

Elect Exiles

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[0 : 00] Thanks very much, Rhiannon. Yeah, as I mentioned, just a brief reading this morning as we begin a new series in this letter of 1 Peter that we're going to run with in this letter right through to the end of November.

So we're going to get a chance to dig into this letter in quite a bit of detail. I think that's going to be really good for us as a church. It's almost a bit of a cliché, I think, as we start a new book for me or for any minister or preacher to begin by saying, well, this book is particularly relevant to us or this book is especially what the church needs today.

I think actually the reality is that wherever we dig into a book of the Bible and start getting to grips with that, we see that wherever we are in the Bible, just how vital, just how timely, just how needed God's Word is.

And I suppose that's what we should expect, isn't it? As the whole Bible is God speaking to us and his Word is living and active. So it all matters. It's all important. But having said that, being aware of that cliché, it does feel as if 1 Peter is particularly relevant, is especially vital for the church in our day and age.

And it's a particularly useful book for us to look at together and to get our heads around. Why is that? What are we hoping to get from this book?

[1 : 24] And really these opening couple of verses this morning are going to give us a great introduction to that. Well, it's really because this is a book that helps us understand as Christians both who we are and also we could say where we are.

This is a book that is going to help us understand ourselves as well as the world around us and see how those things fit together and how we're called to live out our identity as God's people in a world that so often has very little time for God or very little knowledge of God.

We're going to see how actually the world of 1 Peter is very similar to the world in which we live today and perhaps very similar to the way our culture is increasingly heading.

And so let's jump in straight into these opening two verses. It can be tempting at the start of a new book to kind of unload on you all the details in terms of dates and places and locations and audience and situation.

We will pick up on some of those things as we go through, as they become relevant, and they will. But this morning I want us just to focus in on just two words in these opening verses that introduce a huge pair of topics which Peter really frames this whole letter around those two words.

[2 : 43] You'll see them there in verse 1. Elect exiles. Elect exiles. That is how Peter describes the Christian. Verse 1.

To those who are elect exiles of the dispersion. There's Peter's kind of fundamental description of the Christian identity. That's what we're going to be thinking about this morning.

Who are we? Peter says that God's people are elect exiles. Those who have graciously received God's mercy, received from him all that we need, all that we could never deserve.

That's the elect side of things. And yet also because of that, are no longer truly at home in the world in which we live. We are exiles with a better destination in view.

So let's begin. Let's get stuck in that first concept, that first essential in our identity. Paul writes to Christians saying that they are those who are elect.

[3 : 45] Those who are elect. I wonder how you would answer the question, who are you? Perhaps we'd start with some kind of basic facts about ourselves. I'm male or female.

I'm from this place. I'm this many years old. Perhaps we would not want to go near that last one. Perhaps we'd use an occupation. I'm a student. I'm a builder. I'm a dentist. Perhaps we'd use someone else to define us.

I'm so-and-so's husband. I'm so-and-so's parents. I'm so-and-so's child. Who are you? How people see themselves, how they identify is a key question in our day.

It's a question that we can answer in a whole lot of different ways. But Peter is making the point at the start of this letter that our primary identity, the definition that really matters more than any other, is who we are in relation to God.

And the word that Peter uses to define that relation for the Christian right here in verse 1 is those who are elect. Elect. Now, it's good to be up front straight away.

[4 : 53] You may or you may not be aware. That word elect is a word. It carries quite a lot of theological baggage with it. It perhaps brings to your mind conversations regarding the interaction between human responsibility and God's sovereignty.

Maybe it brings up other questions for you as well. If anyone wants to chat any more about any of those, I'm really happy to do so. Those could be really helpful conversations.

So do find me afterwards. If you've got any kind of pre-existing questions about that idea of election that you'd like to talk about, those can be useful times. But what we particularly want to do here and now in this time together is to get under the surface and understand what it is that Peter is meaning here and his reasoning in this letter as he uses this key definition of the Christian's identity as one who is elect.

And actually, we get under the surface. We get to see Peter's thinking in verse 2 here. Do have a look there. It says that this election is 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.

And notice there how the whole of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Spirit, are involved in that. And so the point here is that for Christians, their salvation is God's work from beginning to end.

[6 : 28] That it is God's work from beginning to end. That it begins, as it says here, with the foreknowledge of God the Father. Now, this foreknowledge isn't just God kind of knowing how we'll respond, but without really having any input into that.

I happen to have foreknowledge of what I'm having for lunch today. It's a lasagna. It's not something I, however, have had any inputs or played any role in. That's not the kind of foreknowledge that the Bible speaks about here.

This is not a kind of a passive prediction. This foreknowledge is an action on God's part. You can see over in verse 20 of chapter 1, the same word, foreknowledge, is used of Jesus.

He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you. And in both of these verses, that word foreknown carries that same meaning.

It's something that God has planned. It is something that God has decided upon before the very beginning of history, which then comes to pass in history, just as God had ordained it to.

[7 : 43] This foreknowledge then is speaking about God's decision in eternity past. Here's an encouraging thought for you this morning, that if you're a Christian, that even before the beginning of the universe, God had chosen to direct his love on you.

We then see as we continue through verse 2 that that is worked out through the Spirit in the sanctification of the Spirit. It says that word sanctification is another kind of long theological word.

It has the meaning of being set apart. It's from the same root as the word holy, separate for God's use. It's the Spirit that we would say applies this salvation that God has decreed.

And then reading on, we see that that is done through and for Jesus. It's for obedience to Jesus Christ. Christ, it's living as God's people. That will be a key theme of this letter.

But it's also at the end of verse 2 there that we're set apart for the sprinkling with the blood of Jesus. Again, that might sound like something, as a few things in these opening verses do, that might sound like something a little bit strange to us being sprinkled with blood.

[8 : 55] Sounds a bit gory. But Peter is linking back to the Old Testament where at Mount Sinai, one of the pivotal moments of the Old Testament, Moses sprinkles the people with the blood of sacrificed animals.

Why does he do that? Well, the purpose, the message behind that was to say that this sacrifice, that the death of these animals covers you, is effective for you so that now you can be God's people together.

That sprinkling with the blood is what formed God's new community at the base of Mount Sinai. And we see here, Peter is saying, for the Christian church, it's not the blood of any animal, but it's Jesus' blood.

It is Jesus' sacrifice which covers us, which is sufficient to deal with our sins, and through which we are brought in to be God's people.

In just the same way, it's through the sprinkling of the blood that God's community is formed and sealed together. So again, the emphasis here is Peter gives these people and gives us their identity in relation to God, that they are elect, is to stress how this is God's work from beginning to end.

[10 : 14] And so there's quite a lot of theology in that opening little section that we just looked at, but here's really the key. Here's why this is so important, because Peter's not giving this as a purely kind of theological statement.

Peter is writing this to help his readers, help us, see their identity in that way as God's elect, full of purpose. There's a reason that we need to understand our identity.

So what is that purpose? Both for the first readers, for us this morning, two key aspects really. humility, humility, and security.

Humility and security. And both of these are going to tie in particularly to what we're going to move on to speaking about, which is about the status of exiles, living as exiles.

They're both to do with how we interact with the world around us. Firstly, we are to be people who go out into this world with humility, because our salvation is, as we said, God's work from beginning to end.

[11 : 19] I notice that Peter doesn't say to those who are particularly good exiles who therefore God loves. Or he doesn't address his letter to those especially insightful exiles who've worked out the way to salvation.

Or he doesn't say to those exiles who are from the right background or the right social status or the right family that God knows because of her. I know the point is there is nothing in who these people are or in what they've done that has elevated them to this status.

There's nothing for them to be proud of themselves about. It's all God's work from beginning to end. And that's a great reminder for us as we get into this book, as we go about our lives.

A key emphasis I hope we're going to see in 1 Peter is to see how living our lives or conduct in the world can be a witness to the gospel in our everyday life.

And yet right from the beginning we're kind of being reminded here or we want to see here that any hint of pride, any hint of arrogance, any hint of Christians or a church thinking that we are better than those people who are out there, any hint of that kind of pride is going to kill that witness stone dead.

[12 : 40] God's gracious election and rescue of us that we don't deserve brings us humility. Peter wants us to see that. Secondly, a key purpose here is that it brings us security.

Again, a big part of this book is going to speak about how do we go out into a world and live in a world of very different values, of very different priorities, perhaps seemingly heading in a different direction to the Christian faith.

How do we keep on going against the flow? Again, right from verse 1 Peter wants to underscore this. It's because we have the security of knowing that we are in God's love.

That our ultimate, our defining identity of who we are in relation to God, those who are part of his family, who as we said earlier have that incredible privilege of saying our Father in Heaven.

Those who have that perfect and eternal inheritance to look forward to that Peter's going to speak about in the next few verses. All these great blessings that are ours as Christians, that status, those blessings are not in our hands, but they're in God's.

[13 : 50] It's what God had decided from before the foundation of the world that we would be the undeserving objects of his love. And because that is God's decision, we can have that security knowing that he is not going to drop us now, that he will keep us through thick and thin, through ups and downs, because he and he alone has brought us into relationship with him and nothing is able to change that because it is his work.

And so very practically, a whole load of things might happen to us this week. We don't know how other people are going to treat us. we don't know how other people are going to speak about us.

We don't know what's going to happen at work or at school. And in some cases, in some ways, that uncertainty is heightened all the more if we go out into the world living as Christians, living distinctively.

But we don't know what's just around the corner in so many ways. but we do know that God will never let us go because he has chosen us as his people.

There is that incredible certainty we can have as his. And just before we move on, especially if you're not a Christian this morning or perhaps especially for people on our minds who aren't Christians, this is a question that's worth thinking about.

[15 : 12] In fact, for more significant than that, this is a question that's essential to be able to answer to live well is this. Is your identity, is the way that you define yourself, is it able to offer that kind of security that we've just been speaking about?

If our identity is based on other people, what they think or say or feel about us, then it's not certain because that is outside of our control. If our identity is based on our performance or our usefulness, that's not certain because our abilities or our looks or our employability, they can all change over time, they can become outdated, I could become replaced by a robot tomorrow, you know, there could be something new or better that takes the role that I try to define for myself.

If our identity is one that we have to define entirely internally, then that's not something that's secure either because how can we ever really know who we truly are? What do we do when we've spent so long trying to make ourselves one thing and then society changes to say we should be something else?

Or what do we do when we feel awkward in our own skin as we so often do? None of these other sources of our identity can offer that security. It's only having our identity as one chosen by God where we can find that true security that we need that will last even in the beatings and the batterings that we go through in life.

Especially if you're not a Christian this morning or again especially if you have close ones, loved ones who are not yet Christians. Please do hear this. This concept of election has so often been misunderstood as something to keep people out but that is never how the Bible speaks.

[17 : 07] Instead the Bible always says if you are not yet a Christian come to Jesus. For those that we know who don't yet know Jesus share Jesus. Come to Jesus trust in him and find that security that he alone offers.

And it's when we trust in Jesus we find actually it's been God who has been at work all along carrying out his plan of salvation working out his purposes pouring out his undeserved love on us and because he has chosen to make us his we can be certain that he will never leave us being God's chosen people is the one identity that will stand strong in every situation.

So this is written to us as an encouragement in terms of our identity who are we? Peter says we are elect that is true of everyone whose trust is in Jesus.

Let's move on to the second half of what we're going to look at. Secondly really I suppose the next question is where are we? and the answer Peter gives Christians to that question is as we've said he says that we are exiles.

In fact it's precisely because we are elect by God that we are exiles in the world in which we live. We're not truly home. Let's dig into that a bit again.

[18 : 25] Verse 1 to those who are elect exiles in the dispersion in Pontus Galatia Cappadocia Asia and Bithynia this idea of exiles this is not a new one here that Peter is introducing in fact the idea of exile is one of the key aspects one of the key movements in the Old Testament that part of the Bible written before Jesus was born there exile is of central importance as God's people are taken from their homeland taken from the promised land where God had put them and instead they're taken away into exile primarily in a place called Babylon they're taken to a place that is not their home that understanding of exile runs right through the Bible and Peter really picks up on that theme here he's not talking about geographical exile in the same way as the Old Testament if there's some reason that Pontus or Galatia or these other places which are modern day

Turkey as if they're geographical outsiders there and just need to get back to a certain physical place no Peter is using this concept spiritually he's saying that those who are God's people will never be truly at home in this world wherever they are in fact we can see that if we turn right to the end of Peter's letter Peter's farewell do just flick over a couple of pages have a look at chapter 5 in verse 14 where we read this Peter says in his kind of farewell she who is at Babylon who is likewise chosen sends you greetings Peter closes his letter again with these twin themes of the elect who is likewise chosen and this idea of exile she who is at Babylon now the city of Babylon at this point has long since been destroyed Peter is actually referring here she who is at Babylon is the church that is in Rome from where Peter is writing this letter why does he call it Babylon well it's because as we said

Babylon was the place of exile and so one writer says how this is a letter from exile to exile that Peter with the church in Rome are in exile writing to these people spread out across Asia Minor they too are in exile you can be out in the sticks in Cappadocia or essentially at the center of the known universe in Rome but if you are one of God's people that you are in exile because this world is not your eternal home and again as we said this is so relevant eternally relevant because it is just the same for us today Peter wants all of us to recognize that as he says in chapter 2 verse 11 we are sojourners and exiles passing through this world who are we we're elect we're God's chosen people where are we we are exiles we are those who are not yet truly home Paul wants us to get that under our skin Paul wants us to understand that status of being exiles and now there can be two different and two equally unbiblical responses to being in exile the first is that we can despair and so for us today we can look at the news around us we can see the morals that the media and the entertainment industries perhaps promote we see what we consider to be a general trend in government policy and how in so many areas things are moving away from the

Bible's picture and it can be tempting to despair or just want to retreat or just to hide away somewhere as if something has gone terribly wrong and we just need to get out of the way or wait it out until things get back to how they should be.

A couple of years ago the 2022 Scottish census was the first time that no religion with 51.1% of the responses was the majority answer on the question of religious beliefs and as you can imagine the kind of Scottish humanist society and other people all got very excited about that about Christianity being a minority and perhaps we see that and we hear triumphal statements from other people and we get anxious about that and Peter reminds us here that that is nothing for us to worry about actually that is the historical position of the church that is the context into which the Bible is written where Christians were different were exiles that's the norm that is the norm that the gospel is given into not to bring despair but to bring hope and so when we recognise that status of being exiles we don't need to despair but neither and here's the other kind of unbiblical response neither do we just as exiles just blend in and so whether in the

[23 : 25] Old Testament or whether for Peter's original readers or for us today the constant pressure for exiles is just to conform and be squashed into the mould of the environment in which they live the temptation for exiles is to forget that they are sojourners that they are people simply passing through and instead to live as if this world is our eternal home a big part of this letter is to say as Christians don't despair about being in a minority about going against the grain but nor are we to just assimilate and just blend in with the world around us instead we're to be aware of our status not naive we are exiles and yet with that humble confidence that security that comes from knowing we are chosen by God the elect recipients of his love we are to live distinctive lives for his glory so let's just flesh this out with a couple of practical examples as we close really what does this look like how does this actually affect us day by day let's think about this first as individuals and then as a church firstly individuals ultimately to put it bluntly these opening couple of verses of 1 Peter we'll see this expanded as we work through the letter this means that for anyone here in this room who is a

Christian anyone here who trusts in and is seeking to be obedient to Jesus there will be times when you do not fit in with the world around you or at least there will be times when you should not fit in because actually you are in exile and often those times will be difficult because it is difficult being different a couple of examples but I'm sure you can think in your own mind what is more relevant to you perhaps it's how much friends or colleagues drink at a party or on a night out there will always be that pull to be the same as everyone else not to be the person who says no I'm fine thanks I don't really want to do that perhaps it will be conversations that just kind of naturally happen and the natural flow goes in a certain way where it's just assumed that surely everyone must think this surely everyone must go along with this kind of approach to life or this attitude towards certain issues in line with current social norms how could you not and yet actually where the bible says something else and it will fall to you to graciously say well actually

I don't actually graciously explain your thought process and your position on those things there will be plenty of times when we do not or we should not just fit in because we are exiles now that is not a license to be kind of obnoxious and rude and just to expect that everyone will 100% of the time be 100% against us and that we're just kind of really down on everyone in fact Peter is going to make the point that there will be areas of life where the world will look up to Christians because of their moral behaviour their kindness their valuing of others but the bible is preparing us to expect that Christians will sometimes find themselves on the outside as exiles but the reminder the encouragement is to stand firm in that because we have a better a stronger a more secure identity in Christ as one of his people than anything that the world could offer or seek to draw us into and so as individuals we want to have the right expectations as to what it means to be elect exiles but also this is a collective identity isn't it that we're to understand and embrace as a church as well

Peter is writing about a community who are in exile how does that shape how we operate together as a church I think again an interesting statistic here is that although it took until a couple of years ago for less than half of our population to identify with any religion actually we've known that for far longer haven't we the people who should have been least surprised about that census is the church it's reckoned there's about 2-3% of the population who actually attend each week a Bible believing church another survey shows at least 70% of the population have no intention of ever attending a church service and I'm sure that as we think of those statistics in some ways those fit much more into our experience and into our mind into the number of people that we see into the people we know than some kind of estimate of 50% of people just below being

Christians actually the reality is far more bleak than that and yet that's what we should expect as exiles and God has promised that he will build his church and so what does that mean for us as a congregation I think it means understanding that as exiles we don't just expect people to wander in through the door that's great if that happens but actually it's recognizing that the way the church will grow is as God's chosen people demonstrate a counter cultural way of life as we lean into this status of exiles rather than trying to deny it as we live out a community that is different is distinctive is not ashamed but a community that in doing that attracts others in because its foundation is the radical and the costly love of God because it is a community that is sprinkled by the blood of Jesus brought together as God's people by what he has done

[29 : 20] God's people are exiles will always be exiles until Jesus returns that will make things tough at times but we need to be aware and prepared for that that we keep on going because we are elect graciously chosen by God to be the recipients of his love that we could never deserve and because it's his work we do that knowing that he will keep us until one day Jesus will return one day we will no longer be exiles one day we will be home with him forever let's pray together heavenly father we thank you that you offer a better a truer a more secure identity than anything that the world could give us Lord we are humbled that we did not choose you we did not seek you out but that you in your grace rescued us that our salvation is your work from beginning to end and because of that we can know that whatever might happen to us whatever others might say about us whatever unexpected turns and directions our life might take that you will always be with us and you will never let us down we ask that we would be aware that we would be realistic that we would be wise regarding the world in which we live we ask that we would be bold and firm in our identity in you to live as exiles even when that comes at a cost that it may be small day to day costs of what people say behind our backs it could be huge costs that we have to bear as so many around the world do we ask that you would help us in those times to hold fast to you knowing that you will hold fast to us we ask that you would live in those times in a way that points to your great love and mercy and that honors you as our

Lord and Savior and we ask that we would do that with joy because exiles are not a people without a home but are people with a different home and in you we have a better home the perfect and eternal home that we look forward to and have our place in through Jesus Christ and through him alone and it's in his name we come to you and it's in his name we pray and it's in his name we are sent out as your people to live for you in the world amen