

Peter Series Part 1

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] Pope Benedict has resigned, possibly the biggest news item of the week, until overtaken by a meteorite doing some crazy stuff over Russia. Now, my views on the matter of the Pope's resignation are really of no consequence, but for what it's worth, I think he's made the right call.

I think it probably is time that Benedict earned a well-earned rest and dedicated himself, as I think he himself has suggested, to a life of prayer. Speculation is rife concerning his successor, with many suggesting that the time is right for a Pope from the Southern Hemisphere. Africa or Latin America are being touted as possibilities. It's certainly the case that an ever-increasing majority of Catholics, and indeed of all Christians, hail from the Southern Hemisphere. There has been this radical shift in the center of gravity of the worldwide Christian church.

Now, I don't know if the new Pope will be black or brown, African or Latino, but one thing I do know is what he won't be. He won't be, despite claims to the contrary, a successor to Peter the Apostle. There's nothing in the New Testament to give credence to the Roman Catholic contention, that Peter and his alleged successors were to occupy any kind of headship over the church, as his claim for the Pope. Christ, and Christ alone is head of the church. But while we, I hope, courteously reject the authority of Peter's so-called successors, we are to gladly submit to the delegated authority of the original Peter the Apostle. And we're going to do so in a very particular way in the weeks and months that lie ahead as we study Peter's letters, as they are preserved for us in the New Testament. And we'll begin, predictably enough, with 1 Peter. There are two letters, and I have no idea how long it will take us. They are rich in content, and as a result, it's unlikely we will be able to take big chunks as we go through these two letters. So, it could take us some time. But we'll begin and see how we get on. And we'll begin this morning with the first letter and the first chapter and the words of greeting that we have as the means whereby Peter introduces his letter.

[2 : 57] Now, it may be helpful to give a little background to the letter. It would seem that the letter was written by Peter from Rome with the reference in chapter 5 and verse 13 to she who is in Babylon, seemingly a reference to the church in Rome. Peter uses this language of Babylon to refer to Rome, particularly in its status as a city that was opposed to the gospel. And so, Peter is in Rome.

He is writing his church from that base of maybe greater interest to us and of greater significance as we consider why it is of significance is to establish when Peter writes this letter. It's impossible for us to know with absolute certainty. We're not told within the body of the letter itself. But on the basis of drawing on the different strands of evidence that we're not going to do this morning, there seems to be a consensus that the letter was written round about 62 or 63 A.D. Now, the significance of establishing the year or approximate year of composition is better appreciated as we compare that to Peter's own timeline and the circumstances in which Christians found themselves in the Roman Empire at that time, when the letter was written and when it was received by its original audience, round about 62 or 63 A.D.

As regards to Peter himself, it is generally thought that he was martyred in the mid-60s, anything between 64 and 67 A.D. So, we can see very easily that the letter was written by Peter as one who was nearing the end of his life, following over 30 years of faithful service as a disciple and apostle of Jesus Christ. And Peter's decades of suffering service add a richness and a maturity to the letters that he writes that his original audience profited from and that we too will profit from as we consider these letters. But as regards the religious climate, I said that the date of composition was significant as we compared it to Peter's own life, but also as we consider the religious climate in which the audience that he writes to were living. And as we read the letters, and there would be merit in reading through certainly the whole of this first letter, it's not particularly long, to give a flavor for it,

and I'd encourage you to do that. But, and if you were to do that, what would be apparent is that within the letter there is a recurring theme of suffering for the sake of the gospel. And as you would identify that recurring theme of suffering, it might lead you to imagine that as Peter is writing this letter, the church in the Roman Empire was subject to severe persecution. But that would be a wrong conclusion to come to. At the time that Peter was subject to a letter, Peter writes the letter, there was no official imperial policy against Christians, though there were localized and sporadic outbursts of opposition. Perhaps the most infamous one occurred soon after Peter wrote this letter, if indeed the date that we've suggested is correct. In 64 AD, there was the great fire in Rome when Nero was the emperor, and following that fire we know of how Nero began a persecution of Christians in Rome. But that, of course, was subsequent to this letter being written. So, even that incident, if we can call it an incident, more than an incident, is subsequent to the writing of this letter. The letter itself says nothing of Christians suffering physical violence or imprisonment for their faith. The focus rather seems to be on being maligned, on verbal abuse, on discrimination endured because of their Christian commitment and distinctive and countercultural Christian lifestyle.

The letter then is written to those who are suffering, certainly in a measure, suffering for their faith, but who intriguingly and interestingly are looking ahead to impending and increasing opposition. Because for those who received this letter, though they enjoyed a measure, perhaps you could say a significant measure of freedom, the times they were a changing, and greater persecution was around the corner. And I say that's interesting because I think it does allow us to legitimately draw a parallel with us as Christians in Scotland today. We are not, despite some claims to the contrary, we are not, I don't think by any stretch of the imagination, victims of violent and severe persecution for our faith in Scotland today. We thank God for that. We still largely enjoy great liberty to live and proclaim our faith. That said, many Christians do suffer abuse and mockery and are increasingly marginalized and even discriminated against because of their faith. Maybe that you have experienced something of that in your own circumstances. And, crucially, as with Peter's original audience, things, it would appear, are likely to get a whole lot worse as time progresses. We don't know, but that certainly would seem to be the trajectory of travel, to use what seems to be a popular phrase, these days. Now, the letter that we are going to be thinking about over these next weeks and months contains a number of themes, and we'll meet them as we go through the letter. But the dominant one is the call to faithfulness and endurance in the face of opposition as we live and move as exiles or strangers in a hostile world. And this morning we will begin by considering the greeting with which Peter begins his letter in the first two verses of chapter 1.

[9 : 59] Even as we read the greeting, we are struck by the richness of it, rich in theology, but rich also in pastoral warmth and concern. And we'll consider the greeting under four headings, God's messenger, God's people, God's work for and in His people, and God's blessing. These four headings will help us or guide us as we think about these two verses. Now, the amount of time we'll spend under each heading will vary greatly. Some will require very little time and others just a little bit more. But let's begin with the first heading as we consider this greeting, God's messenger. There at the very beginning of the letter we read, Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ. Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ.

Now, no doubt much could profitably be said if we were to detain ourselves on Peter's name, the very first word that we encounter. We know that there's great significance in the name that he was given, but we have to focus and consider rather his designation as an apostle of Jesus Christ. Now, the word apostle is derived from a Greek verb that means to send out, to send out. So, an apostle is one sent out, or an envoy, or messenger. Now, in the New Testament, Jesus gives the word apostle a richer and more precise. We might even call technical, meaning by designating twelve of his disciples as apostles.

The twelve were granted a unique and foundational role in establishing the New Testament church. Indeed, Paul, as he writes to the church in Ephesus, speaks of the church as, and I quote, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. And it is reasonable to conclude that with the foundation laid there was and is no need for further apostles. It's interesting that the phrase of Jesus Christ, or apostle of Jesus Christ, is one that is used only of apostles. You know, this form of words, an apostle of Jesus Christ. It's not used of other offices in the New Testament, be that of evangelists or teachers or indeed of prophets. Only apostles are designated in this very particular way, apostles of Jesus Christ.

Christ. And while of course, those who were prophets and evangelists and teachers were also of Jesus Christ, that the form of words would be reserved as it is just for the apostles. It does seem to suggest that what is intended is to focus on their very special place in God's purposes.

[13:14] The apostle was one who had been given particular and special God-given authority. The apostles could and did speak and write God's very words, and they did indeed do just that. Indeed, as we will consider this letter, we do so on the understanding and in the confidence that we are reading and considering the very words of God, the very words of God spoken through the apostle Peter, granted that authority by God himself. Now, it's important for us at the very beginning of our consideration of this letter to be very clear on this matter. It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of this. In a world and generation that in great measure despises the past, certainly the religious past or our religious inheritance, and in a world and generation that seems intent on making things up as we go along, in a world where the majority opinion is king until dethroned by a new majority opinion, we have in our hands words that carry universal and absolute authority. And as we study Peter's letters, we are studying that which was written by God's messenger, by God's apostle, we are handling and listening to the very words of God. So, first of all, then, we have in this greeting, we are confronted with God's messenger. But secondly, we want to notice also how in this greeting we have described for us God's people. Now, the original letter has an identified audience, the believers who lived in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and

Bithynia. We see that there in verse 1. These are all regions or provinces of Asia Minor in what today is modern-day Turkey. But the manner in which these Christians are addressed or described in this verse that we're going to look at in a moment is applicable to Christians across frontiers and generations. And that includes Christians in Scotland today. And there are three words in particular that merit explanation in this description of God's people that we have here in this greeting.

And the three words that we want us to notice are the words, elect, strangers, and scattered. Notice there in verse 1, to God's elect, strangers in the world scattered throughout. And then the geographic reference. And as I say, these are words that apply certainly to the Christians that Paul was writing to, but they also apply to us. And let's think of them briefly in turn. First of all, Peter speaks of those he writes to, he speaks of the Christians he writes to as God's elect.

Now, for God's people to be described as elect or chosen is familiar language in both the Old and New Testament and speaks first and foremost. And this morning we limit ourselves to what I consider to be the first and foremost significance of this language, of this reality. It speaks first and foremost of God's grace. It speaks of God who graciously and lovingly and mercifully from all eternity has chosen a people for himself. It speaks of God's sovereign grace in his dealings towards us, to God's elect. But we have to move on and notice how God's people are further described by Peter to God's elect strangers in the world. Now, the Greek word used here is variously translated as strangers or exiles or sojourners and has the meaning of temporary or alien residence. The principle truth that the word conveys is that as Christians, our principle, our primary citizenship is not in this world. We are strangers in this world. We are sojourners in this world. We are exiles in this world. Our primary citizenship is elsewhere. It is in heaven. This is the same truth and indeed the same language that we find in Hebrews and in chapter 11. And we can just quickly make reference to what we read there in Hebrews and in chapter 11 and in verse 13.

There we read, all these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised. They only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. We are, as those who first received this letter from Peter, we are strangers in this world. We are exiles in this world. Our citizenship is first and foremost a heavenly one. That reality is memorably captured in the words of the spiritual song. This world is not my home. I'm just a passing through. Now, while we recognize that truth and there are many implications of it, it is important to stress that recognizing that we are strangers in this world, that we are in a very real sense passing through, is not to suggest that we have little or nothing to do in this world. Far from it. As we pass through, as we recognize our temporary residents in this world, we also recognize that while we are here, we have been given by God a great deal to do. Here, there's always that need for balance. We can so focus on our status as exiles as to imagine that there's no importance in this world that we live in. The

sooner we're out of it, the better, and that would be wrong. But equally, it would be wrong to be so enmeshed in the affairs and in the tasks that we have in this world to forget that our primary citizenship is in heaven. So, God's people are described as God's elect. They're described as strangers or exiles, but they're also described as those who are scattered. Now, the Greek used here is a familiar, the word, the word is diaspora. We recognize that word, and it's a familiar and significant biblical word. In the New Testament, the reality of God's people as a scattered people goes beyond simply describing a particular historical reality. Now, what I mean by that is that Peter is not saying, well, you know, those who I'm writing to today, they are scattered. That is what has happened to them. They were elsewhere, but they've been scattered, and now we find them in all of these provinces that he identifies. He's not simply describing a historical reality, though it may well have been for many of them a historical reality, that they had been scattered.

[21 : 13] Certainly, the Jews among them, though the letter, it would seem, is directed very particularly to a Gentile audience, though also no doubt to a Jewish audience. But certainly, the Jews among them who had been scattered from Jerusalem could say, yes, we have indeed been scattered, literally. But the language, as I say, is not primarily intended to describe a historical reality, though it may do so. It is language that describes God's people as we are by God's design and intention. We are, as Christians, by design and rooted in God's missionary strategy, a scattered people. That is true of all of us. God is the God who scatters His people, but He scatters His people with a purpose that we might be scattered throughout the world. In our case, our concern would be how God scatters us throughout this city to be a witness for Him, to be ambassadors of Jesus Christ. And so, as Peter's original audience could be described as those scattered throughout these various provinces, so it is true of Christians today. God is the God who scatters His people that the good news might be taken to all. That is what we are as Christians. We are

God's elect. We are strangers in the world. We are a scattered people. We ought not to feel comfortable in this world. We certainly ought not to get comfortable in this world. We don't belong ultimately, and nor should we aspire to belong. We aspire to belong. We ought not and must not conform to this world and its values and priorities. We are, by nature and design, counter-cultural. But is that so for ourselves? Is that true of us?

Are we strangers? Are we different? Are we willing to be scattered by God into the city or, indeed, beyond? So, in the greeting we have then also this description of God's people. But we move on to really what is the heart of the matter, though we'll deal with it briefly, and that is God's work for and in us. You see, Peter also deals with that in this greeting. There in verse 2, well, we read from verse 1 to get the flow to God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father through the sanctifying work of the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by His blood.

I think the first thing to notice and celebrate is that the work of God for and in His people is the work of the triune God. His work is a Trinitarian work. It is the distinct and complementary work of God the Father, of God the Spirit and God the Son. We notice that even as we read how Peter very deliberately identifies how the persons of the Trinity together work in securing our salvation and lets us, in turn, consider what he says of the Father and of the Spirit and of the Son. We begin with what is said of God the Father. There in verse 2, those Christians, Peter says, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father. What are we to understand is meant by the Father's foreknowledge.

It sounds a very theological or doctrinal term. What's important to stress is this is not just about God knowing facts. Clearly, He does know facts about us. There is a foreknowledge in that sense, but it's important to stress that the language here used describes personal knowledge. This is language that speaks of God the Father as one who from all eternity has loved His people. His knowledge is a loving, fatherly, fatherly knowledge. This is language that speaks of God's fatherly care for us from before the world began. But what does the phrase according to God's foreknowledge actually refer to? What was according to God's or the Father's foreknowledge? Well, as we read verse 2, we might imagine that it refers only to our being chosen because that is what it says certainly in the version of the Bible that we are using there in verse 2, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father.

[26 : 04] So, in answer to the question, what has occurred in accordance to the foreknowledge of God the Father? Well, the answer is we have been chosen. Now, that is true. But it's interesting to

notice that the verb there, chosen, is not found or Peter doesn't use it in verse 2. What the translators have done, and a case can be made for this, is transport the word from verse 1 that we've already noticed to God's elect or to God's chosen. They use it in verse 1, but then they feel it appropriate to transport it also into verse 2 for the reason that they consider that that is the intent or that is what Peter is intending to communicate. He's intending to communicate that it is this fact that we have been chosen that is according to the foreknowledge of God the Father. But I think we would be better advised not to do that, but simply to take Peter at face value and read the passage as he wrote it, which would omit these words who have been chosen in verse 2. And what is the effect of that? Well, we can read it. To God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout, and then according to the foreknowledge of God the Father. The significance is this, is that what Peter is saying is that everything he says in verse 1 is according to the foreknowledge of God the Father.

Yes, it is true that we have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, but Peter is saying more than that. He's saying, yes, we have been chosen on those grounds, but we have also been scattered according to the foreknowledge of God the Father. It is also true that we are strangers according to the foreknowledge of God the Father. Now, why is that important? Well, it seems to me that it is important because it carries with it a sense of real pastoral encouragement. Peter is writing to Christians who are struggling in significant measure, who are being opposed by those whom they live around and amongst, who are aware that there is impending, increasing, and greater persecution that they will have to endure. They're conscious of their status as strangers. They're conscious that they're scattered and the insecurity that that can bring. And Peter says, but don't forget, all of this, your circumstances, your circumstances, all of your circumstances, however perhaps unwelcome they are for you, however difficult they are for you, all of these things are according to the fatherly foreknowledge, the loving knowledge of God the Father. And take heart. Don't be discouraged. Don't imagine that things are not as they ought to be. This is all part of God's loving purpose for you and for your life.

You are scattered. Yes, but it is according to the father's foreknowledge. You are strangers. Yes, and I know that's difficult, but it is according to the father's loving foreknowledge that it is so. Well, that was true for those to whom Peter wrote in this letter, but it is true also for us. So, Peter identifies this work of the father. He is the one who chooses. He is the one who grants us the status of strangers. He is the one who scatters us, and he does all of these things according to his own foreknowledge. But then Peter also speaks of the work of the Spirit through the sanctifying work of the Spirit. If the aspect of the father's work highlighted by Peter points us to eternity past, the work of God the Spirit brings us to our present and indeed our continuing present. Now, there is a sense in which we are sanctified by the Spirit at the beginning of our Christian lives and experience by his work of regeneration. But this is not, I think, the primary emphasis here. Rather, Peter, in what he says here through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, is concerned with the present and continuing work of the Spirit of God in the lives of believers, to free us from sin and to make us ever more like Jesus. This is something that the Spirit is engaged in now in the life of every believer. This is what he is doing for us now, chosen from all eternity, but today in the present, in our present, we are the objects of the work of the Spirit of God sanctifying us. So, the Father has a role to play, the Spirit has a role to play, but Peter also identifies the work of Jesus Christ. We read at the end of this verse, for obedience to Jesus Christ

Christ, and sprinkling by His blood. Now, when I first read this passage, I was intrigued by the order in which the two statements concerning Jesus are presented by Peter. In my mind, and others may come to another conclusion, but in my mind as I read these words, it seemed to be the wrong way round.

[31 : 32] You see, in my mind, maybe it's the way my mind works, but I thought, well, yes. You know, there's a cogency in what Peter is saying. Chosen from all eternity by the Father, sanctified by the Spirit, sprinkled by the blood for obedience to Jesus Christ. In my mind, that seemed to be the order that would make sense. But right at the end, there's a switch. As I say, there isn't a switch, but as I read it, it seemed to be a switch in terms of the order. Why does he mention obedience first and then sprinkling by his blood? As I further reflected on it, and with the help of others who have reflected on it previously and can aid us in this regard, I think we discover that the order, though perhaps at first sight unusual, it can be seen and should be seen as refreshingly encouraging and true to our actual Christian experience. Now, let me explain what I mean by that. Obedience to

Jesus Christ is certainly what the

Father plans. That is why He chose us from all eternity. It is indeed what the Spirit empowers. Jesus is the Lord of our lives, and we are to render to Him the obedience that He is due as Lord and King.

But the reality for the believers to whom Peter wrote, and the reality for us, is that we often fail. We often fall short. We often disobey. And what are we to do when that happens? What were the Christians in Pontus and Bithynia and Cappadocia to do? What are we to do when we fail? Are we to despair? Are we to throw in the towel? Are we to imagine that the Father's purpose is being frustrated by our weakness?

We are certainly to mourn when we fail and when we sin, but we are not to despair. Why? Because God graciously has provided permanent provision that our sins might be forgiven. He has provided for our continuing cleansing. And He has provided by means of the blood of Jesus Christ, the sprinkling by His blood. Now, we don't have time to explore the manner and significance of blood sprinkled in the Old Testament. The Old Testament background is very evident here. Suffice it to say that David in Psalm 51, that we sang earlier in the service, he understands that behind and beyond the sprinkling of blood with hyssop, which was the plant used for the purpose of sprinkling blood, behind that physical reality, behind that ceremony, behind that ceremony lies the spiritual reality of cleansing from sin.

In the New Testament, this truth is also eloquently expressed on many occasions. We could maybe just make reference to one of those. In 1 John 1, verse 7, we read of how the blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all sin. The merits of the death of Jesus in our place as sinners, with the power to purify us from all sin, and to do so permanently and continuously, which is our great real and practical need. So, Christian friend, you have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father. You're strangers according to the foreknowledge of God the Father. You're scattered according to the foreknowledge of God the Father. You are being sanctified by the Spirit. Your purpose is to render obedience to Jesus Christ. But you sin. We sin. And when you do sin, flee to Jesus. Embrace Jesus. Trust in Jesus.

[35 : 35] And experience the cleansing that comes from the sprinkling by His blood. We close by noticing that this greeting of Peter as he begins his letter contains also what we've called the blessing of God. We thought about the messenger of God, the people of God, the work of God, and then finally, the blessing of God. Grace and peace be yours in abundance. The blessing is pronounced by Peter, but the blessing is from God. It is an expanded form of Paul's familiar grace and peace to you. What Peter adds in desiring for his readers grace and peace in abundance reveals something of Peter's own passion for God and his love for God's people. Grace and peace be yours in abundance.

In abundance. The word literally means multiplied. Grace and peace be multiplied in your life, in your experience. Peter's desire is that the Christians he is writing to would know in ever greater measure the grace and peace of God, that their every moment, and indeed perhaps especially their every trial, would be filled with God's undeserved spiritual blessings. And as that was Peter's desire for those he wrote to, so may it be our desire for ourselves and for each other that we might know in ever-increasing measure what it is to experience that abundance of God's grace and peace, that multiplication of it in our own experience. May God grant that it would be so. Let us pray. Let us pray.