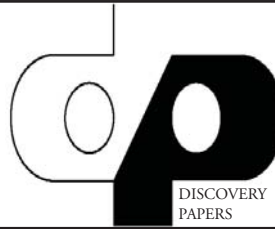


# THE SOJOURNERS PARADOX

**SERIES: *BELOVED EXILES: STUDIES IN 1 PETER***



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1 Peter 1:1-5  
Steve Zeisler  
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Today we begin a study of a life-changing letter found near the end of the New Testament. Peter was the most influential disciple in the earliest days of the church. His ideas and personality are 'writ large' in all four of the gospels and in the first chapters of the book of Acts. Our text, First Peter, is the fullest expression of his teaching. It has the familiar structure of first century letters, including others in the New Testament.

This letter is somewhat different than others in Scripture, however, because it does not address the 'life together' concerns of its recipients. Often, the New Testament letters were written as an answer to a question or to help with problems in the believing community. This letter is written for people who find it difficult to live in the wider world in which they find themselves. It calls for faithfulness in the face of temptation and ridicule, even persecution. And our responsibility, drawn from this text, is to be a light on a lamp stand—we are to be different from, yet present with, those who live in darkness. We must allow Jesus to shine his beauty into our circumstances so that others may see it and be persuaded by it. Even when the gospel is rejected, our Lord receives honor from faithful servants in a dark world.

I Peter 1:1-5:

**Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,**

**To God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood:**

**Grace and peace be yours in abundance.**

**Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.**

Characteristic of ancient letters in the Bible and other places is that the author mentions himself first, noting the recipients next, followed by a greeting or word of blessing. We see this pattern here and will do well to notice the details – what is said and not said – as Peter introduces himself and observes the circumstances of his readers.

Peter is an apostle of Jesus Christ. This is a remarkable assignment. He was one of only twelve commissioned by Christ to declare and defend the gospel, to give wise direction in the forming of church communities, to counter error and lies, to lay a lasting foundation. Despite various claims throughout history, the twelve have no successors as such – their teaching comes to us in the New Testament, and faithful Christians continue in submission to what it teaches. Peter's claim of apostleship marks him as a man of enormous and lasting significance.

But it is also important to note what Peter doesn't say. He doesn't brag or promote himself. This letter is written in Peter's maturity, to a church of Jews and Gentiles, probably from Rome. There was a time when Peter would have punched up his resume, written more of his gifts and accomplishments. As a young man he spoke too soon, acted rashly, longed for the spotlight. Now the simple, authoritative introduction reads, "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ."

We can also recall that there was a time when Peter had no use for Gentiles, when he was certain that the work of the Messiah was for the Jews and only for the Jews. In fact, he once challenged the voice of God from heaven rather than go willingly to the home of Cornelius, a Roman centurion. Now, he is living in Rome and writing a letter to a church that is made up mostly of Gentiles. In his maturity Peter learned humility and he learned that God's love extended far wider than first believed. There are many references to Old Testament in this letter, but they are applied to a church made up of all people. So he will describe his readers as those chosen for obedience. That language was once only for Jews. They are sprinkled with blood. They have their identity in their birth. They are promised an inheritance. All of that is language he was familiar with when it applied only to a few,

and now he is applying it to all.

Moving from the author of this letter we consider its first readers. They are named in contrasting ways. Having dual identities their lives are a paradox. They are embraced and rejected, privileged and cut off, known by God and rejected in the world. This paradox is the big idea we should attend to in this study. First we will observe the blessing of being known by God and then the difficulties faced by “strangers in the world”.

Verse two addresses “those who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, through obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance.” The important word is *chosen* – once applied only to Israel, now to all Christ’s followers. We are chosen by One who approves of us and includes us, embraces us. It is a love word. All of us know the struggle of trying to be included, trying to find our way into the circle, trying to be the one who is approved. The first murder took place in sibling rivalry, a competition for approval.

We long to be special in the eyes of our parents, to have close friends, to be admired by those with influence. Our deepest longing is for God to extend his hand to us. And Peter is writing to such - those with divine favor who have been chosen by the Father, Son and Spirit. The triune God (v.2) eternally fulfilled in infinite love in his own being chooses us not from any need in himself but as an act of grace.

A clear understanding of God’s love-filled approval of us leads to worship on our part. “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!” - a short cry of gratitude and exaltation of the Lord. This is followed by observing some of the specifics of God’s goodness for which we are grateful, “In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.”

Let’s consider two of the phrases from this sentence. First: new birth – a clean slate. We are born again into a living hope. All of us start life with the limits of our genes and an imperfect family. We have gone on to make choices that we cannot retract and live with consequences that are immutable. The gift of a new life, not shaped by the difficulties of our past, filled with hope, offered in resurrection power by the hand

of God is a staggering thing.

“Mad Men” is an award winning television series that has all the ‘world-view’ pluses and minuses of 21st century popular entertainment. One important element of the plot is noteworthy for our study here. The protagonist, Don Draper, is not who he appears to be. Returning from the Korean War, he abandons a terrible childhood and takes the identity of a fallen comrade. He attempts to make himself new (born again) and, of course, cannot fix what is wrong inside him and cannot keep former things in the past. The story resonates because it speaks to a deep human longing to change our history and our habits, to become what we are not. The gospel alone offers us “new birth into a living hope.”

Secondly, verses 3-5 speak of permanence. We receive an inheritance that cannot fade, that doesn’t go away, that doesn’t fail. Consider the economic lessons of the last two years. There is no such thing as a secure investment. Yet Peter is saying we can have an inheritance that won’t fail, that won’t fade. It is reserved for us in heaven. Jesus made the same point when he said, “Invest in those things that thieves can’t take away and rust will not destroy and moths will not tear apart.” Two remarkable impossibilities: new birth and a certain inheritance in the future, and we receive them as a gift.

Retuning to the paradox of two identities, we are known by God but also strangers, given new life in the context of an unredeemed world. This tension leads to suffering (this letter has much to teach regarding suffering) and to the temptation to go back to old realities. It also offers the opportunity of witness, recalling the old phrase, “to be in the world but not of it.”

We might ask why Peter is particular about geography (Pontus, Cappadocia, Bithynia) in verse 1. He knows that every believer is assigned to live some place in the world. We have neighbors and enemies, opposition and opportunity that we cannot avoid. Our faith is not only apparent in church gatherings but also at work, in youth sports leagues, block parties, and market places. Jeremiah told those who go into exile in Babylon to build houses, plant gardens, and be a blessing in the difficult place God had sent them.

Christians sometimes avoid witness by withdrawal, but increasingly we are tempted to be everywhere and nowhere. We move frequently, change jobs often, flit from church to church, have relationships in cyberspace, and keep all contact at level of shallow

pleasantries. Genuine witness happens in the tension of real relationships, when we put down roots in a lost city and live with undiluted confidence in Christ.

In addition to witness we have a call to extend God's kindness, his mercy to those who are in need, and Jesus instructs not to be merciful for benefit to ourselves (status, tax breaks, applause, etc.).

Verses 12-14:

**Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."**

The more certain we are of our identity in Christ, the more freely we can live among those who don't know and even reject his love. The paradox of being known and being strangers grows our faith and gives glory to our Savior. May He be praised.

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