

THE CHURCH IN 1 PETER

BEAUTY IN EXILE

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Do you see her? Cast out, maligned, mistreated, and unimpressive by any worldly standard, yet to eyes of faith beautiful, magnificent, and glorious. She is the church, in exile in this world yet chosen and precious in the sight of God. She endures hardship and remains faithful to her Lord. She suffers false accusations yet stands approved in him. She is holy in an unholy culture. She is pure despite her past of impurity. She is a warrior, resisting the roar of the satanic lion yet living in weakness under the pagan authorities of this age. She finds honor in reflecting her Savior who bore her sins and cares nothing for the reproach of this age. She is an assembly of living stones, a magnificent temple, standing tall in the sin apocalypse of this age. She is birthed by the Word of God, lives by the grace of God, and hopes in the inheritance of Christ. She is a sojourner with no place to lay her head yet destined for a heavenly inheritance that will never fade. She preaches revolution but not of political power or social control. She holds out the message of a crucified Savior and an eternal invitation.

She is the church of Jesus Christ. Do you see her? And do you love what you see?

How Peter Saw the Church

We must see the church as Peter saw her, as God sees her, lest we fall prey to the false expectations and delusions of phony modern descriptions of the church or become seduced by alternative visions of her mission and identity. Most importantly, this vision must shape how we engage in our own local church. Peter is not writing for philosophical speculation or academic theory, but for real Christians in the real world. He is writing for you and me. And God has sent Peter's letter through the ages to countless Christians who need this vision to be restored to their soul and to shape their lives.

Peter establishes the ironic definition of the church in his opening greeting. By writing to elect exiles (1:1), he crafts a phrase that communicates both the church's value and her vulnerability. To be an exile is to be cast out, in the way that Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden, or Israel out of the promised land. An exile has no refuge, no protector, no prestige. Yet here there is a change.

We are “elect exiles ... 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 (1:1-2).” We are cast out, but we are known. We are counted as unworthy in the world, but cleansed before God. And far from our exile revealing God’s judgment, Peter believes that “grace and peace” will be multiplied to these dear saints (1:2).

The irony of the church is that she is at once outside of the power and prestige of this world, yet chosen and precious in God’s sight. She has no present claim to earthly glory, but she has unparalleled honor as those chosen in Christ. She is at once priceless and powerless. She is in and out at the same time. This irony establishes the main vision of God’s people that will carry through the book and ought to rearrange our view of the church.

In Peter’s day, the vulnerability of the church was quite clear. The Christians knew they were exiles. They knew they weren’t popular or powerful. They knew they were falsely accused and mistreated. Peter’s goal is to help them view their present suffering through the lens of their eternal identity. He seeks to raise their vision to the spiritual glory of the church and to motivate their faith to look beyond their current pain.

In American culture, the church faces different temptations. For a couple of centuries now, Christianity has had a relatively favored status in America. In an aberration from most of church history around the globe, to be a Christian has not felt like being an exile. Though such a reprieve from suffering should cause us to rejoice, it also created a subtle temptation, which the church in our day must resist. The temptation was to disagree with Peter’s vision. And the temptation was to change the vision of the church. Perhaps, we began to think, the church is not in exile in this age. Perhaps we should expect to be made at home in this world. Perhaps we should expect political power rather than enduring oppression. Perhaps the church should normally be spiritually glorious *and* socially powerful. Perhaps our unfading inheritance is meant to come to us in this age *and* in the age to come. And behind this temptation of expectation, there is the temptation of compromise. If we are meant to be popular and powerful rather than maligned and vulnerable, perhaps we should conform ourselves to the ways of this world so that we can retain their approval, rather than stand apart and risk their wrath. But Peter has gone ahead of us. He plants his feet firmly to block this false path and points us back to the truth.

Your inheritance, he says, is unfading (1:4), but in this age, in this life, if necessary, you may be grieved by various trials (1:6). This is good, he says, because your endurance proves that you are made for eternity. In your soul is the gold that cannot be ruined by the heat of this life. And lest you dislike this calling, remember that the prophets of old longed and searched for the things that have been handed to you (1:10). So do not conform to the passions of this age (1:14), but be true to your holy calling. Your glory is in your purity and in your love by which you prove that you are born of that Word that has come from above.

So, Peter says, our value is not in compromise with this world, nor in prestige or ease or power in this age, but rather in our calling as God's special people. And lest we don't understand the privilege we have been given, Peter describes the church in chapter 2 with language that reaches one of the high points of ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church) in the New Testament. "You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (2:4-5).

Built on Christ the great Cornerstone, we are

a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (2:9-10).

And lest we think that this status entitles us to pride toward our non-Christian neighbors, Peter reminds us to "keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation" (2:12). This command carries through to the most personal and painful aspects of life, including Christians of the first century having to honor the pagan and ruthless emperors (2:13), or slaves having to honor their masters (2:18), or Christian wives having to submit to their non-Christian husbands (3:1), or Christians suffering unjustly (4:12-16).

Peter's vision is of a church that cherishes her heavenly calling and privilege, is not surprised by the suffering of her exile status in this age, and steadfastly refuses to return evil for evil but is ready at any moment to give a reason for her hope. That hope is evident precisely because she remains joyful and righteous and loving even in circumstances that would cause a normal human to complain, compromise, or seek revenge.

Do You See Her?

So, is this your vision of the church, and does it motivate your church practice on a week to week basis? *Do you see her? Do you love her?*

Peter's vision (and it ought to be ours) is not a church mobilized toward political power or expecting earthly comfort. She does not seek suffering but is not surprised if it comes. She does not willfully provoke accusations but is not shocked by them. She resists doing any evil yet she is not disturbed by unpopularity or unrest.

Peter's vision is of singing sojourners, eyes fixed on heaven, fighting aggressively against every evil impulse, loving the family of God, and proclaiming the gospel of grace. He envisions us to see this beauty and belong

to it. He wants us as happy members of this holy temple, built together into this magnificent priestly family. He exhorts us to defend her holiness and worthiness, continuing to drink in the Word which is her source of life and continuing to exalt the Savior who bore her sins.

Do you see her? There she is on Sunday, gathered in small numbers but adorned by praises reverberating with worship. There she is receiving the Lord's supper and humbly hearing God's Word. There she is in prison, unwilling to compromise her faith for her freedom.

And there she is in the future, in heaven, receiving her inheritance, which even now shines with undimmed glory in the face of Jesus Christ.

Do you see her? Do you love her? She is the church of Jesus Christ.