen people! We have been granted a corporate identity that transcends race, nationality, and culture. And why can Gentiles be called God’s elect? For the same reason that Israel was called God’s elect: by grace, and grace alone! God didn’t save ancient Israel because they were a particularly impressive nation (Deut. 7:7). In fact, he chose them because their weakness displayed the glory of his grace. In the same way, God doesn’t save us because we are good. He saves us because he is good!<sup>4</sup>

When we embrace our identity as an elect people. It means that we can hold the unflinching confidence that we are fully known and fully loved by our God.

*Secondly, God’s people are an exilic people.* Now an exile is a term that refers to a person who lives in a place other than his or her homeland. Our community has thousands of people who have fled their homelands due to the horror of war and persecution; several of them, due to their faith in Jesus. They are in many ways modern-day exiles. However, when Peter is using the term “exiles,” he is yet again invoking the terminology of the Old Testament concerning the nation of Israel.

When the ancient kingdom of Judah fell to conquest, many Jewish people were uprooted from their homes and taken to live in the city of Babylon. This was the seventy-year long period in Jewish history known as the “Exile.” After these Jewish exiles lost their kingdom, they didn’t know what to do. They now lived in a culture that had entirely different values and a way of life than the ones they were used to in their own

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<sup>2</sup> D.A. Carson and Douglass J. Moo. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992, 2005), 650.

<sup>3</sup> George Eldon Ladd. *A Theology of the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 599.

<sup>4</sup> Edmund Clowney. *The Message of 1 Peter: The Way of the Cross*. The Bible Speaks Today commentary series. Ed. John R. W. Stott. (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1988), 32-33.

culture. As they found themselves in this context, the Prophet Jeremiah wrote a letter to them that contained a dual calling. They were to remain distinct a God's people. But at the same time, they were to actively engage and promote the welfare of their new nation. Here is a sample of Jeremiah's instructions: *"Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. 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. 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...For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope" (Jer. 29:4-7; 11).* Now, in his own letter, Peter calls Christians to take on the same identity and calling as the ancient Jewish exiles.

Often, many modern Christians may feel like estranged exiles too. The kingdom of Christendom has fallen. But rather than lamenting this turn of events, we can see this time as a profound opportunity to display to the world the uniqueness of the kingdom of God.

Our exilic identity should necessarily alter Christian's expectations of the world. We shouldn't be shocked when the world sins. That's what the world does! Nor should we be shocked when the world doesn't understand our values. We are, after all, exiles.

When I was in college, I participated in a study abroad program in Europe. It was an art history course that began in Italy and traveled through Switzerland, France, and England. I remember I had a friend who kept getting frustrated when European people couldn't speak to him in English. But the truth was we were the frustrating ones! We were the Americans who felt so entitled that we wanted people from other countries to engage us in the way we preferred. Sometimes I think Christians make the same mistake.

But Scripture calls us to actually embrace our alien identity as a prophetic minority. Because it is only from that alien identity that we can display to the world what it could never be apart from Jesus Christ. Too often, the church today would rather be cool than alien. Too often, we would rather be self-protective rather than prophetic. But as Dr. Russell D. Moore writes in his book *Onward*: *"Our call is to an engaged alienation, a Christianity that preserves the distinctiveness of our gospel while not retreating from our callings as neighbors, friends, and citizens."*<sup>5</sup>

*Lastly, we see in Peter's greeting that Christians are a Trinitarian people. Let's take a closer look at the first two verses of Peter's letter. If you look closely, you will see that Peter refers to each member of the Trinity: "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the*

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<sup>5</sup> Russel D. Moore. *Onward: Engaging Culture without Losing the Gospel*. (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 8.

*Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: May grace and peace be multiplied to you.” (1 Peter 1:1–2, ESV).*

Christians are a people who have been baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Mt 28:19). Our identity is no longer rooted in our age, our gender, our race, our political views, or our income. We are a people who have been immersed into a new life that flows from our Triune God.

Even before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4), our Triune God has conspired together to save us. God the Father, according to his foreknowledge, has authored of our salvation. God the Son, Jesus Christ, has accomplished our salvation by the sprinkling of his blood that was shed on the cross. God the Holy Spirit applied to us what Christ has accomplished, by filling us with resurrection life that leads to sanctification and obedience.

In a world that is often poisoned and paralyzed by identity politics, God’s people are to embrace the far greater identity of elect exiles who are marked by the Triune God.

## **2.) Our Hope in the Gospel**

Let’s take another look at our text today, beginning in verse 3: *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” (1 Peter 1:3–5, ESV)*

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is not a mere doctrine of belief. The resurrection of Jesus Christ creates new spiritual life and a new vision of the future for those who believe. The resurrection creates a *“living hope.”*

Christians do not derive their hope from the power of positive thinking. Christians do not derive their hope from encouraging analytic projections. Christians do not derive their hope from the conditions of the circumstances that surround them.

Christian hope derives from the resurrection of Jesus Christ. *What God has done in the past grounds our confident expectation of the future.* The God who began a good work in us will be faithful to complete that work until the day of Jesus Christ (Phil 1:6). As our text says today, the same power that has “caused” (ἀναγεννάω) us to be born again, will “guard” (φρουρέω) our salvation until the end of time (1 Pt 1:3-4).

This means that even in a time like today, when our future is full of uncertainty, we can look to our future with hope instead of fear. More than that, it means we *must* look to

our future with hope instead of fear. As author Marilynne Robinson once wrote, “...*fear is not a Christian habit of mind.*”<sup>6</sup>

Christians are a people who believe that our God will neither leave us nor forsake us (Heb. 13:5). He walks with his people through the Valley of the Shadow of Death (Ps. 23:4). So, no matter how dark the night may be, as elect exiles, we know that dawn is coming. In Christ Jesus, death will be vanquished, and sin will be no more (Rev. 21:4).

Peter thus reminds us that Christian hope is not a *contingent* hope. Our hope is not dependent upon ever-changing circumstances. Our hope is dependent upon a faithful God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb 13:8).

And if this is true – if we really do have a sure and living hope – then we can be a people who walk through pain and suffering in a distinctly different way.

Look at verse 6: “*In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ*” (1 Peter 1:6–7, ESV).

Because of our Christian hope, Peter tells us that we can rejoice in our trials.

Now, rejoicing in trials does not mean that going through trials feels pleasant. On the contrary, our text shows us trials *grieve* us. Trials are like a fire that burns.

But there is a difference between a fire that is meant to destroy and a fire that is meant to refine. And for those in Christ, *all of our trials are refining trials.*

That means when trial comes, it burns all our false and circumstantial hopes away. It burns all that is non-eternal away so that our restless hearts find their rest in Christ alone.

Earlier this week, I spoke with a man in our church who has gone through immense and crushing trials this year in his life, even before the pandemic began. But do you what he said to me? He said, “*Pastor, I feel like I am seeking God more than I ever have in my life, and I’m never going back.*”

That is what it looks like to rejoice when you have been grieved by various trials.

I wonder if this text and this current trial might invite you to ask the uncomfortable question: *what do you need to allow God to graciously burn away in this season of trial?*

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<sup>6</sup> Marilynne Robinson. “Fear.” *The New York Review of Books*, (24 September 2015). <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2015/sep/24/marilynne-robinson-fear/>

For when the refining fire burns, our faith in Christ is made pure, our love for Christ grows, and our joy in Christ is restored: *“Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls”* (1 Peter 1:8–9, ESV).

That word translated as “inexpressible” (ἀνεκκλήτῳ) is what we call a “hapax legomenon.” It means this is the one and only time this word is used in the entire New Testament. It refers to a joy that is so profound that is beyond the power of words to express.<sup>7</sup>

For this reason, Christian hope naturally brings forth Christian worship, not just with words, but with music and art and creativity and all of life. That leads us to our final point.

### **3.) Our Glorious Salvation**

Let’s take a final look at the final verses of our passage today: *“Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look”* (1 Peter 1:10–12, ESV).

We see here that the gospel of Jesus has been God’s plan of redemption all along. The Holy Spirit – also known as the “Spirit of Christ” in this passage – has been working in and through the Old Testament prophets, as they wrote the inspired words of the Old Testament.

Peter says that, even then, they knew there was something more to come. When Moses painted the blood of the first-ever Passover lamb over his doorframe, he knew that it was pointing toward something more. When King David penned the words of Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,” he knew that it was pointing to something more. When the Prophet Isaiah first sang the “Song of the Suffering Servant” from Isaiah 53, he knew that it was pointing to something more!

The prophets eagerly inquired to see what they were pointing toward. And today, we are privileged to see what they only dreamed of seeing. We are able to behold the gospel that is revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God!

In fact, the gospel is so good, even the angels are amazed. Now think about that for a moment. Think about all that the angels have witnessed. They have beheld the glory of

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<sup>7</sup> Wayne A. Grudem. *1 Peter*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Vol. 17. (Downers Grove: IVP, 1988), 71.

God in the throne room of heaven! They have witnessed the creation of the galaxies! They watched the power of God part the waters of the Red Sea! Think about how hard it would be to amaze an angel!

But when they look at the good news proclaimed to us in Jesus; when they look at the truth that God himself would take upon himself the sin and evil of this world to redeem his enemies; when they look messiah who would be humiliated and murdered on a cross and rise again to everlasting life three days later – they are rightly amazed.

We should be amazed too. Even more, we should be a people whose lives bear witness to this amazing gospel.

## **Conclusion**

This gospel is not a mere set of doctrines about God. As Paul says in Romans, it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes (Rom 1:16). This is the true power of the church.

I love our church building. I love our sanctuary. I love that we have been blessed with a place where over a thousand people have gathered worship in Sundays past. But this is not the power of the church.

About a decade ago, my wife and I went on an evangelistic mission trip with the *Jesus Film* organization to rural Malawi, where we partnered with African local churches to help preach the gospel and plant new churches. *Jesus Film* is filmed version of the gospel according to Luke, which is then translated into the language of various people groups (in this section work through the pictures of the Malawi mission trip).

One evening, as the sun was setting, we drove through a forest of rubber trees until we got to a remote village named Kalowa. It was a village that had no local church, and we were partnering with a church in another town that had a leader that they wanted to send to this village to plant a church.

The church we were working with had already told the village that we would be showing a film about Jesus. For many of the villagers of Kalowa, that night would be the first time they ever saw a movie, it was the first time they ever saw white people in real life, and it was the first time they had ever heard the gospel explained.

When we arrived in the village, a large crowd had already gathered on the soccer field. There was great anticipation. But as we set up the projector, the screens, and the speakers, a terrifying truth began to emerge. Our projector wouldn't turn on, and it was now pitch-black darkness.

We tried to trouble-shoot, but nothing worked. We tried to make a cell-phone call for help, but there was no reception.



But we had people who had gathered together. We had two microphones and working speakers. And most importantly, we had the gospel.

So without any time for preparation or planning, a translator and I were asked to preach. And beginning in Genesis and ending with Revelation, we told the story of God's redemptive plan. We told the people of Kalowa about the creation of the world and the fall of man. We told them about the story of Israel, and the promise of Israel's messiah. We told them about Jesus: about his life, his teaching, his death, his resurrection, and the promise that he will one day return and make all things new.

We told them that soon there we would be planting a church in their village. We told them if they wanted to know more about Jesus and become followers of Jesus, that we wanted to talk and pray with them and encourage them to become part of the new church in Kalowa. We told them that they too could be a part of the kingdom that Jesus was bringing into the world.

We invited them to respond. And to our astonishment, almost the entire village of hundreds of people professed faith in Jesus at that very moment.

To this day, the church that was planted still ministers in Kalowa. To this day, that evening was the most fruitful evangelistic moments I have ever known. And to this day, as recent as two weeks ago, I have continued to correspond with the African pastors we ministered alongside during that trip.

I've thought a lot about that moment in recent weeks. The pandemic has changed almost everything about the way we are able to do ministry in this season. It feels a lot like we are in a rural village in the middle of nowhere, the sun is setting, and our projector just broke.

*And in a time like this, it important to remember that the power of the church lies not within our methods we employ, but in the message we proclaim.*

We are Christians. As a people, we have always faced challenges and suffering. Our faith was birthed on a cross. We will always be misunderstood and sometimes even maligned by a world that cannot and will not understand us. We are allegiant to a different King, and we belong to a different kingdom.

But despite all the circumstances and trials and plagues and empires that have opposed us, the gospel has always proved to be unstoppable.

It is in historical moments like this that our lives have the capacity to show a watching world that we really believe our gospel is good news.

So Redeemer Christian Church, as the people of God, may we embrace our identity as elect exiles. May we know the unfailing, unflinching hope of those who are foreknown by God the Father, sanctified by the Spirit, and obedient unto Jesus Christ. And may God multiply his grace and peace be to us all, by the power of his blood. AMEN.

## Gospel Community Discussion Questions

- 1.) Take some time to reread 1 Peter 1:1-12. Summarize the big ideas of this passage in your own words.
- 2.) Peter wrote 1 Peter to a group of primarily gentile (non-Jewish) Christians in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). However, he applies to his reading audience the term “elect,” which refers to the status of the nation of Israel as God’s people. Why is this so surprising? What is the significance of Gentiles being part of God’s chosen people (see Romans 11:11-24)?
- 3.) Peter also uses the term “exiles” (another Old Testament term for Israel) when referring to gentile Christians. How should the identity of “exiles” influence the way Christians think about their place in culture (see Jeremiah 29:4-7)?
- 4.) This chapter pointed out the centrality of *future hope* in the biblical text. What several phrases from 1 Peter 1:1–12 stand out to you as defining our future hope? How should this hope affect our prayers for ourselves and for those around us in our families, our churches, and our world?
- 5.) What various truths about *suffering* do we find in this introductory passage to 1 Peter? How do these verses set suffering in a certain perspective? What tends to be your perspective on suffering, and how do you think 1 Peter might affect that perspective?<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> These last two questions come from Kathleen B. Nielson, “Born Again to a Living Hope (1 Peter 1:1–12),” in *Resurrection Life in a World of Suffering: 1 Peter*, ed. D. A. Carson and Kathleen B. Nielson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 56–57.

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