

Living as Exiles in the Church

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[0 : 00] Okay, if you've got your Bibles there in front of you, it'd be worth keeping those open. I think as we look through these verses together, it's good to keep on coming back and reminding ourselves where we're up to in the flow of this letter, 1 Peter.

I think one way that really helps us both remember, but also more importantly than that, be put into practice and be shaped by what we hear in God's Word, is to see and keep it in the context of the flow of a book, the flow of the argument.

As it comes to us, as well as just doing individual sections, seeing how they all fit together as well. So in 1 Peter, we began with that focus on our identity as elect exiles.

Remember that right back in verse 1, that that's a kind of a controlling theme that runs right through the letter. That in God's mercy, through the work of Jesus, all who trust in Him have an eternal heavenly home.

That means that we are not truly home in this world. That idea of being exiles, of being travelers through this world in which we live.

[1 : 09] And then if you remember last week, Peter moved on to a kind of a new focus, which we're going to continue this week, which is really our conduct. If our identity is that of elect exiles, well, how then are we to live that out, is the question.

Last week, it was particularly in relation to God, and it was that commandment to live holy lives, to be holy as He is holy. This week, the focus really is on how we live out that relation to one another, as God's people within the church.

Next week, the emphasis then is on living that out in the world around us as well. So that's kind of where we are, a little bit of where we're heading. It's good to remember that big picture of the letter.

Just one, I suppose, other practical thing on that. If you're not around for a week, if you're in kids' church helping out or not able to listen, I would encourage you to try and catch up. You can listen back on the website. I also discovered recently, this was quite exciting to me, that through the website, our sermons are also automatically uploaded as a podcast.

So I'm now a podcaster, which was good news. I don't think we're riding particularly high in the kind of podcast charts or kind of threatening Joe Rogan or anything like that. But if that is an easier way for you to kind of catch up, you can search Haddington Community Church on your podcast app of choice, and you should find things there so that we can keep on working through this book together.

[2 : 32] But having said that, it's best that we're here. It's best to do that together on a Sunday morning. So let's focus on these verses in front of us. Living as elect exiles within the church is Peter's topic here.

Why is the church so important? Why is how to live within the church so important? Again, it all ties together, doesn't it?

If you think of that idea of being in exile, of traveling through this life without it fully being our home, we see all the more why it is good, why it is vital that we have somewhere we can be among fellow travelers, as it were, supporting and encouraging one another along the journey.

Peter, in these verses, is going to remind us of the importance of that. He's going to give us first a reminder and a huge encouragement of how we became the church, and then highlight two key aspects of the church that flow out from that.

So that's our plan this morning, kind of a big overarching how we became the church, and then two aspects that flow out from that. And that first thing, that foundational thing, is this, that God's people have imperishable new life through God's word.

[3 : 52] I think one of the great things of this letter of 1 Peter is that, although it builds, it has this flow, it has this progression, that Peter keeps on coming back to the objective facts of the gospel, that everything else comes out of it.

And this is it, that God's people have imperishable new life through God's word. Let me read verses 22 and 23 again.

And as I do that, do just notice the emphasis on what has happened, what has been done, before we're going to get onto these two implications, the two things that we are to do that flow on from that.

It says, Two really big ideas that Peter is re-emphasizing here.

First, that we have been born again. That's a big theme in 1 Peter. It takes us right back to chapter 1, verse 3, where we read, According to God's great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

[5 : 19] That key idea, that through God's mercy shown to us, worked out in the work of Jesus, we have this new life as a gift of God.

And that's how in verse 22, in our passage this morning, our souls have been purified as we've been obedient to the truth of the gospel by putting our trust in Jesus.

So again, it's this fact of this new life, this new identity we have in Christ, with God as our Father. We saw that again last week. That is what all that Peter is going to teach us about life in the church flows from.

It's so important, isn't it, that we remember whenever we're looking at the Bible's teaching on how we're to behave, we remember that that conduct, that behavior comes from our relationship with God rather than trying to earn that relationship with God.

Our conduct is in response to God's love, not to earn God's love. Through Jesus, we have been born again, if our trust is in him. So that's one idea, that idea of being born again.

[6 : 26] The second idea that's picked up, and Peter's mentioned this a few times, but is emphasized here, perhaps most fully, is that this new life is imperishable.

The idea of perishable versus imperishable is a thread that runs right through 1 Peter 1. Verse 4, Peter writes, we have an inheritance that is imperishable.

Verse 7, a tested faith is more precious than gold that perishes. Verse 18, we weren't ransomed with perishable things, such as silver or gold.

Verse 23 here, we've been born again, not with perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God. And then if we just read on, see that quotation there in verse 24, it's from the book of Isaiah.

It's all about that contrast of the things around us, the things of the world, the things of the flesh, that wither and fall, but the word of the Lord remains forever.

[7 : 31] And so clearly reading through this chapter, durability, imperishability, if that's a word, that is a big deal for Peter. Not long ago, our TV remote gave up the ghosting, it was a combination of being kind of dropped, and sat on, and chewed, and various other things that shouldn't happen to it.

And rather than kind of fork out for the official replacement, I thought, I'll just get this kind of cheap knockoff one off Amazon, it'll be just the same. We went through three of these cheap knockoff remotes, none of which lasted more than a month, before finally realizing, okay, I'm going to have to invest in the real thing here.

Even that's not going to last forever. But these cheap things did not last. They perished very quickly. Peter is saying here, don't be content with anything that is passing, that's disposable, that's perishing.

Because we are talking here about something far more important than changing the channel, we're talking about your life and the foundations you're building it on.

Peter's point is to say that everything else around us will wither, even silver, even gold, even the things people think are the most important. But in a fading world, here is something that lasts forever, the imperishable seed of God's word, that brings us an imperishable new life as God's people.

[9 : 01] And Peter is reminding us of this as an encouragement to Christians as we live as exiles. We look around the world and we see so much that looks so powerful, that looks indestructible and in contrast to that, the church, that can feel very weak, can feel very small.

This letter of 1 Peter was written to those living through the Roman Empire when everything was geared up to visibly and tangibly remind people of the might of Rome.

And a rule where the emperor demanded ultimate allegiance, where Christianity could not be tolerated tolerated as it proclaimed Jesus as Lord. And this letter was written at one of the toughest times for Christians in the Roman Empire.

And yet, however inconceivable it would have felt at the time, the Roman Empire has faded and fallen, just as Peter, just as God's word promised.

But the word of the Lord remains forever. Here we are, 2,000 years ago, reading from that, gathered around that. In just the same way, there are influences, there are establishments, there are powers all around the world today with no place for Jesus, which to our human eyes look kind of inevitable, all-powerful, as if they will always be there.

[10 : 30] But ultimately, like every other human institution, they will one day fall and fade. And Peter is reminding us this morning, when it comes to judging whether we are on the right side or not, whether we're on the victorious side or not, if we want to use that language, whether we make a wise decision to go with God and to stick with Him and the promises of His word, rather than the temptations of the world, when we're weighing up that decision, Peter says, don't look around, but look ahead.

Because it is only those who are born of this imperishable seed, by trusting the living and abiding word of God, that can have this eternal hope. So Peter writes this to give encouragements to Christians, to exiles.

What we have is good news, better than anything else. And that's also why this passage, although it's a passage written, as we've said, to Christians about the church, this passage is actually the most important thing you could ever hear if you're here this morning and you're not yet a Christian.

As always, we're really glad that you're here, that you're really welcome. But we want you to hear this message because it's saying that there is nothing you can put your hope in.

There is nothing people can build their lives upon that will not perish and you perish with it other than the eternal hope promised in Jesus Christ, revealed in his word, the Bible.

[12 : 10] The invitation into the church through that word is the greatest invitation there is because however unimpressive and at times however hard, however costly being part of the church is, it is the church, incredibly it is the church, the people who make up the church, who will last forever, who will outlive, who will outremain, who will not perish when all around us does.

As God's people, we have imperishable new life through God's word, that word, verse 25, which is the good news of the gospel preached to us. So Peter again begins restating that fundamental foundation, God's people have imperishable new life through God's word.

Before he goes on then to say, well how then do we live out that new life within the church? What does that involve? We're going to look at two things. As we said, they are going to be this, a love for God's people and a love for God's word.

Let's look at those in turn. And so the first instruction here, given to those who, as we've said, have been born again through the gospel, brought into the church through God's mercy, is to have a love for God's people.

I do have a look at verse 22. We're going to see something pretty incredible here. It says this, having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth.

[13 : 31] We mentioned earlier, I think really that means having accepted the gospel, having trusted in Jesus and the forgiveness, the purification, the new life that he brings.

So what's the goal of that? What is the gospel for? Is it for a restored relationship with God? Is the gospel for the glory of God? It is. It's both of those things.

But look again at verse 22. What does Peter actually say here? Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love.

And what Peter's saying here is that actually loving one another within the church is not a secondary thing or a byproduct of the gospel, but it's actually a fundamental, non-negotiable part of it.

We're being purified for a sincere brotherly love as part of God's family. So verse 22 continues, so love one another earnestly from a pure heart.

[14 : 38] So kind of get on and do it, Peter says, really. The point is this. As we meet together this morning, as we are part of a church community throughout the week in various different forms, the attitude is not to be, well, we're all kind of here doing the same thing anyway.

We all live nearby. We all love Jesus. So we might as well try and get along and hang out a bit. No, actually, Peter says, no, you have been saved for that very purpose.

That we are brothers and sisters and so we're to demonstrate that family love, that family love that might well actually be absent in many human families, but which we're to live out in our spiritual family, our Christian family, our church family.

Through the gospel, God is restoring all things, all things to how they are supposed to be. Restoring, yes, our relationship, that vertical relationship with him as our creator through the forgiveness made possible through Jesus' perfect sacrifice, but also restoring humanity's relationship with one another.

Restored to the harmony that God had originally created, but which we see destroyed by sin in the very opening chapters of the Bible, and which we see destroyed and that destruction played out day by day in the world around us, whether kind of petty neighborhood feuds or international conflict and wars.

[16 : 06] And yet the church is to show something different. The church is to show how things were designed to be.

It's almost kind of the show home for what God had originally intended. As we love one another sincerely, love one another earnestly, love one another from a pure heart, love one another from a pure heart, and what does that look like then practically, day to day?

Well, verse one of chapter two picks up this idea, so put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Peter hones in on those ways we have of treating one another which are not loving, which destroy unity.

Those attitudes that we see all around us and which are just as big a danger for us in the church today as they were in Peter's day. These are not things that have died out over the years.

But Peter says, no, those attitudes cannot be in the church, cannot survive in the church if we remember that new life we have in the gospel.

[17 : 18] That if through Jesus we have been purified, if we have this pure heart, then our response to others is not backbiting or trying to bring others down or any of those attitudes listed in verse one, but rather is love, a love for God's people.

Okay, so let's stop here. It's a good time to be honest and say this is one of the parts of the Bible where it is much easier said than done. We know where to do this and yet strife between Christians within churches is still a huge issue an irregular occurrence today.

That's not because those churches never read 1 Peter and didn't know that they were supposed to get on. It's because it's hard. It's because all of us are sinful people and sinful churches in a sinful world.

So actually, what then makes the difference? How do we put this into practice? How does this passage help us do that? At our prayer meeting just last Wednesday, we were giving thanks, among other things, to God for the unity within our church in the six years that we had been celebrating.

How can we make sure that unity continues for another six years, another 60 years? That actually, that it deepens, that it grows, that our love for one another increases. Well, again, it comes back to this gospel foundation and I'm aware that as I say this, this could sound like an over-simplification of the complexities of relational challenges, but this is the Bible's foundation for unity.

[18 : 55] That all of us can only stand before God due to his electing, we are elect exiles, due to his choosing, his gracious choice to show us mercy.

There is nothing in me, there is nothing in you, there is nothing in any of us that deserves that. We are sinners saved by grace. And so, when others wrong us, as we shouldn't be too surprised with, as we sit in a room full of sinners, when that happens, that our love for that person is not suddenly kind of evaporated, disappears in a puff of smoke, but we recognize, even within the church, these people, this person is a sinner just as I am.

And so I can choose to love, even if that's not deserved, even if that's not earned, just as Jesus loved me, which I certainly didn't deserve, which I certainly didn't earn.

It's only the gospel that can bring that unity as we choose to love one another, enable us to choose to love one another. And perhaps even that phrase, choose to love, that might sound strange to our ears, because our culture tells us that love is simply a feeling that kind of comes upon us, or equally can kind of drift away from us.

But in the Bible, love is always a commitment. That's why Peter can write it as an imperative, a command, love one another and reflect the new birth God has granted you in your relationships with those who have also been born again by demonstrating a love for God's people.

[20 : 37] Now we've seen what that means, getting rid of, verse one, those actions that tear down, perhaps more positively, what does loving earnestly look like? There's lots of things we could say, not least rather than tearing down, like verse one, but desiring the best for people instead.

One thing that I'd love to kind of flag up for us as a church as an application of that is simply time with other people. One of the best metrics of love for God's people, one of the best, the best measure is not feelings and emotions, but is minutes and hours.

We live in a culture of busyness, we're surrounded by that, that's almost how we're kind of trained to respond, isn't it? How are you? I'm busy. I find myself saying that all the time and it's true, we are busy, but it can almost become a badge of honour or a way that we justify ourselves because that's what everyone else in the world is saying, they're busy, we should be busy.

And yet the casualty of that busyness is so often time with other people. We have finite hours, finite energy, and so often it is relationships that get squeezed out in our world of busyness.

And yet Peter is saying that the church should look different from the world around us because we are not at home in this world. I'd love to leave that with you as a challenge. The gospel demands we love one another.

[22 : 08] It's not a secondary thing. It's baked in. Where are we showing that love to others by spending our most valuable resource, our time with one another as God's people?

Supporting each other as exiles and actually investing in that which is eternal, which is God's people. There's also born again through the imperishable word of God. So there's the first mark of the church, our living out that identity, a love for God's people.

The second mark we see then, and it's worth saying here, this doesn't mean all churches look exactly the same. This isn't a one-size-fits-all mold for churches, but these are kind of two non-negotiables that Peter gives us here, a love for God's people.

Secondly, a love for God's word. And we'll be a bit more brief here because we've already been introduced, haven't we, to the word of God as that imperishable seed that brings us new, eternal life as it reveals the gospel to us.

We've seen that emphasis how it is God's word that brings us into the church as we put our trust in it, the only thing that will last for all eternity, the promises pointing to Jesus, that it's God's word alone that holds out eternal hope and salvation.

[23 : 26] And when we think of that background, think of that foundation, we're perhaps not surprised then when Peter says, verse two of chapter two, like newborn infants long for the pure spiritual milk that by it you may grow up into salvation if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

And the way verse three is kind of phrased in the original, it's a rhetorical question really, knowing that God is good, knowing that you have been born again, that image of newborn infants, knowing these things, keep longing for that spiritual milk, that essential nourishment of the word of God.

Here's the key point here, that the word of God that brings us life is the same word that helps us to continue to grow as God's people, to grow up into salvation, which really means to live out our salvation, to live in light of our salvation.

Again, that big idea of how we live out that identity as those saved by God's grace. Our response to God's word is a love for God's word. That's one of Peter's non-negotiables for God's church.

And so again, good to ask that question, kind of get practical. How do we put this into practice as a congregation? One example is really obvious, and we're doing it right now, that week by week we gather.

[24 : 54] We seek to sing songs of biblical truth. We have prayers that are shaped by the Bible, and the single thing that we spend the most time doing every Sunday morning and that I spend the majority of my time kind of preparing for each week is having the Bible read and preached from so that we can hear not what I have to say, but what God has to say to us, so that we can receive this pure spiritual milk to grow us up into, to grow us up in line with our salvation.

And we want to keep that at the heart of our church, of our services, of our community groups. That needs to happen at an organizational, a structural level. But we also need to remember that this letter is addressed to the whole church, to all Christians.

As individuals, how much are we longing to be fed God's word? How much are we prioritizing this weekly gathering? How much are we praying in advance that God would be preparing our hearts to hear and listen and understand?

How much perhaps are we even reading through the passage in advance to start to think about what God might be saying through this particular portion of his word? Really, the challenge for all of us, and I include myself in this, the challenge is that just like loving God's people, we can't think that's a box we can just tick because we go to a church that calls itself a community church.

We actually have to live out that community, live out that love. And in just the same way, we can't say that a love for God's word is something we can just tick because we go to a church that seeks to have the Bible at its foundation.

[26 : 43] Actually, this is something for all of us. We need to be longing for that word, longing for that pure spiritual milk like a small baby desperate to be fed.

The church is not a kind of a drive-through where we just come in and get a quick fix and then can get on with the rest of our lives having been boosted or charged up. No, it's that longing for God's word.

It's translated as craving in some versions. It's such a strong word. It's something to fill our minds and our hearts that we would continue seeking after it. And again, Peter gives us the reason why as God's people that would be the case, why we would long for God's word.

And it's because that word as it helps us grow up into salvation is again the only thing that can offer us perfect hope. It's as we grow into salvation through the word that we grow more and more toward our eternal state as it were.

The change that God's word brings in us is the change that will last for all eternity. Whereas all the other earthly things that we focus our time and energy and resources on will go, will perish.

[27 : 57] Verse 3, if indeed we have tasted that the Lord is good and we have tasted that, we have seen that in the gospel of Jesus Christ, we can be certain of God's love for us as he gave Jesus as the greatest possible sacrifice for us.

And so now we continue to want to live in line with his will as it's revealed in his word. Not because that's the easy life but because it truly is and we need to grow to believe this more and more.

It truly is the best life. It is life living with and according to the one who made us, who loves us and who will one day will welcome us home.

The call to life as an exile, as one of God's people in a world that is turning its back on him. That call means being distinctive but it also means being called to be part of the church family on that journey that joined together through God's mercy in that eternal new life.

We are given to one another to love one another, to love God's word as we travel together to that perfect inheritance kept in heaven for us.

[29 : 08] Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you that as we have been connected to you in the gospel so we have been connected to one another through your mercy and your grace.

We pray that you would help us to show that mercy and grace, that love to one another as your people as we travel through this world where we are not truly home but travel in joyful anticipation of the certain hope and the eternal home and salvation that will be ours when we see you face to face.

Lord, please help us to be growing up into salvation, to be living according to that eternal hope by loving and longing after your word.

Lord, we pray that we would keep coming back to the great truths it reveals to us of all that you are and all that you've done for us. We pray that we would find our security in your promises to us as they remind us of the certainty of our identity in you.

And we pray that we would live that out by seeking to obey your commands to us that we might live as your people encouraging one another within your church all for your glory. We pray these things in Jesus' name.

[30 : 27] Amen.