

Billy Graham told the following incident: I have a friend who in a time of recession lost his job, a sizable fortune, and his beautiful home. Then to add to his sorrow, his precious wife died; yet he tenaciously held to his faith – the only thing he had left.

One day when he was out walking in search of employment, he stopped to watch some men who were doing stonework on a large church. One of them was chiseling a triangular piece of rock. “Where are you going to put that?” he asked. The workman said, “Do you see that little opening up there near the spire? Well, I’m shaping this stone down here so that it will fit in up there.” Tears filled my friend’s eyes as he walked away, for the Lord had spoken to him through that workman whose words gave new meaning to his troubled situation – “I’m shaping you down here, so you’ll fit in up there.”

I thought that would be a fitting illustration to begin our sermon series through the letter of **1 Peter** this morning, where Peter encourages his readers to have hope and peace, and to live godly lives in the midst of a hostile and troubled world.

So, let me start with some background. This letter appears to be addressed to both Jewish and Gentile believers who were likely converts from Paul’s missionary journey through Asia Minor. There were several churches in these regions, and it’s safe to say that Peter is writing a circular letter meant to be passed from church to church to church. He’s writing to a large audience of believers who were likely already experiencing some local persecution as most churches did in those days, but on top of that, they were experiencing or were about to experience some intense persecution by the Roman government, and let me explain.

When the Christian church first began in Jerusalem, it was initially looked upon by the Roman government as being part of Judaism – a sect of Judaism, because the first Christians were Jews, and as a result, the Roman government took no official action against the Christians since Judaism was already being tolerated by the Romans as a sanctioned religion. But all that drastically changed after July 19, 64 A.D.

On that day, the city of Rome ignited in flames and burned for six days. Historians tell us that Roman Emperor Nero likely started the fire so he could rebuild Rome according to his own vision, according to his own liking, but when it blazed out of control, destroying 10 out of the city’s 14 districts, the citizens became hostile, and so Nero looked for a scapegoat, and he shifted all the blame for the fires onto the Christians. And within a few months, Nero started his government sponsored persecution against the innocent Christians – and he was ruthless and brutal. For

example, Nero reportedly covered Christians in tar and then set them on fire while they were still alive, using them as human torches to provide light for his garden parties. Lynching without a trial became common place. Christians were crucified, and as we know from stories, Nero fed others to lions just for sport. The Apostle Paul was arrested because he was considered a ringleader, he was imprisoned, and he was later beheaded.

So, this persecution by Nero was initially unleashed against the Christians in Rome, but as you can imagine, it eventually spread throughout the Roman Empire, outward to the other Roman provinces, so Peter, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wanted to encourage these believers who experienced and suffered through this intense persecution.

That's the terrible background for this letter, but hopefully that will give you some context for the purpose of this letter – that believers can still have hope and peace, and live godly lives even in the midst of a hostile and troubling world.

So, if you have your Bibles, turn with me to **1 Peter 1**, and we are going to begin with the first part of **verse 1**.

¹Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,

As, I have already mentioned, this letter was written by the Apostle Peter. Before he was an apostle – one sent out by Jesus, Peter, whose birth name was actually Simon, was a fisherman who was chosen by Jesus to be one of the twelve disciples, and during the earthy ministry of Jesus, Peter became part of an inner circle of Jesus' closest companions.

Peter seemed to be a popular guy amongst the disciples as he is mentioned quite often in the gospels, in fact, Peter's name is mentioned in the gospels more than anyone else except for Jesus. We could say that Peter is the second leading man in the gospels.

In addition, other than Jesus, no one spoke in the gospels as often as Peter did, and Jesus spoke more to Peter than He did to anyone else – which in some cases was a positive experience for Peter and, in other cases, a not so positive experience.

Jesus rebuked Peter more than any other disciple, and if you recall, Peter was the only disciple who dared to rebuke Jesus, and we all know that didn't go too well.

Do you remember the “*get behind Me Satan*” response by Jesus to Peter in Matthew 16?

Peter denied Jesus more forcefully and publicly than any other disciple, when after Jesus had been arrested, Peter denied he even knew Jesus three times, but in **Acts Chapters 2 and 3**, after the day of Pentecost, Peter preached two sermons and confessed Jesus more boldly and accurately than any other disciple.

So, Peter was a mixed bag, with his ups and his downs, his good moments and his bad moments – a normal person just like the rest of us, and now Peter had become a very influential and respected leader in the early church, and unlike the Apostle Paul, no one ever dared to question Peter’s authority as an apostle – so this letter would have been received with a sense of great importance.

Now Peter addresses his readers, and he says to them,

“To those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who are chosen² according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure.

As I mentioned earlier, this letter was written to those residing in the Roman providences of Asia Minor – which would be modern-day northern Turkey. Again, these are believers who were experiencing persecution because they identified as Christians and lived for Jesus, and Peter encourages them with the truth that they may be rejected by a hostile world – they may feel isolated, they may feel forgotten, they may feel insignificant – but they are graciously **chosen** by God the Father.

Peter says that believers are chosen by God, and this passage gives us two trains of thought to consider – first, the believer’s chosen standing in this world, and secondly, the believer’s chosen standing with God.

So, let’s first look at the believer’s standing in this world. Peter identifies these believers as **aliens**. Your translation may use a different word, but in essence, all believers are strangers in this world. The Greek word used here is “*parepidemos*” (*par-ra-ped-e-mos*) which means one who dwells for a while in a place where he is not a part of its people. In other words, we are all foreigners here – we dwell here only as temporary residents, but we do not belong here. Believers are strangers in this world because our true home is not here.

Jesus said in **John 17:16**, when praying for believers, ***“They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.”***

Later, Paul told us in **Phil. 3:20**, *“For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.”*

We are not from around here, but I fear that many of us have put down our roots so firmly in this world that we forget about the next – we settle here, we establish our kingdoms here, and we forget this is not our real home. It’s so easy to think that this is all there is, when the fact is, all of this is just a vapor. Our entire experience in this life is but a blink of an eye in comparison to eternity.

We are just passing through, but this does not mean that we become so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good. Rather it means that we should not hold tightly to the things of this world, instead we are to seek those things that are above – where our home is.

Not only are the readers of this letter considered strangers, but they are **scattered** strangers. Scattered means to be dispersed like a farmer scatters seed. In our passage, the readers of this letter had been dispersed like seed into **Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia**, which were Roman provinces in Asia Minor. God did this, God scattered His people, He **chose** this for a purpose, and this becomes so clear when we consider other passages like **Acts 1:8** and **Acts 8:1**.

Acts 1:8, *“but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.”*

In this passage, before Jesus ascended into heaven, He promised His disciples that with the power of the Holy Spirit, the gospel would be preached first in Jerusalem then be preached all over the entire world.

Now look at **Acts 8:1**. We read, *“Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.”*

What prompted the spreading of the gospel from Jerusalem to other regions of Judea and Samaria? Persecution did. Can you see how the persecution in **Acts 8:1** impacted the promise in **Acts 1:8**? This was all God’s doing. He chose this.

These believers that Peter writes to were strangers, scattered all throughout Asia Minor because God wanted them scattered throughout Asia Minor. God had a purpose and whether they knew it or not, they were on a gospel mission – and what was true for them is just as true for you and me today.

Whether it is a region in northern Turkey or Amboy, Washington, God puts His people right where He wants them. God plants us where He has chosen to plant us.

Okay, let's continue with this our passage. Peter tells us that these chosen believers – strangers, were scattered like seed **according to the foreknowledge of God the Father** which means the difficulties, and the circumstances, and the persecution that God's people faced happened according to the eternal knowledge of God in advance, it was pre-ordained by God, and used for His divine purposes. Nothing surprises God, He's never caught off guard, God knows exactly what He is doing, and believers should take comfort in that truth.

Now, before we move on, I do want to dig a little deeper into that word “**chosen**” as it relates to our standing with God – our salvation. I know there is a great debate out there pertaining to the question of salvation by the election of God or by the freewill response of man. Another way to reframe the question would be: **Did God choose me or did I choose God?**

The word “**chosen**” is the Greek word “*eklektos*” (*ek-lek-tos*) which means elected, or chosen, or called out. The chosen are the saved, and they are saved according to the foreknowledge of God. In other words, according to God's prior eternal knowledge and His predetermined plan – He knew us, He loved us, He chose us, and He saved us. It's all God's doing.

For example, Paul tells us in **Ephesians 1:3-4**, “*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him.*”

Paul also tells us in **2 Thessalonians 2:13**, “*But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth.*”

So, this makes sense, and there are other several passages that speak to this truth of being chosen by God for salvation before we could do anything – it's God's doing – **case closed right?**

Well, not so fast, because we come to passages like **John 3:16** that give us another perspective.

“*For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.*”

We also read from **Romans 10:13**, where Paul states, “*For whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved*” which tells us that we have a response.

So, Pastor, which is it? Did God choose me for salvation or did I choose God?

My answer is “yes.” My answer sounds like a cop out, but I think it is the truest and best answer. We are dealing with a great mystery here – it’s a paradox of sort.

As believers, God chose you and me from the beginning of the world for salvation – for a heavenly home. This was done according to the foreknowledge of God. This was not a random act or an uninformed choice by God. It was done with His prior advance knowledge. God chose you, His Spirit convicted you and drew you to Christ, and yet you are held responsible for your choices.

I like what D.L. Moody said, “*The elect are the whosoever wills – the non-elect are the whosoever wont’s.*”

When we believe in the truth, when we choose to receive Jesus as our Lord and Savior, then at some point we will look back and see that I didn’t find Jesus – Jesus actually found me and He chose me. It’s a paradox.

Okay, let’s continue on. Peter tells us that believers are chosen **by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood.**

Peter mentions **the sanctifying work of the Spirit.** Sanctifying is an interesting word, and to explain this word, I need to remind you of another word we learned in our study through Galatians.

If you recall our study in Galatians, we learned about the word “justify” which means to “declare righteous.” It refers to a verdict from the judge where the defendant is declared not guilty, innocent of all charges, and there is no record against him or her in the eyes of the law. If you are justified, your record is clean.

Justification is a one-time act of God whereby He declares the believing sinner righteous – not guilty. Justification is not the result of a person’s character, or works, or observing religious rules and regulations. It’s an act of God based solely on the finished work of Christ – period, end of story. That’s justification.

Sanctification is a process that begins with justification. To sanctify means to be set apart, it means to separate, it refers to making one holy, and it applies to our salvation experience, but it also applies to the ongoing process of growth and obedience in a believer’s life. Sanctification is the continual work of the Spirit in the believer to mold us, and to shape us, and to conform us to become growing and

obedient believers – to become Christ-like in our lives. And if you think about it, this is another reason why believers are strangers in this world. We are sanctified, we are being set apart from the world by the Holy Spirit.

In Christ, we are set apart, chosen by God for His exclusive use, and this is all made possible by the blood of Christ. His blood brings us into a relationship with God. The blood of Christ saves us, keeps us, and presents us faultless before God. In Christ, we are holy, that's who we are and now we need to act like it – in obedience to Him. That is the goal.

Peter concludes by saying, **“May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure.”** In spite of the persecution and their suffering, Peter says that grace and peace can still be theirs in abundance. Now that we know we are not rejected but instead chosen by God, strangers in this world but known by Him, set apart according to God's foreknowledge and His purposes, we can experience grace and peace. This is all part of God's purpose and plan.

There once was a king who offered a prize to the artist who would paint the best picture that represented peace. Many artists tried, but there were only two that really impressed him, and he had to choose between them.

One picture was of a calm lake. The lake was a perfect mirror as peaceful towering mountains were all around it. Overhead was a blue sky with fluffy white clouds. All who saw this picture thought that it was a perfect picture of peace.

The other picture had mountains too. They were rugged and bare. There was an angry sky from which rain fell, and lightning flashed. Down the side of the mountain was a rushing, foaming waterfall. This did not look peaceful at all.

But when the king looked closer, he saw behind the waterfall a tiny bush growing in a crack in the rock, and in the bush, a mother bird had built her nest. In the midst of the rushing water, sat the mother bird on her nest in perfect peace.

*The king chose the second picture. **Do you know why?** “Because, peace does not mean to be in a place where there is no noise, or trouble, or hard work. Peace means to be in the midst of all those things and still be calm in your heart. That is the real meaning of peace.”*

Source Material:

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James, 1, 2 Peter & Jude, The Randall House Bible Commentary – Robert E. Picirilli & Paul V. Harrison
Exposition Commentary – Warren Wiersbe
The Bible Knowledge Commentary – Walvoord & Zuck
Enduring Word – David Guzik