

Last Sunday we wrapped up a series on the book of Haggai. It was to the remnant of Israel who had returned from Babylonian captivity and were called to resume faithful worship of God and look ahead in hope to his salvation. What preceded that return was 70 years of exile in Babylon. The Jews were foreigners, outsiders, aliens in a land that was not their own, subject to the oppression of their captors and the influence of cultural norms and spiritual beliefs that didn't belong to them either. They were faced with the challenge of remaining obedient to God, or allowing themselves to become indistinct from the kingdom in which they now resided. Could they thrive as the people of Israel while living as exiles in a different nation?

Fast-forward 600+ years, and the people of God were once again faced with a similar dilemma, but this time it was followers of Jesus. This morning we begin a series in the book of 1 Peter called *Thriving in Babylon*. Though the Babylonian Empire no longer existed, Peter makes reference to it in his letter. He's following the prophetic pattern of referring to any corrupt nation as Babylon. And in this case, he's referring to Rome.

Until that time, the church had been experiencing peaceful growth in the Gentile world. But that began to change in AD 64 when Nero became emperor. After Rome burned, Christians began to be persecuted, and that persecution started to spread throughout the empire. Additionally, those who now professed an allegiance to Christ were being ostracized from their families and communities, and felt pressure to revert back to their pagan ways. How could they remain living as the distinct family of God while living in a world they no longer belonged to?

Peter declared the purpose of his letter is to "exhort and declare the true grace of God". His aim is to encourage and console us by reminding us who we are in Christ, who we are in the world, and how we are to live in light of that tension, particularly as it relates to trials and suffering. How do we not only survive, but thrive, in our lives and in our faith in light of living in two worlds? That's what we are going to consider over the next several weeks. These first nine verses set the foundation for the rest of the book.

[1 Peter 1:1] Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.

For us to thrive in this life, we must first understand who we are in the world and who we are in Christ. It's a question of identity. In v1, Peter refers to us as "elect exiles". It's in the nexus of these two identities where we find our struggle, but it's also where we find opportunity.

As exiles, we live in a kingdom not our own.

While we live in the kingdom of man, this is not our home. Christians are temporary residents of one country while a permanent citizen of another. An exile is a foreigner or stranger, passing through on a pilgrimage to their eternal home. They are resident aliens, living outside their own country while choosing or being forced to live in another. We are also of the Dispersion, a term that means "the scattering". It referred to the covenant people of Israel who were exiled but didn't return. The implication is for Christians to view themselves in the same way; the covenanted people of God scattered throughout a world that is not their home.

Have you ever felt like a foreigner? I have in the Jerusalem market called The Shuk. I didn't speak the languages being spoken, didn't understand the commerce and culture going on around me, and I didn't recognize half of the foods I saw. My German/Irish pigment stood out. My 6'2"-ness stood out. Even my cargo shorts stood out! I felt completely out of place. That's what being an exile is. The challenge for us is to remain faithful while living away from home.

In a prayer to his Heavenly Father, Jesus said his followers were not of this world, but he asked that we be kept in it. If he wants us here, he must have something for us to do. That becomes clear as we understand the other half of our identity.

As elect, we look forward to a kingdom we call home.

Philippians 3:20 tells us followers of Jesus are citizens of heaven. That is our home. While in the kingdom of man, we travel with our heavenly passport as representatives of the King. We are able to thrive in this world because of what God has done for us.

[1 Peter 1:1-5] 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. ³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

In five verses, Peter lays out one of the most condensed and most beautiful proclamations of salvation in Christ and the benefits of being a citizen of heaven. He begins with the saving work of each member of our Triune God. The Father has chosen us as his own, the Holy Spirit has set us apart for service to God and to obediently pursue the call God has placed on our lives, all made possible through the shedding of Christ's blood on our behalf.

We have been born again to a living hope (do you think we live in a world that could use a little hope?) It's a hope that is alive because it is based on the resurrected Christ. Hope is not crossing your fingers and wishing for something to happen. Hope is looking forward to something in confident expectation. Jesus said "Because I live, you shall live also." Hope propels us forward in this life because we know we too shall be raised to eternal life.

Our citizenship grants us an inheritance. This promise could have been especially important to the original recipients of this letter because, as a consequence of their faith in Jesus Christ, many could have been disowned by their families and cut out of any inheritance. But this goes beyond the passing of land and stuff from one generation to the next.

My grandmother passed away when I was seventeen years old, and she left me a small bit of money in her will that I quickly turned into my first car: a 1981 two-door Toyota Tercel hatchback 5-speed. And while I loved that car, my inheritance was only temporary, eroded by time, the elements, and the driving philosophy of 17-year-old who was rather fond of going fast. In the end, my inheritance lost all value, and I sold that car for a \$1.

But that's not the kind of inheritance citizens of the kingdom of heaven will receive. Our inheritance is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading. As one commentator says, it is "untouched by death, unstained by evil, unimpaired by time." It is reserved for us, meaning it cannot be taken away. You may have everything in this life but, like my car, it is temporary and fleeting, and cannot bear the weight of your hope. You may have nothing in this life, sometimes to the point of hopelessness. Know this morning that your inheritance in heaven is secured by God and it has your name on it. It written in permanent ink with a heavenly Sharpie, and it is yours for eternity.

Not only is our inheritance being kept safe in heaven, the heirs of that inheritance are also being protected. This is a promise of great comfort to those who are vulnerable. It's one thing to trust God in Dallas. It's quite another to trust him while ISIS closes in. Peter uses a military term to tell us we are being shielded by God's power, securing our salvation to come. No matter what happens in this life, our eternity with God is certain.

But that protection is not a guarantee we will be free from troubles in this life. In fact, Peter continues by preparing us for the difficulty that's to come. But his message is not one of hopelessness but is, instead, one of potential.

As elect exiles, we can experience joy and grow in our faith while in the tension between both kingdoms. If we are a citizen of one kingdom and resident alien of another so incompatible to one another, it should come as no surprise that they will occasionally collide.

[1 Peter 1:6-9] ⁶ In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷ so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. ⁸ Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, ⁹ obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

The life of an elect exile is one that includes suffering through many different trials. But suffering is not something we simply have to endure, or just get through. Suffering has a purpose. Peter encourages us by saying suffering is temporary, in light of eternity, and suffering is necessary, meaning it is to our benefit when it occurs.

Suffering tests our faith. It is the crucible we go through to see if our faith is genuine or artificial. Those who truly believe will persist when trials come, continuing to trust God in all circumstances. The only way to test the sturdiness of a structure is to place weight upon it. Trials test us by showing if we can faithfully stand up under the heaviness of suffering.

Suffering purifies our faith. Just like the impurities in gold are burned away when it is heated, suffering purifies us by burning away anything that is not genuine faith that may be a hindrance to our relationship with Jesus.

Suffering increases our hope and results in glory to God. Suffering is the harsh, but merciful, reminder that this world is not our home, and that our eternity is secure. Suffering increases our dependence on God, allowing us to experience his sufficient grace, resulting in our joy and his glory.

Suffering is a central theme in Peter's letter because suffering is central to living life as an elect exile. It is a training ground for citizens of heaven, a catalyst for spiritual growth, and a mirror that allows us to reflect our hope and God's glory to the world.

So what do we do with this. I want to challenge you, as elect exiles, to consider and answer three questions, not just this morning, but throughout this entire series.

What evidence is there that you are an exile in this world?

How are you different? How do you stand out? In other words, if I didn't know you were a Christian, could I tell you were a Christian by observing your life? The challenge for us, particularly in the American church, is that it is so easy to feel at home in this world. We become a little too much "resident", and not enough "alien".

The pressure and potential discomfort of living as an exile, and of possibly experiencing consequences for being an outsider, creates the temptation for us to compromise our faith by modifying our values and practices so that we might better fit in. Peter's letter is a call to resist that. Over the course of the next several weeks, Peter is going to show us how to live as an elect exile in this kingdom. I want to encourage you to hold up your life against that standard and let God show you how to live more faithfully to him.

How are you engaging the kingdom of man?

Just like we can lean one way and be too much of a resident, we can lean the other way and be too much of an alien. Peter is writing to followers of Jesus who are under duress for their faith. How should they live with those in this world in light of that? He understands that their natural reaction may be to fight back, to make trouble, or to disengage. But that response goes against the purpose of us being in this world.

If you remember back in v.1 where we read the word "Dispersion", we explained it as being scattered throughout. But there's more to it. Peter uses a form of an agricultural word meaning "to sow", as in sowing seeds. Based on the sovereignty of God, you have been scattered to this time and this place. God has planted you into the world to be an active participant in it, and to live a life of faith based on our certain salvation, for all of this worldly kingdom to see. But if we don't stay focused on the purpose God has for us living in this world, we run the risk of veering off course in one of two ways.

The first is that we begin to take an "us vs. them" mentality. As hostility towards our faith grows, we may be inclined to become defensive and want to fight back. We live in a day where everyone is being told they have to pick sides on every issue, and that everyone on the other side is evil and deserves nothing but your disdain. It's so easy for us to fall into this pattern ourselves, but it's an approach guaranteed to never change anyone's mind.

This week I read an article that said a school district in Alabama has banned pre-game prayers over the stadium loudspeaker because they have been sued by the organization Freedom From Religion. Can I be honest with you? This organization makes my blood boil, and I sometimes want to fight back...and not in a nice way. **But we must resist because, if we don't, the message of our hope is distorted and the reputation of our home is tarnished.** We will see in this letter that trials not only test and grow our faith, but they can result in an opportunity to tell others why we are so hopeful. And if we do that, we may have the opportunity to pass on our hope to them.

The other way is that we choose to remove ourselves all together. We may live in this kingdom physically, but we are no part of it. But Jesus said "No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar or under a basket, but on a stand, so that those who enter may see the light." If we look at the worldly kingdom as a place to be avoided, we hide the light that is in us, and deprive citizens of the kingdom of this world the opportunity to see and hear about the glorious, hope-inducing salvation we have been given. **We don't change the world by removing ourselves from it or waging war against it. We change the world by showing them there's a better way.**

What is your "joy meter" reading these days?

When I ask another Christian how they are feeling, the answer I hear most often is "exhausted!" The pace of life is overwhelming and their relationship with Jesus is just one more thing to fit into their over-committed schedule. Do you know what answer I almost never hear? "Joyful!"

But how can that be? Why aren't more of us "rejoicing with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory", as Peter says? We've been born again into a living hope. JOY! We have an irrevocable inheritance in heaven. JOY! We have a future eternal salvation. JOY! Even trials and suffering can grow us in our faith. JOY! So where's the joy?

When you are under the oppression of the Roman Empire and at risk of being persecuted for your newfound faith, you're looking for some good news. You need something to hope for, and you delight in your heavenly citizenship. But for many of us, we don't feel like exiles. Since it's easy to feel at home in this world, our focus is often on the things of this world. When our faith is not tested, the magnitude of our salvation can diminish, and the presence of joy in our lives can begin to wane.

Now I would never wish trials on you, or encourage you to go stir up some persecution on yourself. But something we must understand is that **joy does not happen by accident.** Joy is the result of setting our minds and hearts on the promises of God, and Peter makes it clear throughout his letter that the lives of heavenly citizens should be saturated in joy. **Regardless of circumstance, a life lived in the presence of God, for the purpose of God, and with the people of God, will always result in joy.** Are you running at a joy deficit? If so, I encourage you to saturate your mind with glorious promises found in vv. 1-5. If you are in a Life Group with someone who is operating at a deficit, remind them often of the glory of vv. 1-5. And if you are someone who is full of joy, it's time to get infectious, not only for the worldly kingdom, but for your brothers and sisters in Christ.

And so I want to close with a story that illustrates what happens when we live the life Peter will call us to in his letter, when we live out our identity as elect exiles in this world. Commit to being here every Sunday through Thanksgiving so you can know, and be encouraged towards, what we are being called to. Our Outreach Pastor Cheryl Read recently told our staff the story of the story of a Muslim Syrian refugee couple she and her husband Chris are mentoring through our Refugee Connect Initiative. As this couple was recounting being attacked by ISIS and trying to escape Syria, they stopped and asked “Are you Christians?” Cheryl said yes, and they replied, “When we were trying to escape from ISIS, it was the Christians who helped us. That is how we know you are good and that you will help us.”

You are ambassadors of the kingdom of heaven, called to do the good, and sometimes painful, work of being God’s representative in this world. You are beacons of hope, created to live a life of contagious joy, and to show this dark kingdom there is something better. What an awesome privilege.