

Hope in Exile - 1 Peter 1:1-12

How are Christians to live when they feel out of place in the world? When they are in small scattered groups surrounded by those who do not follow Jesus. These are the kind of people Peter writes to with words of great encouragement!

Scattered Refugees

When Peter comes to describe those he is writing to he calls them scattered refugees.

Some of you at St. Luke's may well think of yourself as one of a number of scattered refugees. Possibly because of events out of your control, you have been forced to leave your home, to move to an unfamiliar place where you have no status and the culture, customs and possibly even language feels alien.

Those who you may have known and been close to, perhaps family members, have also been forced to leave their homes, but have ended up in different places. Whereas in the past you would have found joy and comfort from meeting with them, now you are scattered refugees. Far apart from each other.

Our Present Situation as a Church

There are some parallels with the present situation of our church during this covid-19 situation. For months as a church family we have been exiled from our home, the place where we gather, unable to meet together, but scattered to our different houses.

Whereas once we would have gained comfort and encouragement from meeting with each other, now we are forced to be apart. Even this week as we are allowed to return to the buildings, the continuing concerns of infection by many and the major restrictions on how we meet, mean that as a family of Christians we continue to be scattered.

And particularly for those of you living in families that are not all Christians, it can feel like you are among people who have a different culture and outlook to you. You can in a sense feel like a refugee, scattered from your friends.

The First Readers

We cannot know much for certain about the background of the people Peter was writing to, but we know that they were scattered over a vast area of what is now Northern Turkey. In those days this was part of the Roman Empire, but much of it was very remote full of strange peoples with different customs not necessarily in tune with the outlook of the rest of the empire.

In the middle of the first century as Christianity was beginning to spread around the empire, the emperor Claudius reigned in Rome from AD41 to AD54. Not only was he the emperor when the Romans conquered England, but he was also responsible for setting up colonies in the remote regions mentioned at the start of 1 Peter. He was also responsible for expelling the Jews from Rome during his reign.

One suggestion is that the Christians Peter is writing to had been part of the church in Rome, where he had been preaching, but were expelled from Rome as Christian Jews and decided to settle in the new Roman colonies set up in these regions.

These were people who due to circumstances beyond their control were scattered and living in places with a strange culture. Even more challenging having been part of a large Christian network in Rome, they were now small groups of Christians in a world, where Christianity itself had been ridiculed. There was every chance that they were both practically and spiritually scattered refugees.

So what does Peter, one of Jesus's closest followers want to say to such scattered readers?

Well as he starts his letter he offers them:
a celebration of their identity in Christ
comfort for their suffering
confidence in their heritage.

Through it all he keeps the focus on Jesus and the key theme of suffering leading to glory.

Celebration of our identity in Christ

So first of all he celebrates their identity in Christ.

When we want to encourage people we often try and build up their self-esteem by telling them something wonderful about themselves. Most ancient letters used a similar technique they would begin by telling their readers how wonderful they were. Even Paul's letters in the New Testament often begin by thanking God for the good things about his readers.

Peter begins, though not by praising his readers, but by praising God!! Yet, this is crucial to helping his readers deal with their situation. Because he wants them to celebrate the wonderful status they have as Christians.

vs. 6 - In all this you rejoice...

Chosen for a Special Relationship - 1:2

Even as he addresses them he tells them that they are chosen by God. That is what the word, 'elect means.' To be chosen by anyone is an enormous privilege. From being chosen to be in a football team at school, to being chosen for a job you want or even being chosen by your spouse as the one that they want to spend the rest of their lives with, to be chosen is a privilege.

As Christians you have been chosen by God!!

But what have we been chosen for?

The phrase in verse 2, may seem quite odd to you:

"for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood:"

Probably Peter is alluding to an important event in the history of Israel. He is referring to what in a way was the marriage ceremony between God and the Israelites.

Israel, had been rescued by God from slavery in Egypt, but now they were refugees wandering around the wilderness. Yet, it is in this vulnerable state that God comes to them and chooses them. He gives them the Law to follow on Mount Sinai and then in a special ceremony recorded in Exodus 24, the Israelites promise to obey God's law and Moses scatters them with the blood of sacrificial animals as a sign that this new special relationship or covenant between God and Israel has now come into place. Israel became God's chosen people.

Peter is saying to his readers, as Christians even as you feel like refugees, God has entered into this special relationship with you, marked not by the blood of sacrificed animals, but by the even greater blood of the sacrifice of Jesus. As Jesus said at the last supper, this is the blood of the New Covenant.

As Christians, you may feel like refugees in the world, but your relationship with God is special and sealed by the death of Christ.

Certain Hope - 1:3-5

So, we have been chosen by God and Peter moves on in verse 3 to say that this is also a new birth. It means a new start in life with a new Father - God!

But, now the focus is not on our relationship with God, but on the certain hope or living hope that God has given us.

Many people in our world put their hope on things that are far from secure and certain:
they hope to have a well paid job,
they hope to find the perfect husband or wife,
they hope to have good health into old age,
they hope to have a wonderful holiday in America.

We can never be certain in life that any of these things will hold true. Sadly and often many of these hopes fall apart:

- we're made redundant from our jobs
- marriages fall apart
- our health fails
- and holidays are cancelled

Our hopes in this life are fragile and even when they do work out as we hope, they are only temporary.

As Christians, however, we have a certain hope. It is an inheritance that is eternal and secured by God ready for us to collect at the end of the age.

This is indeed something to rejoice about.

And it is something that we can continue rejoicing in, even as we face the struggles and suffering of this life.

Comfort for our suffering

And in verse 6, Peter turns to the whole issue of suffering. Peter is vague here about the kind of sufferings he is talking about, but the rest of the letter makes clear that as Christians who are like refugees in the world, we will expect to suffer in some way, simply because we are different to the world around.

Nonetheless on top of the fact that such suffering cannot take away the joy we have because of our certain hope, there are two other things Peter points to in order to comfort us in our suffering, both of which are tied to the fact that as Christians suffering is the path to glory.

Short Lived - 1:6, 8-9

First of all, Peter reminds us that our suffering is short lived. It is for a little while. It is always easier to cope with any suffering if we know it has an end point and even easier when we know that end point is glorious.

God has guaranteed our coming salvation that will be fully revealed when Christ returns. Our suffering will come to an end.

Serves a Purpose - 1:7

But, not only that our suffering now serves a purpose. For when we suffer as Christians and endure it, it is proof that our faith is genuine.

Peter uses the illustration of gold. Gold is refined by fire. The metal is heated up and all the dross, the bits in the metal that are not gold are taken off. It takes fire to bring out the genuine faith.

In the same way suffering brings out our genuine faith. It forces us to stop relying on the wrong things and to start relying on the fundamental truths of what God has done for us in Jesus.

For some Christians it may be that they come to church because they get a great lift from singing along with a large group of people. Certainly it is wonderful to do that, but reliance on that experience is not part of genuine faith. In our present situation as a scattered people we cannot do that, but if we are thus forced to focus more on the deeper truths of our faith and rely on them, then our faith is being refined and made genuine.

And a genuine faith is worth far more than gold. You cannot take gold with you into eternity, but genuine faith will carry you into the glory that comes beyond suffering. Suffering serves a purpose and so we should not be overwhelmed by it. Rather it should help us to focus even more on our salvation.

Confidence from their heritage - 1:10-12

And Peter says, this salvation although something new and wonderful because of Christ, was something that has been looked forward to by the prophets of old.

In the last couple of verses of this introduction to the letter he wants to give his readers confidence from their spiritual heritage. From the Old Testament.

Jesus was clear that he was not tearing up the Old Testament, but fulfilling it. Peter is equally clear here that the truth of Jesus's death and resurrection of his suffering leading to glory is not just a new idea, but one that the Old Testament prophets had looked into, longing for it to come in their time.

And as we go through the rest of the book of Peter, we will discover again and again that he refers his readers to the Old Testament as a means of helping them deal with their present struggles as they look for their future hope.

Noah - (3:18-22 - Gen. 6-8)

In chapter 3 he talks about Noah. The one righteous person in a world so wicked that God destroyed it with a flood.

Because of events out of his control, he was forced from his home to live in an ark as the floods came. But, through these struggles he and his small family survived to the kind of resurrection beyond the flood.

David - (*Psalm 118 - 2:7; Psalm 34 - 3:10-12*)

Peter quotes the Psalms in a number of places and particularly Psalm 34 in chapter 3.

When David wrote Psalm 34 he was a refugee! He had fled from his home country, because King Saul was trying to kill him and he was forced to live among the Philistines, who were normally his enemies!!

Yet, David came through this period of exile to become the most important king of Israel. God promised this king who had suffered that one of his descendants would be the Messiah.

Isaiah - (*Isa. 53 - 2:21-25*)

In chapter 2, Peter quotes from Isaiah 53.

Isaiah foresaw the exile of Israel from their home country to be refugees in Babylon. In chapters 40-55 he writes to give hope to the people of Israel in the midst of their time as refugees. In chapter 53, he writes of the suffering servant, the one who bears the sins of his people and dies and yet comes alive to live again.

Peter wants us to see that suffering as kinds of scattered refugees or exiles, rejected by the people around us because of our faith is a common thread throughout the Bible, we shouldn't be surprised or knocked off track by it.

Rather we like the prophets of old should look to Jesus, to his sufferings and the glories of his resurrection that followed. So that we are comforted in our sufferings and increasingly celebrate the certain hope we have of our eternal glory!