

Responding to Exile (1:1-2)

Well great to see you guys this morning, thanks for being with us. If you have a bible, go ahead and turn with me to the book of 1 Peter, chapter 1. If you don't have a bible, feel free to grab one of ours in the rack under the seats. If you're using that bible, the page number will be up on the screen to help you find it. If you're *not* using one of those bibles, that page number will not work, but feel free to stop by the table of contents—you'll have a little bit of time to get there before we dive in.

The reason we're turning to 1 Peter is because this morning, we are kicking off a new *teaching series* on the book of 1 Peter. Over the next fifteen weeks or so, we will just be marching our way straight through this letter, beginning to end. If you've been around for a few weeks, you know we just finished a teaching series all about the importance of reading and studying the bible. So now, we're going to do exactly that, by studying our way through a whole book of the bible together as a church family.

That being said, my goal *today* is just to set up the *central idea* of the book of 1 Peter, and then talk a little about why I think that idea has a lot of *relevance* for us in today's world. And in order to do all that, today we're only going to cover the first two verses of the book. Which I know doesn't sound like much—I promise most weeks during the series we'll cover a good bit more than that, so we're not in 1 Peter for like seventeen years. But truth be told, **there is a lot of content packed into just these two verses**, so we need to spend some time together sorting through it all. Sound good? Are you guys excited about 1 Peter?

Okay, let's take a look at 1 Peter 1, starting in v. 1:

[1] Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ...

Okay stop. I told you there was a lot of content in here. So people back in the day would sign their name at the *beginning* of letters, kind of like how we sign ours at the end. So this letter is written by a guy named *Peter*. If you're newer to church or the bible, Peter was one of Jesus' twelve disciples, and specifically one of the disciples who was closest to Jesus relationally. He was also one of the key leaders of the early Church movement. He's the one writing everything that we're going to be reading in this book.

So we now know who this letter is *from*. Next, let's see who it's written *to*. Keep reading, picking it back up in v. 1:

*To those who are **elect exiles** of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia...*

So the intended audience of everything we're about to read is a group of people referred to as "**elect exiles**," in what would be modern-day Turkey. The word "elect" simply means "chosen" or "selected." But the word "exile" is a bit more complex. It's *one* word in the Greek that you kind of need *two* English words to translate. You need one word that means "to live or reside in a place," and another word that means "you don't really *belong in* that place." Does that make sense? So we could translate it as something like "citizen stranger" or maybe "resident alien"—but without all the legal and political baggage *that* term has in our country. So **an exile is a person who lives in a certain place, but doesn't truly fit in or feel at home in that place.** That's who this letter is written *to*.

Now, it's hard to be *certain* from history exactly *why* they were exiles, or even whether that term is meant literally or figuratively (or both). But **the point is that Peter wants them to think of themselves in that way: as exiles. These followers of Jesus found themselves living in a place where they didn't really belong.** Where they didn't *fit in*. **A place where their values weren't the dominant values of the society around them. Where their way of doing things was not the normal way of doing things.** Where their way of life was at best *different* than the people around them, and at worst *at odds with* and *offensive to* the people around them. And as a result, these followers of Jesus found themselves misunderstood, maligned, and even actively *mistreated* by the culture around them.

Now maybe on the surface, that sounds like a completely *foreign* experience to a lot of *us*. Like, you're thinking, "Okay, I've never really felt that way as a follower of Jesus. I've never been *mistreated* because of my faith, and to be honest, I feel like I fit in pretty *well* with the society I'm a part of." For a lot of us, it might be hard to think of a time where we've felt like *exiles* in our day-to-day lives. So we might be inclined to think that 1 Peter isn't all that immediately *applicable* to our lives today.

But let's think a little more about that. I want you to imagine a scenario with me real quick. Let's say you showed up early to the Gathering this morning (which is already difficult to imagine since nobody gets here that early, but...) let's say the reason you got here early is because you wanted to park your car, and walk down to Honeybee to grab a pre-church latte. And let's say it's kind of slow in there, because it's a Sunday morning,

and you're trying to be a good missionary in our city, so you strike up a convo with your barista. And things are really clicking...y'all have the same sense of humor, you like a lot of the same things, and you're thinking to yourself, "this is going really well...way to go, *me*." (You're a real self-talk kind of person.) And then, there's a brief lull in the conversation, and the barista fills it by asking the question you were really hoping they wouldn't ask: "so what are you up to this morning?" And after trying briefly to come up with a good lie to tell and failing to think of one quick enough, you say "oh well, I'm actually going to church. Our church meets right over here, and we get together on Sunday mornings to worship Jesus and be a church family together. So uhhh, anyways...*almond* milk, please." And before you know it, it gets terribly awkward, and the conversation just grinds to a halt. Maybe the barista lets out a "oh, cool," which you know is just code for "okay we're done talking now." And you're like "dangit. I should've went with the lie"?

Okay, **have any of you had moments that at least *feel* a little like the one I just described?** I would think that many of us probably have. Okay, so that *experience*—the feeling of being the odd one out, of being treated with suspicion and caution by people because of your belief in Jesus—that *is* the experience of an *exile*. Now, I *realize* that **that's nowhere *near* as *intense* as the experience that most of these *first century* Christians faced, but my point is that it's still the same *principle* at work:** those of us who follow Jesus live in a world where our values are not necessarily the culture's values. And often, our values are even *opposite from* and *off-putting to* our culture's values. Hence the awkwardness and stand-offishness in situations like that one. We are *exiles*. We are citizen *strangers*. The culture around us does not share our way of thinking or living, and will sometimes look at all of it with skepticism and even hostility as a result.

So in the same way, I think if Peter could speak to us as *21st century American* followers of Jesus, he would say something very similar. He would say, "I don't care how long you've lived in America, I don't care how much you *love* America, how *proud to be* an American you consider yourself to be. You are still to think of yourself as an *exile* here. And here's why: *because your citizenship is not ultimately as an American. Your citizenship is in heaven*. Now...that being said, you should know, I *love it* here in America. I shoot so many fireworks on the fourth of July, regardless of whether it's legal to shoot them in Knox County or not. One of my favorite foods is a cheeseburger, precisely because of how *American* it tastes. I 100% love living in this country. But that being said, the most important thing about me is not that I'm an *American*. The most important thing about me is that I'm a follower of Jesus. Are you following me?"

And one thing that makes all this a little tricky is that it hasn't always *been* like this in America. Many of us in the room can remember when feeling like an exile wasn't a common experience at all for a Christian. If you rewind 50-75 years, Christians didn't really feel that way at all. For many of our parents or grandparents, if they publicly made it known that they were Christians, that almost always worked to their *advantage* at a cultural level. Being a Christian usually meant you were moral, you were respectable, you were trustworthy. It meant people trusted you to babysit their kids. It meant that they'd be more likely to vote for you if you ran for office. Back then, even if people didn't *share* your faith perspective, they often *respected* you *for* it. In fact, that's probably what led a lot of people back then who weren't Christians, to claim Christianity, because it was usually advantageous to identify in that way.

But all of that is now *changing*. For instance, as of 2012, Protestant Christians are no longer a majority in the U.S.¹—that is the *first time in history* that that has been true. And 2012 is eight years ago—that's even *more* true now. According to nearly every study done, people with "no religious affiliation" are *the fastest growing demographic* in our country.² Additionally, it used to be that "Christian" had a *positive* connotation: people associated Christians with words like "moral," "honorable," "respectable," and "trustworthy." But a study was done back in 2012 that found the most common words now associated with "Christian" are words like "judgmental," "hypocritical," and "anti-gay."³ Lastly, and this one specifically stood out to me: one study found that nearly half of *non-religious* adults perceive *Christians* to be "extremists."⁴ So do you see the shift? The reality is that the public perception and posture towards Christianity has *changed*, and *is changing*. And there are no signs that that is going to reverse itself any time soon. And many of us have *felt* that shift in our conversations and interactions with the society around us.

Now, if you *haven't* really *felt* any of that cultural pressure *personally*, that's probably because we live in the Bible Belt. So it'll be a while before *we* feel it to the extent that someone living in a place like New York or L.A. or Seattle feels it. But we will sense it eventually, and we'll sense it *more* and *more* in the coming years. **We can try to fight that, or ignore it, or live as if it's not true, but the fact of the matter is that it *is* true. And we *will* have to confront that reality sooner or later: *we are exiles.***

¹ Details [here](#).

² Same study as #1.

³ This study detailed in [this book](#).

⁴ Details on this study [here](#).

Now with all that said, I would love to speak very bluntly with you guys for a moment. Can I do that? Are we on that level in our relationship? Let's assume that we are. To be blunt, do you know who has a very *hard time accepting* the fact that they are *exiles*? People like me: white, middle to upper class Americans. **Those of us in that demographic tend to have a really difficult time understanding ourselves as exiles.** Because quite honestly, for most of us, we have grown *accustomed to* the society around us valuing the things that we value, at least on some level. On the *other* hand, a lot of you who are *minorities* in the room probably already have a working understanding of this idea. Because for the same reasons, some of you are *already know* the feeling of being an exile all too well. But for probably the *bulk* of us in the room, thinking like this is going to be an adjustment. It's gonna take some work for us to understand that we are no longer the majority, and therefore shouldn't expect to be *treated* like the majority. We should not expect to have culture cater to us and mirror our values. ~~And until we understand that we are exiles, we will find ourselves perpetually frustrated when it doesn't.~~

So that's the "*bad*" news, if you want to think about it that way. **We (as followers of Jesus) are no longer the majority, and probably won't be anytime in the near future. But here's the good news: God's people have nearly *always been* exiles.** In fact, you could make the argument that God's people in the bible spend way more time *in* exile than *not*. **And because of that, the Scriptures have *lots* to say about what life in exile *looks like*.** In fact, you could even say that **God's intentions for his people was *never* that they would be a powerful, imposing majority, but rather that they would be an influential, creative *minority*.** And perhaps, the more obvious it becomes to us that that's precisely what we *are* in our society, the more we can get on with being who God has called his people to be all along. And that's *exiles*.

So...the question this all brings us to is *how do we respond* to that reality? **Given that we live in a society that sees the world very differently than we do, how do we live faithfully, helpfully and missionally in that context?** How are we called to relate to the people, systems and structures around us as followers of Jesus? And *those* are the very types of questions that 1 Peter is written to help answer. **Peter in this letter is primarily concerned with how we live in a society that we are exiles *in*.** And because of *that*, I think this letter has *every bit* as much relevance to followers of Jesus living as exiles *today*, as it had to followers of Jesus living as exiles back *then*. Even if our situations seem *different* on the surface, they are very similar at their core. So we're going to let Peter teach us, through this letter, how to *respond* to exile.

Now, different people respond in very different ways to being treated like exiles. I'd put people's responses into three overarching categories: some people *conform*, some people *run*, and some people *fight*. We'll walk through these one by one, just to wrap our minds around them a little:

Response #1: Conform

Conforming attempts to resolve the problem of exile in a very *simple* way: it decides to **just to *assimilate completely to the ways of the world around us. In other words, eliminate all the differences between our way of life and their way of life, so that they don't take issue with any of it.*** Simple enough, right? Anything that seems foreign or offensive or off-putting to our host culture, let's just not do or believe those things. The old school, Baptisty, term for this would be "worldliness." **Conforming is deciding to become just like the *world*, so that the *world* will accept us.**

So what are some good ways to know if you've *conformed*? Simply put, just ask the question, **is there any noticeable difference between my way of life, and that of a person who doesn't follow Jesus?** For instance, is there any noticeable difference in the way you approach sex, from the average American? Those of you with a boyfriend or girlfriend, do you live with that person just like everybody else does? Those of you who are dating, do you sleep with the person on the second, third, fourth date just like most anyone else would? Do you *talk* about sex just like anyone else would? Just like it's light and casual and meaningless, like it's just play for grown ups? And sex is just *one* arena of our life—we could ask the same question with a variety of other topics: do you approach *money and possessions* just like the average American? Do you approach interpersonal relationships just like the average American? **If there is very little discernible difference between how you go about your life and how the average non-Christian goes about their life, that means you've *conformed*.**

And here's the problem with conforming: **if your life looks indistinguishable from anyone else, there is nothing to *draw those people to the way of Jesus.*** Jesus calls this "salt losing its saltiness." He says "if salt loses its saltiness, it's no longer *good* for anything."⁵ In other words, if your non-Christian co-worker sees in your life, a mirror image of their own life, they're going to struggle to find a reason why they should consider becoming a Christian. Because *that* communicates that Christianity has no real *power*. So *conforming* can't be the answer. Next response I've seen people have is...

⁵ See Matthew 5:13.

Response #2: Run

We could sum up this one with *another* word: *retreat*. Retreat. Run. There's a big bad world out there and it's trying to corrupt us all, so let's just create our own little subculture and keep to ourselves. Now, an *extreme* example of this would be a group of people like the Amish. But we do it in far more subtle ways. We do it, for instance, when we live the entirety of our lives from within a Christian bubble.

Here's *one* way to know whether or not you've *run*: **do you have any non-Christian friends?** Now when I say "friends," I don't just mean people you wave to at a distance when you see them at the grocery store. I'm not talking about people you're *pleasant* towards. I mean *friends*—as in, people that are in your *home* on a regular basis. People you go do things with, like *for fun*. Are any of them people who don't yet follow Jesus? If not, there's a good chance that, at least on some level, you've *run*. So let me just say: one thing I absolutely love about our church is that most of us hang out with each other *a lot*. Like, we're not just church friends—we're *actual* friends. I *love* that's true of us. But at the same time, if we're only ever hanging out with each other, to the exclusion of getting to know our non-Christian neighbors, co-workers, classmates, and friends—that's not a win. That means we've *run*.

And here's why we can't do that: **the entire point of following Jesus is to let the world get a *glimpse* of who God is and what he's like.** Jesus unpacks this by calling us "the light of the world." He says "no one takes a light and hides it under a basket."⁶ Because that defeats the *purpose* of the light. Which is his way of saying that **if we live distinct, holy, unique lives as followers of Jesus, but we do all of that from within our own little Christian subculture where no one ever really sees it, our lives can't do what they were *meant* to do.** We can't be the shining city on a hill that God intended us to be. So *running* isn't an option either.⁷ And lastly...

Response #3: Fight

Now, ***fighting* is similar in some ways to *running*, but it's more *antagonistic*.** Fighting is saying, "not only are we going to *separate from* the world, we're going to *take back* the cultural power where we've lost it. We're going to win the 'culture wars'! We're going to show everybody that nobody takes our cultural influence from Christians!" I

⁶ See Matthew 5:14-16.

⁷ Peter also warns against this mentality in several places, one of which is 1 Peter 3:14-15.

bring this one up partly because we're in the Bible Belt, and some people here still have a little bit of that "nobody takes our country from *us*" kind of mentality going on.

Now, here's how you know if *fighting* is your mindset: if you see non-Christians as people to vote against, argue with, and antagonize, before you see them as people to love and serve, that probably means you're a "*fighter*." If you've ever uttered or thought the phrase "*they're* ruining our country," really regardless of *who* you mean by the word "*they*" are in that sentence, this is probably you.

Now, if this is you, I know what you're probably thinking. You're thinking, "but America is supposed to be a Christian nation! So shouldn't we put up a fight on some level as it seems to become less and less of one?" Okay. Here's probably the only part of the teaching today that might get me a couple angry emails. If you do want to *send* me one of those, just remember: my name is Jeff Hsiang, and my email is jeff@citychurchknox.com. But here would be my response to "isn't America a Christian nation?" **America is not and never has been a Christian nation.** One reason for that is that there is no such thing. Nations can't be Christians—only people can. Jesus did not die to save a country, he died to save *people*. So unless you mean that *every single human being* in America is a Christian (which would be a silly thing to think), we are *not* a Christian nation. But secondly, *even if there were* such a thing as a Christian nation, that nation would not have been built on the backs of slaves, like America very much was. In fact, America was built on quite a *few* practices and beliefs that run directly *contrary* to the kingdom of Jesus.⁸

Now, I think what people *mean* when they say America is a Christian *nation*, is that our country was founded on *some* Judeo-Christian *values*. And that's certainly true, that's clear from many of our founding documents. But **I would strongly encourage you *not* to see America as a Christian nation that needs to be 'taken back over' for Jesus, and here's why: because it will lead you to *demonizing* the very people you are called to *love*.** It will create in you a hyper-antagonistic mindset towards the world around you, and that is one of the very attitudes Peter writes to *guard against* in this letter.⁹

//

So *conforming* won't work, *running* won't work, and *fighting* won't work either. Which leaves us all wondering, what *should* our response be? If none of those are the answer, what *is*? Well, before I tell you, fair warning: today, all I'm gonna do is give you a *name*

⁸ Radical individualism, the pursuit of happiness, and rebellion against authority, just to name a few.

⁹ For instance, see 1 Peter 3:9-11.

for it, and a *quote* to point you in the right direction. That's just all we have time for today. But what we're going to do for the *rest of this entire series* is work out practically what it looks like, because that's what the entirety of the book is about. But here's what I would say Peter proposes in this book—here I think is a good term for how he says exiles should live in the society they're a part of.

Distinctive Influential Presence

I think what Peter is going to call us to, over and over again, in this letter we're going to work through is *distinctive, influential presence*. He calls us not to *conform* to culture, but to live *distinctively* from it. He calls us not to *fight* culture but to *influence* it. And he calls us not to *run* from culture, but to remain *present* within it.

Here's how Lee Beach puts it in his fantastic book, *The Church in Exile*:

*For Peter the church is not called to **overthrow** the culture and its norms but instead to **subvert them**. The church **functions as a witness** by lives that reflect integrity and righteousness, so that even if it draws derision from some, eventually the people's lives will have an effect that **brings even their critics to see God through their actions**. This is a **work of subversion** that does not seek to **conquer** culture but rather to **live differently, within it**.*

Like I said, we are going to spend the next fifteen weeks unpacking all the implications and applications of that phrase, but hopefully that gives you at least a little preview of where we're headed.

For today, I simply want to close out by talking about **what makes that posture possible**. And for *that*, we'll circle back to v. 2 of our passage. Because v. 2 I think provides us with the basis and motivation *for* this. It gives us a preview about where it all *comes* from, and how to *persist in* it. So let's circle back around to v. 2 together. Remember, he has just said that we are "elect exiles..." then v. 2...

*[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.*

Let's break each part of that down briefly. First, it says that we are elect exiles, "according to the foreknowledge of God." Now, that could just mean that God foreknew

us, or it could mean that God foreknew us *and the fact that we would find ourselves in exile*. Either way, here's what we know from *elsewhere* in the bible: **God is not *uninvolved* in his people finding themselves in exile**. For instance, in the book of Jeremiah, a book that talks *a good bit* about the idea of exile, God speaking through Jeremiah actually puts it like this, in chapter 29, verse 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.*

Did you catch that phrase right in the middle? "...The city where *I have sent you* into exile." Who is "I" in that sentence? *God*, right? So that's kind of odd: historically speaking, we know that a nation called *Babylon* carried the nation of Israel into exile. But here, God says *he* did it. In other words, it was *his* plan to have them go *into exile*. Now, I wonder how many people in America, as we see the cultural power and influence of Christianity begin to fade recently, have thought to themselves "I bet this is God's plan." "I bet God is orchestrating all this." That's not how most of us think, right? But right here in Jeremiah, we have it plain as day. God *foreknew*, not only the exiles *themselves*, but the fact that they *would be in exile*. And **knowing that about our situation helps us not panic about it, or seek to retaliate against it happening**. God knows—which means we don't have to freak out when it happens. Are you following me on that?

Then Peter says "*...in the sanctification of the Spirit*." Now, probably a better translation for the word "sanctification" there is the word "consecration," or "setting apart." Which is a way of saying that **this God who foreknew us and our situation also set us apart to be a distinct witness to him in the world**. Not to *blend in*, but to, on some level, *stand out*. So the fact that God has allowed all this to happen doesn't mean we just throw up our hands and go "I guess I have no choice but to give in to what society values!" No, rather, we're called to live distinctively *from* the society around us.

But the fact of the matter is that we will never be able to do that *perfectly*. Which is why the last thing he says matters so much. Finally, he says "*...for obedience to Jesus and for sprinkling with his blood*." Now *there's* an interesting sentence. What's happening is that Peter is referencing a story in the Old Testament (if you're keeping up with the bible reading plan, I think we actually read it last Sunday, in fact).¹⁰ But in the story, Moses comes down to deliver the "Law" to the Israelites. And upon *hearing* the Law, they all respond to it by saying "all the words that the Lord has spoken we will do." Which is an

¹⁰ Found in Exodus 24:3-8.

ironic statement to make, considering most of the rest of the bible is them fairly consistently *not* doing what God said to do. But after they say that, Moses takes the blood from an animal sacrifice and literally “sprinkles” it on the people. And this was a way of communicating that **though they had *intention* of living distinctly from the world around them, it wasn’t their ability to live distinctly that made them right with God.** They still needed a sacrifice to stand in their place.

But *now, post* Jesus’ crucifixion, this phrase takes on even *more* meaning for *us*. Peter actually says that it is with the blood of *Jesus* that this all happens. It is now the sacrifice of *Jesus* that stands in *our* place. **Part of the point of the cross is that we, like the Israelites, quite literally *cannot do* “all the things God has told us to do.”** Our sin makes us *incapable* of doing that. We are incapable of living perfectly *distinct* lives. We will at *some point*, and probably *often*, fail to do that. But **the fact that we are *marked* by Jesus’ own blood, shed on the cross, means that that failure is no longer a barrier between us and God.** That no matter how imperfectly we carry out being a “distinctive, influential presence,” Jesus himself stands in our place. **Jesus was the only person to perfectly execute what it meant to be an exile. He refused to *conform, run, or fight*. He *perfectly embodied* everything that we are called to be. And because of that, those of us who have trusted in *him* get to find acceptance with God regardless of how *imperfectly* we might embody that posture. *That’s the good news.***

And, being his disciples, we get to learn from *him* along the way about how to walk in it, more and more faithfully, day by day. We get to learn to walk how Jesus walked. So for the next few months, 1 Peter is going to assist us in that learning process. Peter, who himself walked alongside Jesus and was privy to how Jesus walked in this tension, is going to help us figure it all out. We’re going to learn how to live as a faithful, influential presence together.

So that’s where we’re headed these next fifteen weeks. But we have to start with the foundation. With remembering who and what makes it all possible in the first place: Jesus, and his death on the cross. It’s only through *that* that we can learn to live, and thrive in exile. Today, we’ll just leave it there.

Let’s pray together.