

“Three Characteristics of Every Christian”

1 Peter 1:1-2

I want you to imagine for a moment that first Easter Sunday morning. Imagine that you've been hiding in the upper room with the rest of the disciples. It is the third day since the events of the crucifixion took place. Confused and bewildered, imagine the hopelessness and despair that these men must have felt. They had left everything to follow Jesus, believing Him to be the hope of Israel, and yet He had been crucified. Suddenly, Mary bursts through the door with shocking news, “The tomb is empty!” No doubt, the women told the group all that they had seen and heard from the angel. But it all seemed too sensational to believe. Luke says:

Luke 24:11 — “But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.”

Peter, however, decides to go see for himself. For the past three days, he's been in a deep, dark and hopeless fog of disillusionment. The pain of his failure still cut like a knife, just as fresh as the words of denial came across his lips a few nights before. He couldn't get past the look in Jesus' eyes, knowing that he had done exactly what Jesus had said. And now Jesus was dead. Or was He?

Peter had to go and investigate for himself. Both he and John hurry to the tomb, and John outruns him and gets there first. Not far behind, Peter arrives and barges into the tomb. As he makes his way to the tomb, he finds it just as the women had said. The stone is removed, the clothes are still in tact, but the body is nowhere to be found.

- Had the body been removed someplace else?

- Had the soldiers come and disturbed the tomb?

The body couldn't have been stolen, for the grave clothes were still in tact, as if the body had passed right through them! The only explanation was that Jesus was alive and had risen, just as He had said. John believes. Peter believes. The dark clouds of hopelessness that had filled his heart were beginning to lift. And very soon, Peter is going to see the risen Jesus with his own eyes. He's going to be forgiven and restored. He will serve as an eyewitness to the ascension and glory of the risen Lord who promised to return. Fast forward some 30 years later, and Peter will write these words:

1 Peter 1:3—“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.”

And this ‘living hope’ is the theme of 1 Peter. Last week, I introduced you to this very practical and encouraging letter in the New Testament, a letter that emphasizes the hope we have as believers. Peter reminds us that we have a hope that goes far beyond the hurts we experience in this life. Just how practical is Peter’s message? Suppose you are...

- going through a particular rough patch right now in life; your health isn’t what it used to be; your marriage is strained because you have kids in college and parents who are aging; *“How do I react to the stress of it all?”*
- struggling with a nagging habit that you just can’t seem to shake; *“Is change something that is really possible?”*

- a Christian woman who lives with a husband who is an unbeliever; he doesn't share your same commitment to Christ; impacting your marriage; *"Is there help for me?"*

Peter has something to say to us about how we can live out our faith in the midst of life's struggles, and it is all on the basis of the hope we have in Jesus. In fact, 1 Peter is essentially a discipleship manual for how to endure hard times. And what Peter has to say to struggling Christians is not a 'grit your teeth and bear it' kind of message, nor is his message full of empty platitudes that sound nice but are really unrealistic.

Peter writes with compassionate concern. The message of 1 Peter will provide you with the theology and confidence you need to make it while living in a broken world.

From the first two verses, I want to share with you three characteristics that are true for every Christian. There are three facts that will essentially form the theological basis of Peter's entire message. Before I point them out, I want us to consider both the author and the recipients of the book.

1. The AUTHOR of the book

"Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ."

In the first century, whenever people would write a form of correspondence, they would often sign their names at the beginning so that their recipients would immediately recognize the one who was writing. We see this same structure reflected in the epistles of the New Testament. This particular letter is signed by the apostle Peter.

Have you ever received an encouraging word from someone at just the right time?

Charles Swindoll—*“Imagine that you are a Christian living in the midst of tremendous pressure from every direction. In your best moments, you grit your teeth and complain about the Lord’s delayed return. At your worst, you consider going back to the familiar rituals of the synagogue or even returning to those idol-filled temples. At one of your disillusioned moments, somebody hands you a letter rolled up and bound. You break the seal, slowly unroll the scroll, and read immediately, ‘Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ.’ Like a cool breeze cutting through sultry summer heat, those opening words blow through your weariness and ignite fresh hope. That great apostle has written a letter—to you.”*

This introduction really is a powerful testimony to the grace of God in a sinner’s life. Last week, I tried to present you with somewhat of an overview of Peter’s life. I think that sometimes we have an inflated idea of the apostles, even supposing that they were somehow removed from the everyday struggles that we feel. Nothing could be further from the truth. Peter wasn’t perfect, but is a man we can identify with, a man who has been there. He is a man who is well qualified to speak into the lives of those who were struggling in their faith.

Alistair Begg has said of Peter’s life:

- We find him in a boat, learning obedience
- We find him in the water, learning faith
- We see him in a garden, acting tough
- We hear him at a fire, telling lies
- We see him on a beach, being restored

- We watch him in a crowd, preaching Christ

His is an example of what it means to be forgiven and transformed by the grace of God. Peter is a man who came to possess gospel hope, and he wants his readers to be in possession of this hope also.

2. The RECIPIENTS of the book

“To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bythynia.”

Every letter has both an author and an intended audience. The same is true for the epistles of the New Testament, and the audience to whom Peter writes are referred to here in verse 1 as ‘elect exiles of the Dispersion.’ (SCATTERED)

“Dispersion” - *word is diaspora; means widely scattered*

His letter is addressed to Christians who were scattered throughout the region of Asia Minor, or modern day Turkey. He is writing some 30 years after Pentecost, and some of the places he mentions were represented by people who were present when he preached that day. As they heard the apostles preach the gospel in their own language, they believed and were numbered among the early church. At some point, they went home and spread the gospel among their native towns in Asia Minor. The result was amazing growth of the church.

Notice that Peter refers to these scattered Christians ‘elect exiles.’ (STRANGE)

That they are elect means they are loved by God; that they are exiles means they are not at home in the world.

“Exiles” - *word means stranger; denotes a temporary resident or traveler whose stay is brief*

It is closely related to the word that Peter uses over in the next chapter to describe believers:

2:11 — “Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.”

“Sojourners” - *word means alien; implies that a person is resident of somewhere else*

When we forget our true identity, it is all too easy for us to become disillusioned in our Christian experience. Our identity as Christ’s disciples makes us a target for the enemy’s attacks. (SUFFERING)

Satan doesn’t like to give up ground to the gospel. It won’t be long, and these believers scattered throughout Asia Minor will come under attack. They will be persecuted for their strange faith. It will become demoralizing and difficult; they are cast out of society, hated, pursued to the death.

Most scholars place the time of Peter’s writing around 64 A.D. More than likely, Peter is writing from the city of Rome. (see 5:13, ‘Babylon’ is cryptic reference to Rome)

Early church history has Peter arriving in Rome sometime after Paul’s release from his first imprisonment. While there, Peter sees the storm clouds of persecution beginning to gather. Nero is emperor, a fire had ravaged the city, and he wants to divert public suspicion from himself. So what does he do? He blames the Christians.

What begins in Rome will soon spread throughout the Roman provinces. Peter didn’t want this persecution to take his readers by surprise, nor did he want them to think that they had been abandoned by God.

3:12-13—“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.”

You say, “Well, that was then.” Persecution is still very much a reality for Christ’s disciples. He said it would be this way. To stand firm in the grace of God is to be despised in the eyes of the world. Faith will be persecuted.

In more and more places around the world, it is becoming increasingly difficult to live as a Christian. Just consider some of the following statistics:

Open Doors — *“Each month 322 Christians are killed for their faith; 214 churches and church properties are destroyed; 722 forms of violence are committed against Christians.”*

Have you been paying attention lately to what’s been happening in Egypt? The Christian minority there is essentially being exterminated through church bombings, abductions, and terror attacks.

As those whose citizenship is in heaven, we won’t ever be at home in this world. Christian discipleship involves a cross. May we never forget the fact that we’re aliens.

Our citizenship is different—Aliens are from another world.

Our customs are different—Aliens have strange ways.

Our communication is different—Aliens speak a different language.

Aliens don’t often fit in. They stick out because they are different. And all of this makes us strange to the world.

We are elect exiles, but we are also to be engaged exiles. Though we are aliens in the world, we are not to be alienated from the world. God never intends for His people to live in retreat and seclusion, cloistered and cut off from those Christ came to save. We are salt that flavors and light that shines. Our relationship to God is one of worship, while our relationship to the world is one of witness. We are exiles in the world with our citizenship in heaven, but we are also agents of change who are on a mission.

Only when we understand the hope that we have in Christ, and only through a heart that is fully satisfied in Him will we move forward with the kind of death-defying obedience that His mission demands.

3. The THEOLOGY of the book

“...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.”

Peter is going to remind these persecuted, discouraged believers that their salvation is according to the work of the triune God. Their confidence in life will depend on an understanding of this. The Bible says that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit work together in perfect harmony to establish the believer's new identity as a child of God. According to what Peter says to these believers in his introduction, at least three things are true for every Christian:

CHOSEN by God the Father

“...according to the foreknowledge of God the Father,”

Peter refers to these Christians as being elect according to the foreknowledge of God. He uses language that would be familiar to those in his audience who were

Jewish, yet he applies it to believers who were both Jew and Gentile. (i.e. 'Dispersion'; 'elect')

As the people of God, they are among those who are related to God by His divine choice. He says that they are elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father. Not according to any intrinsic quality that they themselves possess. Not by their own effort or good works.

In other words, God didn't choose them because they were a bunch of awesome people who were better than everyone else. What the Bible says about election is not intended to puff us up with pride, but humble us deeply.

God doesn't choose like we so often choose. Our choices are often based on the attractiveness of the object to be chosen. (illus. of kids in school)

God has chosen to set His love on those the world tends to reject. He chose Israel, not because of they were more numerous or special than the rest of the earth. He chose David, not because He was stronger or more righteous than than His brothers. God's election of believers is based on His own gracious purposes. That's why it is called grace. If it were based on anything that I had done or any effort on my own, it wouldn't be grace.

You say, "How do I know if I am one of God's elect?" The answer is, "Are you trusting in Jesus Christ as your Savior? Are you saved?" If so, then you belong to Him. This is a marvelous mystery of our faith. Believers are elect according to the foreknowledge of God, and yet they are those who have made the decision to trust in Jesus Christ. Those who believe the gospel are among God's elect people. This is why we hold forth the gospel to all! The invitation is, has been, and always will be 'whosoever will, let him come.'

When it comes to the issue of the sovereignty of God in salvation and human responsibility to believe, it is not an “either/or” issue but a “both/and.” The gospel is always ‘whosoever will, let him come.’ And yet it is also ‘chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world.’

The doctrine of divine election keeps us from an easy believism that minimizes the role of the convicting and drawing power of God’s Spirit in salvation. The doctrine of human responsibility keeps us from hyper Calvinism that minimizes the accountability of men and women to repent and believe the gospel message. We shouldn’t be afraid of the word ‘chosen,’ and neither should we be afraid of the word, ‘whosoever.’

CHANGED by the God the Holy Spirit

“...in the sanctification of the Spirit,”

The word ‘sanctification’ means to be set apart. Peter says that believers are set apart for the glory of God. We are sanctified through the power of God’s Spirit. This refers both to conversion as well as spiritual progress in the Christian life.

In a mysterious way, the Holy Spirit uses the difficult experiences of our lives to strengthen and build our faith as He sanctifies us and makes us more like Christ.

Sometime ago, I read something about the emperor moth and the way that it is transformed from a worm that crawls into a beautiful insect that flies. Its cocoon is shaped in a unique way. To develop into a perfect insect, the moth has to force its way through the neck of its cocoon with hours of intense struggle.

Entomologists explain that this pressure is nature’s way of forcing life-giving substance into its wings.

Well, wanting to lessen the seemingly needless trials and struggles of the moth, one observer thought to himself, “I’ll lessen the pain and struggles of this helpless creature!” And so with a small pair of scissors, he snipped the restraining threads to make the moth’s emergence painless and effortless. But do you want to know what happened? The creature never developed wings. For a brief time before its death, it simply crawled around, rather than soaring through the air on colorful wings. If only the moth had been allowed to finish its struggling, its life would have been transformed into beauty.

Much in the same way, the Spirit uses our sorrows, our suffering, our trials, and our heartaches in this life and puts us in a ‘cocoon’ of transformation.

1 John 3:2—“Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is.”

Struggle today means strength tomorrow. Today’s crisis is tomorrow’s crown. Christians are chosen in sanctification of the Spirit.

Chosen by God the Father, changed by God the Spirit,

CLEANSED by God the Son

“...for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: May grace and peace be multiplied to you.”

Notice that the Holy Spirit sanctifies us for a purpose, and the purpose is obedience to Jesus. The reference to sprinkling with His blood is an allusion to the ratification of the covenant between God and His people in the Old Testament. (see Exodus 24:6-8)

In the Old Testament, the Israelites vowed to obey God and were sprinkled with the blood of a sacrificial animal. Yet the people failed miserably to hold up their end of the covenant. In Christ, God has done something wonderful and new— He has placed His Spirit within the believer and thereby sealed my salvation. This is the language used by Peter to remind these Christians that they are God’s new covenant people, forgiven and indwelt by the Spirit.

Believers are chosen by the Father, purchased by the Son, and set apart by the Holy Spirit. All three are involved in our salvation. As far as God the Father is concerned, I was saved when He chose me in Christ before the foundation of the world. As far as God the Son is concerned, I was saved when He died for me on the cross. And as far as God the Holy Spirit is concerned, I was saved on March 19, 1989 when I heard the gospel, became convicted of my sins, and trusted in Christ.

He is still working in my life to conform me more and more into Christ’s image. The Bible says that all three members of the Trinity were involved in bringing me to faith. Warren Wiersbe puts it this way: *“If we separate these ministries, we will either deny divine sovereignty or human responsibility, and that would lead to heresy.”*

Salvation is of the Lord, but Peter doesn’t deny human responsibility in the plan of God. In 1:23, he emphasizes the fact that the gospel was preached to these people, they heard it, and they believed. Peter’s own example through his preaching at Pentecost is proof that we do not ‘leave it all with God’ and never urge lost sinners to come to Christ.

How encouraging all of this would be to these Christians!

Though they were being persecuted, and though they were suffering, they were not forgotten. Even though they lived in a hostile world, their standing before God was secure. Their hope depended on it! When facing the hurts of life, they needed to be reminded that they had been:

Chosen by God the Father—His love for them was not contingent upon their performance for Him. It was by His grace, and nothing would ever change that fact. From an earthly perspective, they were refugees. From heaven's perspective, they were chosen sons and daughters!

Cleansed by God the Son—Their sins were forgiven. They were not being punished, even though they were suffering. Christ had already paid their debt.

Changed by God the Holy Spirit—They had been set apart for God's gracious purposes. Somehow, in some strange and mysterious way, the Spirit of God was using the trials and struggles and hurts of life to conform them more into the image of Christ.

This ought to encourage us, as well. It is the kind of truth that gets us as believers through tough and troubled times. This is our hope, and it goes far beyond our hurts.

Have you turned from your sins and placed your faith and trust in Jesus Christ alone for salvation? If so, then no matter what you face in this life, you have nothing to fear.