

Faithful in Exile

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1 Peter 1:1-2

I. Introduction

Good morning! If we haven't met yet, my name is Ethan. I'm one of the Pastors here at Union Church and I'm grateful to be standing on the precipice of a new year with you, looking at God's word together. If you have a bible, you can open up to 1 Peter 1. We'll be in verses 1 & 2 this morning. If you want to be prepared, you can also turn to Jeremiah 29 in the Old Testament and keep a finger there. We'll be spending some time there as well.

One of the things we are always aiming for as a church is to be a Bible Saturated people, because for followers of Jesus this is the primary way we can know God and his will for us. So that means that no matter what season of the year we'll be looking at The Book, studying a passage of scripture in our gatherings. Most of the time that looks like working through a book of the bible or a *part of* a book and moving through it passage by passage and verse by verse. Another way to saturate ourselves in the scriptures is to look for themes that weave themselves throughout the Bible and to pull on those threads so that various parts of God's word begin to work in concert to shape us according to the Word. And so as we kick off 2024, that's the kind of work we'll be doing. For the next several weeks, we'll be pulling on a thread that really begins in Genesis and shows up all the way through Revelation; and it's the biblical theme of exile.

Now, why exile? That's a great question and it reminds me of the classic 2001 cinematic masterpiece, *Spy Kids*. I'm sure that's where your mind went as well. In the film two kids, Juni and Carmen Cortez, don't know that their parents are secret agents. And early on Juni is dealing with bullies at school and as he walks into school his dad, played by Antonio Banderes, shouts to him: "Juni remember, you are a Cortez!" And this is meant to encourage Juni, but he just rolls his eyes. Why? Because he doesn't comprehend what it means to be a Cortez! It's not helpful to him. It's not until later in the movie when Juni finds out that he comes from a long line of secret agents, that he's able to be courageous and overcome even greater obstacles. Now, you can dock my points for that terrible reference, but the principle is what matters. Our stories - what we know to be true about ourselves - shape the way we respond to the world around us. A boy who doesn't think he comes from much, doesn't have resources to navigate troubled waters. But a boy who knows the blood of heroes runs in his veins can walk through life with resilience! The stories we tell ourselves about who we are influence the way we perceive ourselves, they shape our expectations for life, our sense of responsibility and purpose. For followers of Jesus, there are various ways we understand our story in Christ. We are adopted sons and daughters in God's family, citizens in God's kingdom, ambassadors for Christ, and more. All of these expressions of our identity in Christ give us a story about who we are that shapes the way we live in the world. And one aspect of our identity, one theme of our story that we cannot neglect as disciples of Christ, is our identity as exiles.

Let's think about the troubled waters we will likely navigate this year. In 2024 all of us will sail through the choppy waters of a divisive election. On top of that the tides of our culture will not only call into

question our Christian morals, but will press the question of whether or not Christianity itself is moral and safe. On top of that the waves of geopolitical conflict happening around the world will strain our society. And all the while you and I will be constantly tugged toward anxiety and apathy, sectarianism and self-centeredness by the undertow of busyness, ease, excess, and exhaustion. This is the world we live in. Tribal division, cultural idols, broken circumstances, sinful systems, individual iniquities. If you're a Christian, how will we navigate these waters without shipwrecking? How do we exist in the world as God's people?

The temptation is to go in at least three different directions. First, we can compromise. As we live in a world that drifts toward sin we can capitulate. Turn a blind eye to sin, adjust our moral standards, live to blend in, become like the world. Or, secondly, we can isolate. Cut off all possibility of contamination from the world. Only interact with people who look and think like us. Hide our light under a bushel. Or, thirdly, we can adopt a posture of conquest. Take on an embattled posture toward the world, see everything as a threat, turn every divergence of opinion into a vicious battle, see everyone who doesn't agree with you as the enemy, fight the culture war, prioritize power so that we can win at all costs, and fall into fear when ground is lost.

Compromise, Isolation, or conquest. Friends, I don't want any of those options for God's church. More importantly, all three of those postures toward culture run against the grain of the Biblical calling for Christians. So what are we to do? How will you and I be people united by the gospel to make disciples for the glory of God and the joy of all peoples in a time when our culture is giving us so many opportunities to off-ramp into unfaithfulness to our calling as Christians?

In the book of 1 Peter, the Apostle Peter is writing to a group of Christians who are living in the Roman Empire, in a culture of increasing discomfort for believers. It's not likely that they were yet experiencing all-out persecution, but certainly more and more cultural rejection. So they're followers of Jesus who are pulled between these same temptations: do we compromise with the culture? Do we isolate from the world? Do we go to war with our culture? They're asking the questions we are asking! And into this situation, Peter writes a letter that begins, "To those who are elect exiles..."

Now that expression of our Christian identity - as elect exiles living in the world - is one that gives the Church purpose, hope, and resilience for existing in the world. It shapes how we engage with culture in all of life. We're going to spend the next few weeks looking at how our identity as exiles should shape our approach to things like vocation, community, Marriage and sexuality in exile, politics in exile. But today, we're just going to spend some time laying the foundations on this aspect of our Christian identity, because at the root of it, all the scriptures are telling us that seeing ourselves as God's elect exiles helps us live faithfully in a sin-filled world.

II. Old Testament Exiles

Now, I mentioned that the theme of exile runs through the whole bible. This is why Peter can begin his letter by saying, "To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion..." without much explanation. It's a little bit like - remember how a few years ago the "Tea Party" was a big deal in politics? Well the name "Tea Party" is a reference to American history, right? The Boston Tea Party. Now, nobody who

said they were a part of the “Tea Party” in 2009 was an actual member of the Boston Tea Party in the 1700’s. But they took on that name because that moment in 1773 in American history exemplified something that they saw to be true about their agenda in the early 2010’s, right? Well in the same way, the Apostle Peter is writing to this group of Christians in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey), giving them a label that references a significant moment in Biblical history because that moment in the history of Israel resonates with where these Christians in Asia Minor are at centuries later. So in order to understand our exile we’ve got to do some OT history together. (And as a quick aside, if you’d like to revisit this theme after today, I recommend heading over to thebibleproject.com and searching “exile,” because some of their resources were really helped me sum up all of this history.)

To be in exile means to be forced to leave your native land, to be a resident alien in a foreign place - to be deported, destabilized, longing for home. In the story of the Bible this is where the people of Israel found themselves. After they had come into the promised land, after the prosperous periods of King David & King Solomon, after a long era of mostly unfaithful kings, after division in the kingdom, and after continual straying into idolatry, in 586 BC God allowed for his people to be conquered by the Babylonian Empire. They were deported from the Promised Land, living in exile in Babylon, longing for the homeland that they had lost. In the OT, the stories of Daniel, Esther, and parts of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah all take place in this period of time when God’s people were exiled from the Promised Land.

Now if you’re an ancient Israelite exiled in Babylon, longing for home you are asking, “How did we get here?” and “Is there any hope of being restored to the promised land?” And these are the questions that the whole story of scripture are set up to answer. Because if we rewind to the very beginning of the Bible, we see that Humanity has a home, right? God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. They could live there as God’s people, in God’s place, in perfect relationship with God as long as they obeyed God’s one command: don’t eat the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. And when Adam and Eve disobey God’s command, what happens? Their sin separates them from God. They are cast out of the Garden. They’re sent into exile.

And as the story of scripture continues, the pattern of longing for a homeland and living in exile continues. God calls Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and these people are sojourners - nomadic people without a homeland. And God promises them The Land: God’s chosen people, living in God’s place again, under God’s rule again. Moses leads God’s people out of Egypt, through the wilderness. They’re sojourners journeying toward the Promised Land. Joshua leads the people into the Promised Land and the condition for remaining in the homeland God had promised was that the people remain faithful to their covenant relationship with God, just like in the Garden. And after unfaithfulness on top of unfaithfulness, God again casts them out of the land, into exile in Babylon. This is the period of Israel’s history that gets the title, The Exile.

Now, when the people of Israel were exiled in Babylon, God had a message for them that he gave through the prophet Jeremiah. Listen to what God says to the exiles in Jeremiah 29:4-7.

⁴ “Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. ⁶ Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your

daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. ⁷ But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

Build houses, plant gardens, take wives, have children. In other words, God is saying, do what I told my people to do since Genesis 1: cultivate the earth and multiply. And then God has this surprising addition: as you live in this foreign land, in a land that is not your home and filled with idolaters; seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you. Live as my distinct people within the culture of the city, seeking it's flourishing as you wait for your true home.

Now that's what God said to Israel when they were in exile in Babylon. But that's not the end of exile in the OT. Eventually God allows his people to return to the Promised Land. But when they come home, it isn't the home they had longed for. They were still forced to live under the rule of oppressive empires, the Israel that is rebuilt is nothing compared to its former glory, God's people continue to live in unfaithfulness to God, and so the prophets of the OT tell God's people, you're back in the land but exile isn't over. In the Bible, as the people who are back in the Land are told that they are still in a spiritual exile, Israel's exile in Babylon becomes a symbol and a metaphor for a spiritual reality. Its not just for the ancient Israelites, but all of humanity. Every human being is experiencing a soul-level alienation and spiritual displacement because their sin has cast them outside of relationship with God. And so the OT ends with a hope and a promise of a coming King who would rescue the world from the exile we've made for ourselves.

All of this is a flyover of the history that is packed into Peter's address to the elect exiles in the NT. But we're actually not done. Because a turn happens in the NT that takes all of this historical significance and adds an element of redemption to our exile. So now let's look at exile in the NT.

III. New Testament Exiles

As we come to the NT we're introduced to Jesus Christ - God who came to rescue the exiles. Jesus preached the good news of God's kingdom - a kingdom not of this world, but of heaven. A kingdom that we are meant to long for and anticipate as our true home. To a people who had lost their way and lived in spiritual exile, Jesus says, "I am preparing a place for you" (John 14:2) and "I am the way, the truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (14:6). He prays for his followers and says, "they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world." (17:14). Jesus' message to the spiritual exile was that there is a homeland and the homeland is with God and he is the only way to our home with the Father.

And not only did Jesus preach a message of good news to the spiritual exile, Jesus walked the ultimate path of exile. He left his throne in heaven and became poor. During his earthly ministry he literally lived without a home or a place to lay his head. Even though he was totally innocent, he endured the oppression of a criminal's cross, and was cast outside the city gates. On the cross he cried out the ultimate lament of those who have lost their home with God - "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And then after his death, he rose again and ascended to heaven where he sits enthroned at the right hand of the Father; King over the kingdom that we groan for. And now the

NT tells disciples of Jesus that our homeland is with Christ! We are citizens of heaven, waiting for our King to come again.

And, friends, *this* is why the apostle Peter writes to NT Christians five hundred years after the Babylonian Exile and uses this title “elect exiles” as a positive label to build them up and encourage them toward living faithfully as God’s people in the world. He’s saying to these believers, the condition that you are in right now - this state of discomfort, this growing oppression; this feeling of not being at home in the world - you are like God’s people who lived in exile in Babylon!

But unlike the OT exiles who were expelled from the land as a consequence for sin, you are God’s *elect* exiles. You are his chosen people! God has preselected you for rejection by the world. When he saved you, you became a citizen of the kingdom of heaven, which means that you will never be fully at home in the kingdoms of this world. That means that your experiences of displacement are not a punishment for your sin. They are a God-given hunger pangs that remind you of your identity and purpose! Peter wants us to see that even in our exile, we rest secure in God’s purpose for us and promises to us. Look at 1 Peter 1:2: “To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion... ² according to the foreknowledge of God the Father...” That means that we live as exiles because it’s God’s loving, gracious plan. He’s called us to live as resident aliens in the world on purpose. He goes on, “...in the sanctification of the Spirit...” that means that the Spirit’s work in you is setting you apart for God. We are exclusively his. We belong to the one who selected us. We have been consecrated; set aside for holy, redemptive work! All “...for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood...” Now that phrase, “sprinkling with his blood” harkens back to Exodus 24 when Moses initiates the people of Israel into a covenant relationship with God and sprinkles the people with the blood of the sacrifice to seal their promise. Peter is saying, in the same way, the blood of Jesus is applied to us and marks us as recipients of God’s promises. We pledge our allegiance and obedience to him.

Now, what are the Implications of all of this? Well if we are exiles we cannot be surprised by suffering, discomfort, rejection, and oppression. But since we are *God’s elect exiles*, we have been given the resources in Christ to endure as exiles with great hope. Because of the secure, sure, guaranteed promises of God we live like exiles, but we have an unassailable hope of a homeland. As followers of Jesus, we will endure discomfort, displacement, rejection, and oppression as resident aliens on the earth. Yet we can endure with patience, knowing that after the death of exile, Christ has guaranteed the resurrection-victory of a coming kingdom that cannot be shaken.

IV. Living Faithfully in Exile

So friends, since followers of Jesus are God’s elect exiles, that means we can read God’s letter to the exiles in Jeremiah as a letter to us. It means that God has given us instruction on how to live in the culture in which God has placed us.

As we wait for the better kingdom, we must live as exiles in the world rejecting the urge toward compromise with the culture. Why? Because we are sanctified by the Spirit and sprinkled with the blood of Christ. We’ve been set apart for God. Consecrated for redemptive work. We embrace exile as we prioritize the community of the local church over other cultural institutions. So we embrace exile

as we obey a sexual ethic that is foreign to our culture. We embrace exile as we navigate unbiblical social expectations or workplace requirements. In all these areas and more, because we know who we are, we expect to be on the outside of culture and we look not through the lens of “what sort of cultural relevance can I hold onto?” but “How do I love the things that God loves and hate the things that God hates, while striving for the good of this place where God has put me?”

As exiles in the world, we also have to reject the urge toward isolation. Why? Because God calls his people not to spend their time in exile hiding away, pining for Jerusalem, but to live in the city. Build houses, plant gardens. Care for the patch of earth that God has given you - both literally and figuratively. That means as God’s elect exiles, you are given license to engage in your secular vocation to the glory of God. You’re called to interact with the and the culture around you. You’re given permission to care about art and beauty and making things. It means you are called to be an investor in people and relationships. You know, the call to multiply in Jeremiah isn’t only referring to having physical children. Jesus calls people to be born again spiritually! That means that for us NT exiles, the command to multiply is a call to have spiritual children. Make disciples! We can’t do that if we’re isolated from the city!

As exiles, we live in the world rejecting the urge toward conquest. Why? Because we are exiles. Exiles know that their hope for a home comes not by taking over their current dwelling place, but by being brought to the place they were made for. Exiles may have opportunities to influence the city in which they live, but they have a realistic understanding that their ultimate hope lies in a heavenly city. It’s only Christ’s return that actually brings about the reign and home that we long for. And of course most exiles don’t get much opportunity to influence culture. Exiles are called upon to embrace weakness. Exiles are cultural minorities. Even the exiles in the bible who did get positions of influence - people like Queen Esther or Daniel - didn’t get those positions of influence because they sought them! Conquest was nowhere on their agenda. So whether we have opportunity for cultural influence or we are an oppressed minority, our hope comes not from caring about the amount of power and influence we have, but from the assurance we have that one day we will reign with Christ in his kingdom,

We reject compromise, isolation, and conquest. But as exiles, as God’s distinct people God calls us to seek the welfare of the city where God has sent us, praying for its welfare. This means that from our place of humility and cultural insignificance, we care for the physical and spiritual needs of the culture in which God has placed us. We live as gospel people and we bring the aroma of Christ into the spheres in which we live.

Over these next few weeks we’re going to examine several spheres of life through the lens of exile. But maybe the best question you could ask yourself today is, How am I currently existing in the culture in which God has placed me? Where do I see the urge toward compromise? Isolation? Or conquest? What attitudes of my heart or habits of my life exemplify an unchristian desire to live at home in the world instead of as a resident alien hoping in another homeland?

Brothers and sisters, the future is always uncertain. We don’t know what trials will come at God’s church in the coming years. How will we live as God’s people amid a culture of sin, confusion, and

chaos? We have to embrace our whole story. We have to see ourselves as God's elect exiles. By embracing this theme in our Christian story, we can be a compelling, resilient people who live with non-anxious presence because we are citizens of a kingdom that cannot be shaken.