

Exiles on Mission

How to Live as Christians in a Hostile World

Introduction

As Byron emphasized in both his first and second sermons in this series, a recurring theme of 1 Peter is suffering, especially unjust suffering. I particularly enjoyed his second sermon of the series on girding up the loins of our minds so that we are *Prepared for Action*. But I do hope we never again have to see him gird up his loins! No more loin-girding at Fellowship. That is off the table! No, it was really a great illustration for what is a central message of 1 Peter. Those first Christians in Anatolia, modern day Turkey, were being persecuted for their faith, and Peter knew it was going to get worse. Peter was writing from Rome, the capital where Emperor Nero lived, and persecution had already been severe (e.g., garden torches). Peter will be killed shortly after writing this letter.

He writes to the Christians living in **Anatolia** on the Eastern side of the empire where suffering is already happening and going to get worse. This is the same region the book of Revelation will be addressed to in less than 30 years. They were already experiencing various levels and forms of suffering for their faith, from verbal abuse to social exclusion, to legal proceedings, economic disadvantages, and in the most extreme cases, even death. Peter closes this letter by saying the devil is *prowling around like a lion seeking whom he may devour*. There's only 1 image that this would have conjured up in Christians' minds, and that's the gladiator games where Christians have already been fed to the lions for sport.

So, what we have in 1 Peter is Peter telling Christians how to think of themselves and how to live in any given culture that might be hostile to Christianity. I think that this is a relevant letter for our current cultural moment in the United States. Peter's ultimate goal is to reshape the way they think about their relationship to the surrounding culture. He wants them to think of themselves as a **colony of Heaven**.

Methodology

What I want to do is look at a couple things that Peter has to say, and then broaden out to see how that relates to similar themes in the NT. And then we will zoom back in on 1 Peter.

¹¹ Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. ¹² Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong,

they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.
~ 1 Peter 2:11-12

Peter says the first thing I want you to learn to do is think of yourselves as *foreigners and exiles*. This isn't the first time Peter has said that in this letter.

That's actually how he starts the letter.

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to God's elect exiles (those who reside as aliens), scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia... ~ 1 Peter 1:1

From the start, Peter wants them to think of themselves as people who don't belong. He says, "I know you're suffering because you are misunderstood, and that's because you are like immigrants."

Peter is not the only NT author who wants us to think of ourselves this way. In Hebrews chapter 11, for example, the author tells the stories of the heroes of the faith – Abraham & Sarah, Moses & David, Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego. He says these were heroes of the faith and they all had this in common: *they thought of themselves as exiles and pilgrims in the world, because they were looking forward to another country.* They said, "This world is not my home. I'm just passing through. I'm a pilgrim in this place." Michael Horton says all theology is pilgrim theology, wisdom for how to live in a world where it feels like you don't belong.

Now, what they do *not* mean by that is "this world is not my home *and it's never gonna be.*" What they mean is this world *in its current state* is not my home, and so with things as they currently are, I don't fit just right. Things are not the way they're supposed to be, but God is on a mission to put things right. Their hope was not to get out of this God-forsaken place and never come back. That's not what they meant when they said "Heaven." Heaven is great, but it's not the end of the story. **NT Wright says**, "Heaven is important, but it's not the end of the world!" The end of the story is Heaven coming down and being joined to the earth. That's what John sees in the last 2 chapters of Revelation. The final chapter is Heaven flooding the earth and God's people living forever with Him in the Heaven-joined-to-earth New Creation.

We know that's the way it will be, we just let it recede into the background of our beliefs sometimes. "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the..." "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven." God's kingdom is going to burst into the earth, and that is what puts things right. When God is king on the earth as He is in Heaven, things will work the way they're supposed to. There will be no more tears, no more death, no more war, there will be no marginalized or oppressed or discarded members of society. It is that Heaven-come-to-earth event that transforms the world into

New Creation. And those who have died in faith will be raised from the dead and given new bodies that are fit to live in a Heaven-come-to-earth world.

You remember those stories in the gospels after Jesus has been raised to new life where he is eating fish, but disappearing into thin air? He's walking through walls or appearing in rooms behind locked doors. It's as though he is walking in-and-out of different dimensions. He has put on a body that is fit for both worlds. One day, we too will participate in His resurrection. We will be raised to new life and be given bodies that are fit for the Heaven-come-to-earth New Creation, and we will live embodied lives and experience life the way God intended in God's put right world. That's the final chapter of the story, but in the meantime, the world is not the way it's supposed to be, but **God is on a mission to put things right.**

Missio Dei

Look over at your neighbor and say, "God is on a mission." God is on a mission to put right what went wrong. Scholars call it the **Missio Dei**. Over 40 times in the gospel of John alone Jesus says he has been "sent." "I have been sent from Heaven to earth fulfill my Father's will." That word "sent," in Greek is **αποστελλω (apostello)**, which means *to be sent to one from another*. It's where we get the word apostle. In Latin it's where we get the word missionary. Jesus was quite literally saying, "I am God's missionary. God is on a mission, at His very core, **He is a missionary God**. And Jesus was saying, He has sent me into the world to accomplish the central phase of that mission." **There are different phases in God's rescue mission. In one phase, He sends the Son. In the next phase, He sends the Spirit, and in the next phase, He sends the church.**

So, when Jesus ascended, that didn't end God's rescue mission. It kickstarted another phase. Jesus said, "I must go, but when I go, God will *send* another comforter, the Spirit of truth." It's that same word, missionary. The Spirit of God is the next crucial phase in God's rescue mission. The Spirit is at work in the church doing things to advance the mission of God. (The Bible! The gifts and ministries in the church. Jesus instituted the Church, and the Spirit—by His gifts and ministries—constitutes us as the Church.)

In **John 20:21**, the resurrected Jesus blows on His disciples, and they receive the Spirit. And what Jesus says to them is significant: "As the Father *sent* me, so now I am *sending* you." Look over at your neighbor and say, "I'm a missionary!" The Spirit draws us up into the mission of the missionary God so that we participate in His mission. It's His mission. I think it's important that we reframe it that way. For too long we have thought that the church has a mission. But it's not so much that God's church has a mission. It's that God's mission has a church.

“It is not so much the case that God has a mission for his church in the world, as that God has a church for his mission in the world. Mission was not made for the church; the church was made for mission – God’s mission.”

— **Christopher J.H. Wright**

That’s why we call it **the Great Co-mission!** And what is the first word of the great commission? **“Go.”** As we get back into 1 Peter, we’re going to see that Peter uses the story of Israel’s exodus from Egypt to help us make sense of our mission. Because there are many similarities, but here is one crucial difference: In the story of Israel, God is rescuing Israel out of Egypt where they were exiles and gathering them into one geographical location to represent him to the other nations. In our case, he is sending us as exiles into the various countries to represent him from within their nations.

1 Peter: Exiles

That’s why Peter says, “I want you to think of yourselves as exiles, immigrants with another motherland.” And he is going to build upon that metaphor. Peter is going to say, “You are **exiles/immigrants from another land. You have a new birth, a new family, a new nation, a new identity, and a new home.**”

A New Birth (1 Peter 1:23-25)

Peter says, “I want you to think of yourselves as exiles, immigrants with another motherland.” And we can imagine them saying, “Peter, I’m a Roman. I was born a Roman, raised in Rome. I’ve been here my whole life. I have Roman ways of thinking and Roman ways of being in the world.” But Peter says, “Ah, yes, but **you’ve been born again.**” Some of your translations might say born *from above*. Peter says, “You’ve been born anew, born from above. You have a new set of guiding values to draw from, a new culture to embody, a new way of being in the world.” I know that you’ve been shaped by your upbringing. You can’t help but be. But you have another source to draw from now.

Peter says, “You have a new birth. You have been born again, not from perishable seed but from imperishable seed.” The word Peter uses there for seed is the Greek word **σπέρμα (spérma)**. It’s where we get our word for the male reproductive cell. “You’ve been born again, born into a new life. Heaven is your homeland and God is your Father. And His children are born from an imperishable seed.” Other people will die. Other nations will be forgotten. Rome, in all her glory, is going away and so will all her citizens.

Rome was all about the glory. That’s why Peter throws in the **next couple verses.**

*“All people are like grass,
and all their glory is like the flowers of the field;
the grass withers and the flowers fall,
but the word of the Lord endures forever.”*

And this is the word that was preached to you.

Rome, in all her glory, is going away and so will all her citizens. But Heaven isn't going anywhere. And neither is her people! You are immigrants from above! You have a new homeland, whose glory will never fade.

Since you have a new birth, from a new land, you have a new way of life. I know you have an inherited culture, and you've been raised a particular way, but you have another heritage now to draw from. It's time to be retrained. So (1 Peter 2:1-2),

So rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. ² Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation...

You've been born again, into a new way of living. Crave it, embody it so that you might grow up in your salvation.

A New Family

You've been born into a new family, and God is your Father. A few verses down, Peter is going to tell them to "love their brothers and sisters" (1 Peter 2:17). We pass over that and don't give it much thought, because we've been raised in the Christian faith. But this was a novel idea in the Roman world. In that culture, you did not call anyone brother or sister if they were not your sibling. Rome had a very strict social hierarchy and much of it was based upon the home. You had the *paterfamilias*, which was the man of the house, the father of the family, and one of his primary roles was to lead the worship of his household. He was, in various respects, the priestly figure of the home. And every home had particular deities or entities that it venerated. One was the emperor, one was whatever gods were deemed to be responsible for their economic livelihood, and one was the family *genius*, or the family spirit.

We think of a *genius* as an innate talent or ability. To them, those innate qualities came from the family spirit. Think of it, if you like, as DNA with a personality. Every family was thought to have its own spirit. It was tied to their ancestors and it sustained and united them as a family. It had special times and places in the home wherein the man of the house would lead the family in prayer to and veneration of the family spirit.

It is into that cultural setting that Peter says, "No, you have been born into a new family. And that family is united by the one true Spirit, the Spirit of God. You have God as your Father and one another as siblings."

A New Nation

You have a new homeland, a new birth, a new way of life, a new family, and you are a new nation (1 Peter 2:9-10).

You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God.

Peter uses 2 significant words in the passage. They are the words γένος (*genos*) and ἔθνος (*ethnos*). Peter wants us to understand that God is building His own nation. He says, “think of it as a new race, if that helps.” People are being selected from every earthly nation, to make up God’s one diverse nation. In Revelation 7, John sees a multitude of people in Heaven, worshiping before the throne and he says they were from every tribe, nation, culture, and tongue on earth. This is the nation that God is building. He’s not taking them out of their earthly countries, He’s leaving them there to live as immigrant-missionaries.

Peter wants to say, “This is where your allegiance now lies. To this new nation. To the people of God. To the community that God is building in the world, wherever they may reside.”

A New Identity

And to make sure that they know how to live as God’s missionaries, Peter gives them a new identity.

You are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

He says, “As you live among the nations, wherever you may be, live as God’s priests.”

Israel’s priests had 3 primary functions for our purposes today: (1) holiness, (2) mediation, and (3) sacrifice. The hierarchy of Israel’s priestly vocation can best be understood in concentric circles. At the outside were the Gentile nations. Among the nations, Israel was meant to be a priestly nation mediating God’s presence to the rest of the world. In the next circle is the Levites, who served as priests to Israel. At the center was the High priest, who served as priest to the Levites and then represented all of the nation to God on the Day of Atonement.

The Temple was thought about in similar terms. It was believed that the closer you got to the inner room of the Temple where God’s presence on seated at the mercy seat, the

more holy it got, and the more holiness was required. You see that in the names that were given to the Temple, right? You entered the Holy place and then as you entered behind the veil you entered “the Most Holy place,” or the “Holy of holies.” It was the holiest place of all. Remember in Corinthians, Paul said that when Moses came out of the presence of God he had to wear a veil over his face because the glory of God shined so brightly. He was so close to the direct presence of God that God’s very life was radiating off of him.

Peter wants us to know that as the priests of God, all of life is lived before him. We are temples of the Holy Spirit, and our lives should reflect the fact that we have been in His presence. It is as we live lives that are more reflective of Christ’s that people begin to see that we are living in God’s presence. In the gospels, Jesus is like a walking Temple, the glory of God at its most intense, walking around in human flesh. People are coming to him for forgiveness of sins. There was one place you would go for forgiveness as a Jew and that was the Temple. He is walking by people, and they are being healed. They are touching the hem of his garment and being healed. There was one place you went for cleansing and healing in that world, and it was the Temple. But Jesus is a mobile Temple, walking around and mediating the presence of God to those around him.

In the book of Acts, you see the same things happening with Peter, the guy writing this letter! Peter is just walking around and as soon as his shadow touches people, they are healed! And part of the point that he wants to make is that we are God’s priestly nation, and we mediate his presence to the world around us. So, the lives we live should reflect the fact that we live all of life before Him.

Can I say one thing? There is no moment that passes when worship is not happening. At any given moment, our thoughts, words, or actions are either directed to and flowing from God or something else. Worship never stops. The question is whether or not we are worshiping God with our lives or something else. That’s why Paul will say “Whatever you do, in word or deed, do it all in the name of Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col. 3:17).

Phronesis

Living like immigrant among our own native kin is hard. It requires wisdom and perseverance. We’ve been shaped by two different cultures. We have the culture we’ve been raised in. It’s determined how we think, what we believe, what we value, how we talk, how we act. And now we’ve been given this new heritage. A new birth, a new homeland, a new way to think and act and live.

This whole passage here that we’re looking at in 1 Peter is an example of the Greek idea **φρόνησις (phrónēsis)**, which has to do with *knowing how to live wisely in*

the world. *Phrónēsis* is where we get our word “schizophrenia,” which has to do with having more than one mind. Peter is not the only NT writer to employ the idea. Paul uses it often. He uses *phrónēsis*, for instance, in Philippians 2, when he says “let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus...” And his point is to say, in essence, you have a second mind available to you. In 1 Corinthians 2:16 Paul says, “We (the church) have the mind of Christ.” And we are told to *put on* the mind of Christ.

The idea, especially in Peter’s writings, is that you have a second personality available to you, a second mind, the mind of Christ. You have one way of thinking, which you learned from your raising. You learned how to think from your surrounding culture and environment. Some of those things were explicitly taught, and some of it was just caught. Nobody explicitly taught you to think or behave that way. You grew up in it, and it was the just part of the way things are. You absorbed it and it shaped you into the person and lives and believes the way you do.

But Peter wants to say, “You’ve been given access to a different way of thinking, a different way of seeing. You’ve been given a second mind, the mind of Christ. And the hope is that you’ll begin to think along with him. The hope is that his thinking will begin to reshape your thinking, so that the things he values begin to change the things you value. So that your life might start looking more like his.”

So it takes wisdom to know which pieces of your surrounding culture you can accept, which pieces could possibly be redeemed, and which pieces we should distance ourselves from.

A New House

It takes perseverance because, as you begin to reject some pieces of culture that you used to take part in, you are going to be misunderstood. People are going to think you’re weird sometimes. Maybe even dangerous. And because of that, there are going to be times when people persecute you. In chapter 4 verse 4 he says, “You used to live just like them and now all the sudden you don’t. They are going to be surprised and heap abuse on you.” You’re going to be misunderstood.

You’re going to be rejected. But remember this: so was Jesus. He was rejected to the point of death. But he did not retaliate, and instead he blessed them. I think that’s what is expected of us as well. Jesus said, “Bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you.” **And here Peter says**, “You are priests offering spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God.” Or to say it as Paul did, “You must present your bodies as living sacrifices... That is true and proper worship” (Romans 12:1).

It’s not easy, but it’s how God builds a place for His dwelling among us. Jesus was rejected, but he offered his life as a sacrifice and entrusted himself to God. And as a result, God made him the foundation stone of the church. And Peter says, “You’re going to be rejected also, but if you will live by Christ’s example, you too will be a stone

in that Temple.” God will you to build a dwelling place for himself, a place where heaven is present on the earth between now and the day when all things are put right.

Conclusion

The Epistle to Diognetus is one of the earliest apologies/defenses of the Christian faith, that explains and defends Christianity as a new and misunderstood religion of the Roman Empire. We don't know exactly who wrote it. The author of the work did not identify himself by name, but he did refer to himself as a “disciple of the Apostles.” The recipient was referred to as Diognetus, which some scholars have identified with a Stoic philosopher by the same name who tutored the young Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Whatever the case, it was written to describe the lives of Christians living in Anatolia 60-100 years after Peter wrote to them. Listen to how he describes the lives of Christians there:

“Christians are no different from the rest in their nationality, language or customs... They live in their own countries, but as sojourners. They fulfill all their duties as citizens, but they suffer as foreigners. They find their homeland wherever they are, but their homeland is not in any one place... They are in the flesh, but do not live according to the flesh. They live on the earth but are citizens in heaven. They obey all laws, but they live at a level higher than that require by law. They love all, but all persecute them.”

It seems like the Christians Peter wrote to accepted the mission. Will you accept the mission today?

In the church, love the brethren, out of the church, do good so that in the end, they will see your ways really are the way to life.