

When God Claims You

Sermons from 1 Peter 1-2 Sermon 2

John 11:45-53; 1 Peter 1:1-2

May 2, 2021

The Rev. Dr. Samuel D. Ferguson, The Falls Church Anglican

⁴⁵ Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him, ⁴⁶ but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. ⁴⁷ So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, "What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. ⁴⁸ If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." ⁴⁹ But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all. ⁵⁰ Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish."⁵¹ He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, ⁵² and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. ⁵³ So from that day on they made plans to put him to death. (John 11:45-53, ESV)

¹ Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, ² 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. (1 Peter 1:1-2, ESV)

Last week we launched our spring and summer sermon series on 1 Peter. We noted in that overview sermon that 1 Peter is a letter written to Christians facing challenging times. In it, the Apostle Peter calls weary Christians to stand firm and keep walking, and to be a holy presence wherever they may find themselves. Today, we begin to move more slowly through the letter's rich contents, curious as to how 1 Peter fosters stability and character in its readers. We begin with the first two verses, which form the opening, or introduction, of the letter.

The writer introduces himself, "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:1). "Apostle" means messenger, or mouthpiece of another. Peter is writing as one commissioned by Christ to speak on Christ's behalf. This signals to us the authority of the letter. Jesus appointed certain men to represent Him, and Peter was foremost of this group. He speaks with the authority of the Lord, and, therefore, 1 Peter is Holy Scripture.

It's worth pondering as well how sweet it must have been for Peter to write these words, "Apostle of Jesus Christ." Not, "Peter, the man who denied Christ." Not, "Peter, the temperamental and at times fickle follower of Christ." But "Peter, the apostle of Christ." The Lord had done a great work in the life of this fisherman from Galilee. And just as He'd forswore— "I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church" (Matthew 16.18)—, He was now fulfilling; through Peter, Jesus was building His church.

But Peter's emphasis in the letter's opening is not himself, but his recipients. He identifies them as verse 1 continues: "To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia." Then in verse two he makes three statements explaining how they came to be "elect exiles" and what this means:

To those elect exiles ... 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" (1 Peter 1:1b-2).

These opening verses are packed with meaning and set the stage for the themes that will follow in the rest of the letter. They are also striking. The almost universal way to address Christians in the opening of letters in the New Testament is with the title, "Saints." But Peter opens with a label that was sure to grab attention: "Elect Exiles."

Why is Peter calling them this?

Sometimes leaders use titles, designations, names, not only to state who people are, but to call upon a sense of identity as a motivating force. Coaches may say to an outmatched team during a pivotal timeout: *You're Hoyas. You're Tarheels. You're Wildcats; and Wildcats never quit.* A parent may say to a child who's losing focus in their studies: *You're a Smith. You're a Wilson. You're a Johnson; and Johnsons are hard workers.*

There is power in remembering who you are. A robust sense of identity, especially when that identity connects you to something big and compelling, not only stabilizes you, but helps you stay focused on where you are going and what you must be about. And the reverse is equally true: forget who you are, and you'll have no idea where you're going. And nothing creates an identity crisis like social rejection and societal ridicule—all of which these Christians in these five cities were facing.

Thus, Peter is doing more in his opening than reminding his readers of a fact. Peter is reminding them of **who they are**. And in this identity, *God's Elect, the World's Exiles*, Peter draws them into the rich biblical roots of their Christian identity, and by doing so, takes his first steps in helping them **stand firm**, and to **keep walking**.

I want to focus this morning on how Peter reinforces Christian identity through this phrase, **elect exiles**, and ask how it might affect our own identity. To do so, we need to consider three things this phrase, "elect exiles", tells us about Christian identity. It tells us Christian identity is (1) God's decision, not my Choice; is a (2) calling forth unto becoming; and (3) puts you at odds with that which is false.

I. God's Decision, Not My Choice

The first term Peter uses to reinforce his readers self-understanding is "election." The word "election" literally means to be **chosen**, or **called forth**, and it has a rich biblical history.

- God says of Abraham, "For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice..." (Genesis 18:19).
- Israel as a nation is chosen by God: "For you [Israel] are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth" (Deuteronomy 7:6).
- Of King David it is said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one; I have sworn to David my servant" (Psalm 89:3).

Election—being chosen by God—is not based on one's strengths or merits: "It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples." But election is based solely on God's freedom and love: "but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers" (Deuteronomy 7:8).

Gentiles, too: What perhaps is at first most striking about 1 Peter 1:1, is that, whereas Israel understood themselves as the uniquely elect people of God, Peter is writing to a group that includes Gentiles, non-Jews, and referring to them, too, as elect.

Identity as Our Choice?

We need to pause and reflect on this: the core of Christian identity rests in God's choosing of us. We modern Westerners are fairly obsessed with choice. And it's no wonder. The more choices we have, the freer we feel and, apparently, the more opportunity we have to discover what makes us happy. Our lives orbit around choice. In school, we choose our style—goth, punk, hipster, jock. We choose our friends. We then choose our college, our major, our career. We choose where we will live. And we take offense at the notion of anyone making these choices for us.

But this obsession with choice bleeds into deeper areas. We choose our religion, our understanding of God. We even choose our ultimate identity—who we are most fundamentally. We think we can choose who we are and who God is the same way we choose our wardrobe or career. But at a certain point this obsession with the freedom to choose runs afoul.

(A) It is Paralyzing

First, the so-called freedom of unlimited choice turns out not to be liberating but paralyzing. Barry Schwartz, a social scientist at Swarthmore College, conducted an experiment on the impact of choice. He took a sampling of children, divided them into two groups, and assigned an allotted time to draw a picture. The kids in group one were asked to choose a marker to use from among three; kids in group two were asked to choose from among 24. Afterward, when an art teacher evaluated the pictures, the worst drawings were by kids in the 24-marker group. They couldn't decide which colors to use so never actually got to work. Other studies supported Schwartz theory that too much choice is actually paralyzing—in the face of it we just don't know what to do.¹

(B) It is Deceiving

At a more troubling level, however, the notion that we can choose our identity or god is a total deception, and a harmful one. The truth is we don't want a world where god turns out merely to be a projection of our own fantasies. And psychologically and emotionally, our need to know who we are, is something that must be founded from a voice outside of us, not within us. We need a sense of identity grounded in something firmer than our own fickle selves. If this weren't the case, then why is it that at a moment when the world tells us to define ourselves by ourselves, we still are desperate to be affirmed by others? This is because human identity is not an autonomous affair, but a reality bestowed upon us by a

benevolent and wise Other. Think of the pupil who longs to hear her teacher's words of affirmation, or the child and parent, or the mentee and mentor. Identity is not self-created by bestowed by a benevolent and wise Other.

Identity as God's Choice

With the Word *elect*, Peter turns our modern notion of Identity as my choice on its head. Who we are, is a matter of God's decision, not our choice.

It was God who created us, we are told, in Genesis 1 and 2. It was God who formed us and decided that we would be and who we would be. Estranged from our Maker due to sin, it is now God who comes and finds us and calls us back to Him. A creature will be forever lost until he or she hears the voice of her Maker.

First thing we learn from Peter's title for his readers. **Who are you? You are elect. You are someone who has been created by God, saved by God, and claimed by God. Who you are is a matter of whose you are—and you are His.**

II. Calling Forth unto Becoming

A second observation arising from Peter's use of the term "elect," has to do with calling, or a calling forth unto becoming. The term "elect" can be rendered as "chosen," and it also carries the sense of being "called." Notice how much the language of "called" comes up in the letter:

- 1 Peter 1:15, "but as he who **called** you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct..."
- 1 Peter 2:9, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who **called** you out of darkness into his marvelous light."
- 1 Peter 2:21, "For to this you have been **called**, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps."

Calling speaks to an important aspect of Christian identity: **becoming**—when God chooses us, and says we are not yet what we could be. So, He calls us to come forth from the life we are currently living, and to follow out. This is represented so often in the lives of biblical people:

Abraham is not just chosen but called to go forth; Israel is delivered from Egypt and called to go to the Promise Land; Jesus chooses His disciples then sends them out, calls them to go out into the world. And it is in this going out, that God forms his people. This tells us that our identity, though secured in God's view of us, is for us something of a process of becoming. We can see some of this in how Peter further describes the Elect with three statements in verse 2: "To those elect exiles ... 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" (1 Peter 1:1b-2).

Here, we see that the entire Godhead is involved in our election—and that it involves formation. God the Father, who knows all things, foreknows who His people are and chooses them—elects them—before the foundations of the earth. God the Holy Spirit works in our lives to awaken our conscience to a need of forgiveness, and our hearts to the call of God. God the Son, Jesus, through His life and death and resurrection, provide the forgiveness and means of grace so we can come back into fellowship with God—so that we can become ourselves again.

So, we are a work in progress—and we know this. We are chosen by God, elect, and yet we don't always feel like this. But the key is to see that becoming who we are can only happen when we go forth in obedience to God; we don't make ourselves into ourselves; rather, God forms us as we follow Him.

Christian identity rests in God's decision, not our choice, and is a being called forth by God unto becoming. Lastly, and in turning to the second term, "exile," we note that Christianity identity puts you at odds with that which is false.

III. Puts You at Odds with That Which Is False

The second term Peter uses to describe who Christians are is, "exile." This could be rendered as "aliens," "sojourners," or "pilgrims." It means one who is not at home in their current location—whether physically, socially, or spiritually.

Like "election," the label "exile" has as a rich history as well. All those figures in biblical history who were elect, or chosen, ironically, became exiles—or called out ones and strangers: Abraham was a stranger in the land of Canaan; Joseph was a stranger in the palace of Pharaoh; Moses was a stranger in the land of Egypt; Daniel was a stranger in the court of Babylon; so, every child of God is separated

by grace, to be a stranger in this ungodly world. And not just this physical place over that physical place; it's this present world over the world to come, as David says:

But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able thus to offer willingly? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you. For we are strangers before you and sojourners, as all our fathers were. Our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no abiding" (1 Chronicles 29:14).

To be chosen by God is to be called to live according to His will. This results, unavoidably, in not feeling at home where God's will is rebelled against. To be at home with God is to feel not at home with those who rebel against Him. **Therefore, the elect with God, are the exiles on earth.**

Exile without and within is a strange tension: you both love the world more than ever and recognize its beauty and potential; and at the same time, you see its fallenness in higher resolution. This is true of oneself: when a Christian, you are the most uncomfortable with who you are: you are God's woman or man, secure in His eternal decision to create you, save you, and claim you. But you are now able to see yourself in His light, and you see your sin all the more clearly and long for it to be eradicated.

Remember who you are. You are elect—chosen by God and called forth to become the person He has made you to be. You are exiles—because of God's call, you are at odds with all that is at odds with God.

A few ways this may impact us in our day to day lives:

1. God forms us in the wilderness.

It was in their sojourning and exile that the people of God were formed and refined. Exile can be strategic. God revealed Himself to Israel in the wilderness sojourning, taught them His ways through the law, began to teach them what forgiveness would entail, and exposed to them the quality of their own faith and love. God works on you in exile.

2. Focus less on world-given and world-rewarded identity markers and more on God-given identity.

Who we are is inevitably caught up in where we come from and who we come from. But through Christ, we are brought into a new family—the people of God. And this call—to be in this family—was determined

before the world was created. Your roots go back deeper with the people of God than they do with whoever you call your current kin.

3. You're a work in progress, and who you will finally be, God knows.

Trust Him and His Spirit in this work.

4. Rest most deeply, not in who you are, but whose you are.

The German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote this poem in a Nazi prison, just weeks before he was executed for his opposition to the regime. His confinement puts ours in perspective. And yet his questions are as piercing as ever. *Who Am I?*

"Who am I? They often tell me
I stepped from my cell's confinement
Calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
Like a Squire from his country house.

Who am I? They often tell me
I used to speak to my warders
freely and friendly and clearly,
as through it were mine to command.

Who am I? They also tell me
I bore the days of misfortune
equably, smilingly, proudly,
like one accustomed to win.

Am I then really that which other men tell of?

Or am I only what I myself know of myself?
Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
Struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing
My throat, yearning for colors, for flowers, for the voices of birds,
thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness,
tossing in expectation of great events,
powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,
weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
faint, and ready to say farewell to it all.

Who am I? This or the Other?

Am I one person to-day and to-morrow another?
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
And before myself a contemptible woebegone weakling?
Or is something within me like a beaten army
Fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely question of mine,
Whoever I am, Thou Knowest, O God, I am thine."

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945)

Endnotes

1. Lori Gottlieb, "How to Land Your Kid in Therapy," *The Atlantic* (July/August, 2011).