

1:1-2—RESIDENT ALIENS**The Text (NRSV)**

^{1:1}*Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, ²who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood:*

May grace and peace be yours in abundance.

What's going on here?

These first two verses are the initial salutation and greeting of the letter. At one level, they do all that an ancient letter's opening should do: they identify both sender and receiver, and they say, in effect, "hello." (See *Session One* materials for a word on both the sender and first recipients of 1 Peter.) But beyond that basic information, this salutation touches on several themes of the entire letter, here in kernel form. We had mentioned in the first session that there was not much to say about the initial audience, at least *demographically* speaking. But there is a great deal to be said about who they are *theologically*.

Right off the bat, Peter here calls these believers 'chosen exiles of the Dispersion' (the NRSV does some shuffling with the Greek to make better sense in English). This is language loaded with meaning from the Jewish Scriptures. For one, the "dispersion" was literally those practicing Jews who lived outside of Palestine across the Hellenistic world. The thoroughly Christian content of the greeting (and of the whole letter) make it clear that this is not a letter directed solely at Jews, but is figuratively applying the Dispersion imagery to *Christians*, who are similarly living scattered in the midst of the world as a distinct community.

The same is true with the word translated "exiles"—its literal sense refers to a political status of living (willingly or not) away from one's homeland. Exile, was of course often a punishment, and people in exile were generally lower on the social totem pole. The word surely evoked the memory of Israel and Judah's time in exile centuries before and again

connects Christ-believers with the ancient people of God. Here as 1 Peter uses it, the word is meant figuratively. The Christians reading the letter are a dispossessed, disinherited people, not because they are all financially poor or the objects of ethnic discrimination, but because they now have a new identity. 1 Peter wants to recast its audience, people of all sorts of regions and ethnicities as one new people, who live as an alternative community in the midst of the world. They are *resident aliens*, not because they have been expatriated or emigrated from some physical location, but because they belong to a new community with a unique identity: they belong to Christ and so will no longer belong to any other lordship.

But prior to that alien status, 1 Peter names its audience as "chosen"—they are exiles, but because they are a part of God's new-and-old people. Together with the *exile* and *dispersion* language, this conjures up the story of Abraham, called by God to be a resident alien through a promise. This whole description of the letter's recipients is thick with meaning then—it connects 1st-century Christians with the people of God of generations past, it names the tension they are already feeling with the surrounding society, and it identifies divine purpose in the midst of that tension.

In fact, for 1 Peter, it is *because* they are the people of God that Christians will be a distinct, even counter-cultural community in the midst of their society. They are called to be *made holy* ("sanctified" in the NRSV) and "obedient" to Jesus Christ, and that will mean some level of disconnect with the world at large. However, and this is important to note, for 1 Peter, that call to be "holy" is not a call to be "holier-than-thou." This is for two major reasons. *First*, the emphasis here in 1:1-2 is on the grace of God which has first called and chosen them into this new community. From the very beginning, the letter insists that people belong to the church not by their own willing it or because of their virtue, but because of the love of God which has claimed them first.

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LOOKING FOR MORE?

- *On the people of God as both chosen and alien, see also **Lev. 19:33-34** and **Deut. 26:5-15** (which begins with the Abraham story).*
- *For other Trinitarian language of God the Father, the Holy Spirit, and Jesus Christ (see 1:2) all mentioned together, see also **2 Cor. 13:13**, **1 Thess. 1:3-5**, and **Matt. 28:19**.*
- *The greeting, "grace and peace" is a regular feature of **Pauline** letters (see **Rom 1:7**, **1 Cor. 1:3**, **2 Cor. 1:2**, **Gal. 1:3**, **Eph. 1:2**, **Phil. 1:2**, **Col. 1:2**, **1 Thess. 1:1**, **2 Thess. 1:2**, **Titus 1:4**, and **Philemon 1:3**. "Abundance" here is to unique to 1 Peter.*

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Second, as the whole letter will go on to say, the holiness of the Christian community is always to be the holiness of Christ—the same Christ who suffered and served. The church can only show its holiness to the extent that it serves and suffers in the midst of a world that cannot understand that kind of life or community. And so the church is always a community of resident aliens: *alien* because it belongs to another Lord than the world's rulers and emperors and gods, but *resident* because it remains in that world to serve and suffer with it in the same way the church's Lord did.

There is a further purpose for this new identity as the sojourning people of God—"to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood." The first phrase regarding "obedience" probably makes some sense, although obedience for 1 Peter is used in a way similarly to that way "faith," at least living faith, is in Paul's vocabulary. It is less about a boot-camp rigidity to following the rules (as we often think of obedience) and more about a submission to the Reign of God revealed in Jesus. It is also less about believing facts *about* God and more about living into a particular *relationship* with this God—it is a way of life, just as faith is for Paul (and even more so for James!). In fact, in Romans, Paul refers to the "obedience of faith" (1:5). Ephesians 2:8-10 is also similar, in that it moves from being "saved through faith" apart from works to saying that we

are "created...for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." This is the "obedience" 1 Peter has in mind.

The 'sprinkling of blood' in 1:2 is perhaps less clear, though. Obviously, there is a connection to the death of Jesus, but in what sense are believers *sprinkled* with Jesus' blood? Some see in these verses a reference to baptism and the sprinkling of water—the connection of a person's baptism with the death of Christ is made in Rom. 6, for example, and 1 Peter will pick up baptism as a theme in chapter three. However, it is more likely that 1 Peter has a Old Testament reference in mind—specifically the blood of the lamb killed in the covenant ritual between Israel and YHWH in Exodus 24. In the Exodus passage, the lamb's blood is sprinkled on the altar (symbolizing the connection with God) and on the people themselves. It is the blood which seals the two parties into relationship and symbolically creates a new people in the wilderness. 1 Peter probably intends the same comparison to Jesus' own death—through it, the readers have become the covenant people of God and now share in the ancient identity of that people first sprinkled with the lamb's blood at Sinai. Again, for 1 Peter, the continuity between the people of God in the Old and New Testaments (to use that language) is emphasized, as though the church were woven seamlessly into the history of God's ancient holy people.

CONNECTIONS—COMMUNITY OR COLONY?

- ❖ These opening verses stress the "set-apartness" of the Christian community, even as it lives in the world. In what ways do you see the church currently living 'out of step' with the prevailing views of the day? How do these change over time?
- ❖ Are there ways the church needs to become more in tune with the culture around us? Are there ways we need to become even more *distinct* from American society? What makes you think so?
- ❖ Is it *always* important for the church to be a distinctive and counter-cultural presence? Why or why not?
- ❖ What are the dangers of emphasizing *only* the holiness and alternative nature of the church? Can you think of some examples when the church has become so separated that it withdraws completely from the world? (For example—and this is asked with all due respect—can the church become completely like the Amish and remain faithful to its mission and identity?)

1:3-12—A NEW BIRTH AND A LIVING HOPE**The Text (NRSV)**

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

⁶In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, ⁷so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. ⁸Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even

though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, ⁹for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

¹⁰Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours made careful search and inquiry, ¹¹inquiring about the person or time that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated when it testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the subsequent glory. ¹²It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in regard to the things that have now been announced to you through those who brought you good news by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things into which angels long to look!

CHAPTER 1:3-12, CONTINUED**What's going on here?**

With the opening salutation finished, the letter continues with a prayer of *blessing* to God. This kind of opening blessing is also found in 2 Cor. 1:3 and Eph. 1:3 (although otherwise, Paul's letters tend to begin with a section of *thanksgiving* for something going on in the lives of the church he's addressing). Like the blessings in Paul's letters, this passage functions to lay out themes that will be developed throughout the whole letter (themes we even saw hinted at in the first two verses). So again, this will be dense material, since our author has packed every phrase and clause with potent words and ideas, but it will help to make sense of the whole book.

1:3 opens by blessing God and then giving a reason for that blessing—the God who is the Father of Jesus Christ “has given us a new birth” which has several promises attached to it. Everything else follows from this “new birth” (which probably refers to entering the Christian community through baptism, but here it is just implied). The remainder of 1:3-12 then fleshes out our “new birth” in the continuum of time—1:3-5 look to the *future*, 1:6-9 focus on the *present*, and 1:10-12 deal with the *past*.

The Future—Hope, Inheritance, Salvation

The first “time” section of the blessing announces all the realities given to the people of God in Christ that are oriented toward the future. The first is a “living hope,” a hope which is connected to the resurrection of Jesus. Presumably, this hope is for believers' own resurrection, which is assured by Jesus' being raised from the dead. Tied up with this is a hope that death will not have the last word with the people of God. The second reality that Christians are drawn *into* (even the preposition in Greek suggests a motion toward some coming reality) is an “inheritance,” again a promise of an ultimate share in life within God's reign and family. This inheritance is contrasted with every treasure we know on earth—it is *imperishable*, *undefiled*, and *unfading*. Again, the reality of the inheritance is assured—it is not described as dependent on believers being good enough or working hard enough to hold on to it. But the revealing of that inheritance, the claiming of it, still belongs to the future. Finally, the “new birth” of believers leads them *into* a “salvation” which is also understood as a future reality. (See the *Sidebar* on the next page for more on the future, past, and present senses of salvation.)

The Present—Of Faith and Sight

All of those future elements of the Christian life and faith are very real for our author—they are assured and are “living,” even though they await us “in the last time.” But clearly for the first readers, hardship and trouble were also all too real. In the second section of this blessing, 1 Peter looks how the people of God face those difficulties

of the present. And his answer, grounded in that “living hope” from 1:3, is *with joy*. Believers can face trials with genuine rejoicing, because for him, God is at work in those very trials purifying and refining their faith like gold.

Again, it is hard to know what kinds of “trials” are in mind here, since they are only briefly described here. Historically, there is little evidence for severe Roman-sanctioned persecution of Christians (at least in Asia Minor) until later decades. Christians were not yet arrested or killed simply for bearing that name, as they would be later. But there is reason to believe that already they were being excluded and stigmatized through ‘unofficial’ means. In any case, our author does not seem to point the finger at the devil or demonic forces as the source of trials, as the John of Revelation tends to want to do. Rather, God is seen at work in and around and through their current hardship, and for 1 Peter, this is a source of joy, since believers can ultimately be certain that their present and their future rests in God's hands.

The idea of joy in the midst of suffering is common to the New Testament writings—we hear it from Jesus in the Beatitudes (Matt. 5), from Paul (see for example, Rom. 5:2ff), and from other authors (see for example, James 1:2-4) as well. This is not a denial of the pain of suffering, nor is it only about putting on a happy face for the outside world in order to win converts (two dangerous temptations often faced in modern Christianity). But there is a clear sense that the future aspects of faith named in 1:3-5 are so powerfully real that they touch us even from the future. We can be assured of our salvation and of our inheritance, and so we can face the present with true joy, not just the capacity to weather the storms of the present with a forced smile. For 1 Peter, this joy in the midst of suffering and trials is one of the ways that the people of God are always distinct or set apart from the rest of the world. Again, it is not that we are better or have stronger character, but rather, we have been given a “living hope” (or as the author of Hebrews would say it, “a better hope”) that allows us to face the challenges of the present. That joy given from God will make us resident aliens in a world that either settles for mere happiness or becomes trapped in despair.

In addition to facing external “trials,” our author touches on the challenge of faith in the risen Jesus in the present. We live “between the times” in a sense—after the man Jesus lived, taught, and worked, and before his return at the consummation of all things. And that makes faith *hard*. 1 Peter names that difficulty of believing (made even more difficult when we are facing hardship) but again finds power in our “living hope” that energizes our ability to believe in one whom we have not seen.

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CHAPTER 1:3-12, CONTINUED—WHAT'S GOING ON HERE?

The Past—Continuity with God's Story

In the last three verses of the opening blessing, we shift gears in time again to focus on the past. For 1 Peter, the past is also a source of hope that sustains us in the present time, for at least two reasons. For one, there is a sense that we can claim the history of God's faithfulness in the past as our own adopted story. 1:10-12 makes a move that many New Testament books do—it says that the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures were ultimately fulfilled in Christ and pointed to his coming. (Whether or not those prophets saw themselves doing that is a very different question, but the word from the New Testament is that the story of the Hebrew Scriptures finds its climax and resolution in the person of Jesus Christ.) We can find assurance, then, in the stories of God's faithfulness in the past, since we know that

we have been claimed by the same God, and as 1 Peter tells us, we have been born into the people of this God.

The past is also significant for 1 Peter here in that it gives us a sense of God's ancient—even "pre-time," if that makes sense, plan for the world. Our passage does not resort to a fatalistic view of the universe, but it does have a clear sense that God, the same God who spoke through the Hebrew prophets and who speaks the "good news" to us now, rules over history and will bring it to consummation. We can trust that at the last, God's love wins out over the present sufferings we face and over the brokenness and bent-ness of life. For 1 Peter, that trust comes from knowing that God willed to redeem us through Christ from the beginning and that God will not rest until that redemption is completed in us.

SIDEBAR—SALVATION IS WHEN?

Popular theology tells us that if I pray the right prayer, I "get saved" at that moment. Even the Bible tells me, too, that by grace "we *have been saved*" (see Eph. 2:8), and that sounds like it's a done deal. So why does 1 Peter confuse the issue by talking about salvation as a *future* reality in 1:5, as something I'm receiving in the *present* in 1:9, and as the knowledge of the prophets in the ancient *past* in 1:10? Just when am I/was I/will I be **saved**?

Actually, if we would ask the authors of the New Testament, including 1 Peter, they would probably first correct not our *tense*, but our *person*. Before we talk about when *I* am saved, salvation is understood to be a corporate reality—it is that *we*, the people of God, and indeed all creation, is brought to redemption and reconciliation. And because salvation is understood to be corporate and plural rather than individualistic, there is always a future element to it, as we all await that day when God will restore the broken pieces of creation. Also pointing toward the future sense of salvation is the idea throughout the New Testament salvation is bound up with God's final judgment—we are not saved *only* out of present troubles (although that is a real part of it, too), but also from the division between God and humanity that is expressed in God's "No" to human sin. Salvation is connected with the final "Yes" of God at the end of all time

and the consummation of all things, and so is often spoken of in future terms by our authors.

At the same time, other biblical authors stress the present reality of salvation to emphasize the assurance we have already in Christ Jesus. Since we have been reconciled with God already in Christ, we know how that final judgment scene will play out for us. We need not live in fear of whether we will be deemed good enough or worthy enough—God has declared us beloved already, and so we are, even as we wait for that salvation to be fully realized in all of creation. Salvation is present, too, for Jesus (see the story of Zaccheus in Luke 19, for example), since the roots of the word itself are closer to our idea of "rescuing." The Hebrew Scriptures understand being "saved" as being rescued from present trouble and threats, and the deliverance that Jesus brings goes beyond the proposition that we will be in heaven when we die. For Jesus, the work of salvation begins now—but that is because for him, the future reign of God has broken into our present. In fact, it has broken into the world most clearly in the event of the cross, and so for us, the decisive moment of salvation is also a past reality for us. So are we saved in the past, in the present, or in the future? In a manner of speaking, the answer is *yes*.

CONNECTIONS: LIVING WITH HOPE

- ❖ How do we use the word "hope" in everyday conversation? (Maybe, "Well, I hope things work out for you." "I hope I get a tax refund." etc.) What does it mean as we use the word? How does 1 Peter use the word "hope"? What is the difference if there is one?
- ❖ Does having a "living hope" or a "genuine faith" mean that we'll get everything we ask for or want? How would you respond to someone who said that if you're not getting what you ask for in prayer, it's because your faith is not strong enough? What leads you to your answer?
- ❖ What is the difference between being *hopeful* and being *optimistic*? What is the difference between *happiness* and *joy*?
- ❖ 1 Peter presents hope as a grounds not to be afraid or worried about our salvation. What risks might we be willing to take if we could let go of our fears of failure? What fears do you see in yourself or in your congregation still? What do you think is keeping you holding onto those fears?