

Becoming more like Jesus

1 Peter 1:13-2:3

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Last week Emma launched our August sermon series looking at Peter's first letter to the Christians living in five Roman provinces around what is now modern-day Turkey. Peter addresses them as '*God's elect, exiles in the Diaspora*', which is an intriguing opening statement, given that many of his audience were Gentiles. Even at the outset, Peter makes the purpose of this letter very clear: If you are a believer in Jesus, you are specifically chosen by God for salvation, but also you are actually an exile. Your core identity shifts from being rooted in contemporary culture to being a stranger in it, living as part of the scattered community of the church. Your identity, your spiritual home and your citizenship are now remapped and reassigned heavenwards with Christ.

Peter probably wrote this letter from Rome while the Emperor Nero was on the throne around AD 63-64. He calls it 'Babylon' as a coded reference to the increasingly Godless culture surrounding him. Some people call the age we're living in the digital Babylon, so this letter is very much for us today too.

In chapter 5 Peter says he had help writing it from a faithful brother called Silvanus, who was also known by his Greek name Silas. Silas also worked with the Apostle Paul, and he must have been really eloquent because scholars say this letter contains some of the best Greek in the New Testament. These were smart people. But shortly after that time Nero seized on the Christians as useful scapegoats for his own political failures and persecution started hotting up, with Christians being tortured, killed or burned.

So, this letter is written as an encouragement and a challenge to Christians who were hearing rumours of persecution and might be tempted to down tools and blend in with the crowd.

I remember someone challenging me when I was younger 'If someone accused you of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?' Do I blend in or stand out?

We hear rumours of increasing challenges to biblical faith in our day and there is definite pressure to conform to society's secular values. Or at least there is pressure to keep quiet and not to challenge them.

But to be a Christian is to live as an exile, someone who challenges the status quo not just by being faithful, but also being distinctive in our behaviour.

In 2007 I was about to head off to Trinity College for ordination training so I had to hand in my notice into my Engineering work. One of the most encouraging things one of my colleagues said to me was that she thought I would make a good vicar because I was one of the only ones who didn't slag off others behind their backs. I instantly thought of plenty of occasions I had messed up and got cross at work, but by the grace of God her impression of me was of someone who was different from the crowd. I was so grateful for that! Thank you Lord!

The first word of today's passage in verse 13 is *Therefore*, so it is really important to ask what it's there for! In this case the first 12 verses of the chapter are highlighting all that God has done for us. We are:

"chosen" **(1:1)**

"according to the foreknowledge of God" **(1:2)**

"sanctified by the Spirit" **(1:2)**

"sprinkled with the blood of Jesus Christ" **(1:2)**

"born again" **(1:3)**

given "a living hope" **(1:3)**

heirs of an "inheritance" **(1:4)**

"shielded by God's power" **(1:5)**

So, in view of all this incredible blessing, Peter then *therefore* highlights what our response should be. He highlights 4 particular ways we can stand out from the crowd:

1. Be Alert
2. Be Hopeful
3. Be Holy
4. Be Heart-pure

Remember these aren't 4 things necessary to become a Christian; you do that simply by saying thank you to the Lord Jesus and receiving the grace and forgiveness that he bought for us on the cross. Rather, here Peter is highlighting four characteristics of people who have already been born again and are now wanting to live as authentic witnesses to Christ as scattered members of God's family.

1. Be Alert

1 Peter 1:13

13 'Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober...'

The Greek literally speaks of "girding up the loins of your mind"—an image of gathering up long robes before running or working. This is about more than simply "paying attention." Peter is calling for mental and spiritual readiness.

Instead of endless scrolling, or the pursuit of pleasure or success, Peter first response is to avoid spiritual complacency by keeping vigilant and spiritually discerning. Jesus criticised the Pharisees for their lack of awareness about the signs of the times. It doesn't mean we go hunting for conspiracy theories, but it does mean that we need to ask what is the story behind the story, with the Holy Spirit as our primary algorithm.

Peter starts by saying we should *Think differently*, but then he also says we should...

2. Be Hopeful

1 Peter 1:13

¹³ '...set your hope on the grace to be brought to you...'

Peter doesn't merely say "have hope." He says 'Set your hope fully. It is a choice where we set our hope

Where do you set yours?

Andy Burnham? The NHS? Elon Musk or Technology?

Certain parts of Greek culture were very cynical about hope. In the story of Pandora's box, hope is the last thing left inside it. *Hesiod* one of the original Greek commentators about the story wrote *hope is empty*, and I suspect that mindset can creep in all too easily in our day too.

Nietzsche must have been having a bad day when he wrote 'hope is the worst of all evils, for it prolongs the torment of man'. Blah! Get a life Nietzsche!

Biblical Hope is much more about positive certainty: If you look at the Hebrew words for hope, they are much more certain:

Psalm 71:5

⁵ 'For you have been my hope, Sovereign Lord, my confidence since my youth.'

Hope = TIQVAH: a cord, a rope

- (תקוה)

Jeremiah 17:13

¹³ 'O LORD, you are the hope of Israel'

Hope = MIQVAH: a collection of yarn bound together

- (מקוה)

Biblical Hope is like a rope to hold on to. But it takes our choice for us to hold on to it.

If you look at the New Testament, this sure and certain view of hope is carried through:

Romans 15:13

¹³ 'May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace and believing so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope'

If God is a God of hope, we must resist any cynical view of hope, because what we are actually doing is being skeptical about God's character.

Instead of the saying, 'where there's life, there's hope', the biblical view is really, 'where there's hope, there's life!'

Peter says we need to intentionally fix our hope on Christ and his return. Because this is the hope becomes an anchor that enables perseverance and displaces the fear of death in our lives.

In other words, we need to *Look differently* as we face the future.

3. Be Holy (1:14–21)

This is the longest section because it is the heart of Peter's appeal.

Holiness is not "Be odd." Nor is it about "Keeping the rules." Instead, it is reflecting the character of the God who paid the ultimate price to save us from an empty way of life.

Instead, holiness is wanting to take our place in God's family along with the distinct traits that identify us with children of our holy heavenly Father:

He says, 'be holy because I am holy'.

This is a reference to Leviticus 11, where God is telling the Israelites to be distinctive from the other cultures around them by not eating bugs and other creepy crawlies. (I am glad we have continued in that tradition!) But the point is, even what we eat and drink and our consumer habits should be considered carefully before the Lord. When was the last time we denied ourselves something and blessed someone else instead?

Verse 17 says we should have a respectful relationship with God because we have been purchased at enormous cost:

1 Peter 1:18-19

¹⁸ 'You weren't redeemed with silver or gold... ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ.'

The price paid explains the lifestyle expected, so for Peter, holiness means we are to *Live differently*.

Then finally in verse 22 Peter progresses onto the way we relate differently too. We are to...

4. Be Heart-pure (1:22–2:3)

"Love one another deeply, from the heart." Which in practice means ridding ourselves of malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, slander
These are all relational sins.

Notice the progression. Peter isn't just asking Christians to behave nicely, He's asking for purified heart motives.

This is perhaps the hardest thing to do. We might be able to suck it up and do things we don't really want to do, out of respect for the Lord. Whilst all the time underneath, we're grumbling inside. But the heart of the problem is the problem of the human heart.

How can we become heart-pure people? Only through the power of the Holy Spirit, the master heart surgeon.

And the principal way he does this is through his Word getting deeply embedded in our souls.

Then he finishes with:

1 Peter 2:2

² 'Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk.'

The picture is wonderful because babies are pure and they don't need persuading to drink. Healthy Christians should develop the same appetite for God's Word and God's life.

In other words, we are to *Love differently*.

So, our four responses to the Gospel focus take us on a journey.

- We are to be alert – thinking differently,
- We are to be hopeful - choosing to set our hope on Christ, looking forward differently,
- We are to be holy – living differently as distinct disciples considering our actions carefully,
- And finally, we are to be heart-pure, asking the Holy Spirit to purify our heart motives, letting the Word of God direct us to love differently.

Peter isn't telling Christians to stand out for the sake of being different. He's saying that because we belong to a different kingdom, we should inevitably think differently, hope differently, live differently and love differently. We will become more like Jesus.

But the place to start is with gratitude. If we start with thanksgiving, our response to God will permeate the whole of our lives as exiles. Your mind, your future, your life and your relationships will day by day become an offering to him and an amazing witness to God's love and grace.



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