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1 Peter 1:1-2

First Message

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JOY WRAPPED IN TEARS

SERIES: A PILGRIM'S LIFE IN AN ALIEN LAND

A month ago today I was sitting with some friends on a beautiful hillside in Eastern Europe. My heart was filled with joy as I anticipated a reunion with other friends I had not seen in a year. As they came up over the hill, I went bounding toward them to greet them with a hug. My jubilation was checked, however, when I looked into their eyes. I could tell their hearts were broken. The very first words that came out of our translator's mouth to us in English were, "He is dead." He was referring to their spiritual leader who had died one month earlier. It would be hard to describe fully the impact this one man has had upon the Christians in that nation. He was imprisoned for 16 years for his faith. He saw an entire generation of people killed for Christ. While he was in prison he composed 10,000 poems of love and appreciation to Jesus Christ. These poems were smuggled out of the country and published, and became the hymnal for this denomination. Now there are some 300,000 to 500,000 Christians singing the hymns which this man composed.

Last year, when I met him, I realized I had never in my life encountered a more weighty individual. When I was in his presence I felt like dust on the scale compared to the weight of his glory. When we met, he looked me right in the eye and said, "You teach about the cross, but we live under the cross." Then, with tears coming from his eyes, he prayed for me. Though I could not understand what he was saying I knew what he was praying for. I could see it in his eyes. He was praying that I would experience the sweetness of Christ that he had enjoyed through suffering. Ten thousand people attended his funeral. More would have come but the police put a stop to it. Then they used the opportunity provided by his death to turn up the persecution on this denomination. Later that week we found out how hot the persecution was going to get. The police came four times to where we were and we had to escape into the forest.

After I had met these leaders and saw their brokenness, I went down by the river with one of our ministry team. She was deeply concerned about the whole situation. She said to me, "How can we speak a word of relevance to these people. They are broken. Their spirits are crushed. What can we say?" We knelt and prayed together, asking God to give us a word from heaven. As we prayed, the Lord turned the light on in my heart and brought me back to the whole year of study which we had undertaken in preparing the book of I Peter. As I thought about this book, it dawned on me that the context of this letter was exactly the same circumstances these people were facing.

When Peter wrote this book in the early '60's A.D., he was nearing the end of his life. He was writing as a father to a very weak and scattered church at a time when its leaders were ready to die. Who would fill their shoes? No more would these men who walked with Jesus at the Sea of Galilee, who saw him walk on water, who saw him feed the 5,000, who saw him heal the blind and the lame, be able to share their experiences. Most important of all, they had seen him crucified, and then they witnessed his resurrected life and were commissioned by him. No more would they be there to tell of these marvelous things.

Secondly, the church which the apostles were leaving behind was not highly organized. There was no great central bureaucracy, no monu-

ments, no money, no wealth. Rather, the church was a very loosely organized, decentralized group of small house churches that were weak and insignificant in comparison to the world.

Third, times were going to get worse as far as the government was concerned. Up to this time, Christianity in the Roman Empire was sheltered under the umbrella of legality, as the government treated it as a sect within Judaism. Judaism was a legal religion, so Christianity was considered legal. But then something changed. As Christianity spread, it began to attack the idolatry of the Roman system. In the Greco-Roman world, practically everything one did for a living was somehow associated with idolatry. When Christianity began to attack idolatry, as in the story in the book of Acts when the silversmith Demetrius charged that Paul and Silas were undermining his business, there was a backlash: "Men, you know that our prosperity depends on this business. This Paul has persuaded and turned away a considerable number of people, saying that gods made with hands are no gods at all. And not only is there danger that this trade of ours falls into disrepute, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis be regarded as worthless..." (Acts 19:25-27).

Roman law held that every man had the right to engage in business without interference. Christianity was now in trouble because it was undermining the economy. Christians were to be charged with "teaching customs which it is not lawful for us to receive, neither to observe, being Romans." This cause of hostility would be universally operative.

When Nero became emperor in A.D. 64, Christians were so unpopular that Nero could successfully make them the scapegoat for the great fire which destroyed most of Rome. In order to divert suspicion that he had done it for his own entertainment, Nero accused the Christians, and the public was willing to believe the worst. The historian Tacitus knew that the charges were false, but he reveals how easily the public was willing to blame the Christians. Here is what he wrote:

Therefore, to scotch the rumor, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled as Christians. Christus, from whom they got their name, had been executed by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate when Tiberius was emperor; and the pernicious superstition was checked for a short time, only to break out afresh, not only in Judaea, the home of the plague, but in Rome itself, where all the horrible and shameful things in the world collect and find a home.

First, those who confessed themselves Christians were arrested; next, on their disclosures, a vast multitude were convicted, not so much on the charge of arson as for hatred of the human race. And their death was made a matter of sport: they were covered in wild beasts' skin and torn to pieces by dogs; or were fastened to crosses and set on fire in order to serve as torches by night when daylight failed. Nero had offered his garden for the spectacle and gave an exhibition in his circus, mingling with the crowd in the guise of a charioteer or mounted on his chariot. (F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame*)

A change had occurred. No longer was Christianity a legal religion. It was not like Judaism, a religion of a nation, but, as one commentator says, “it was of the off-scourings of society” (F. F. Bruce).

This was where these Christians to whom Peter was writing found themselves. Their leaders were about to die. The church was highly unorganized and decentralized. They had no money. Persecution was going to flare up. What would Peter say to them? What words of advice could he give to these wounded people about how to have an influence in their society? What he says is very interesting, as a matter of fact. In the first two verses of the book he tells them who they are; he tells them about their identity. As Christians, they had a two-fold identity. If you understand that, you have the key to influence in the world regardless of what is happening around you. Identity is the most important thing. It's from this that everything else follows.

Listen to what Peter writes in these first two verses.

I. Our Relationship to the World: Scattered Aliens

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ to those who reside as aliens, scattered through Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, that you may obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with his blood. May grace and peace be yours in fullest measure. (1 Pet 1:1-2 NASB)

Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, and Bithynia were provinces in Asia Minor, located between the Taurus Mountains and the Black Sea. It is likely that Peter ministered in this area after his departure from Jerusalem.

What he says here in these two verses could be more accurately translated by the Greek text: “To the elect sojourners of the dispersion (the diaspora).” *Sojourner* and *diaspora* are very significant terms. These words, which come right out of the Hebrew scriptures, are the key to our identity in the world. The prophets Micah, Isaiah and others wrote that after the Messiah came, God would take this tiny remnant of Jewish believers and scatter them among the nations. Micah (5:7-9) tells us that the remnant of Jacob, as it is among these peoples, would be “like dew,” bringing life, freshness and salvation. And, further, the remnant would be “like a lion.” It would be given strength to overcome its enemies.

What this is telling us is that God's method of salvation for the world is to take believers and scatter them everywhere. That is why the apostles did not create a strongly centralized church that could be seen by the world. Rather, Christians were scattered everywhere, in every segment of society—slaves, freemen, rich and poor. I believe the church loses its influence when it clusters together, setting a high profile and attacking the world. That is not the way to influence. The method is to be, in Jesus' words, “in the world but not of the world.” This is what Peter is telling his readers. He is saying, “Though you are scattered, be encouraged. You are part of God's method of salvation to the nations.”

Then he says, “While you are in the world you reside there as sojourners or aliens.” Again, this comes from the Old Testament, right out of the patriarchs. When Abraham was in the Land of Promise, he went to the sons of Heth to buy a grave for his wife, saying to them, “I am a stranger and sojourner among you.” He was declaring that there was no place on earth he could call his home. He had a sense of alienation while he was on earth.

Do you feel that way when you go to work every morning? When your children go off to school, do you feel a sense of alienation, that everything is temporary?

One of the classic expressions of this sense of alienation is found in Psalm 120, when the pilgrims in exile from Jerusalem express the alienation they feel in the world. One of them writes:

**Woe is me! For I sojourn in Meshech,
For I dwell in tents of Kedar
Too long has my soul had its dwelling
With those who hate peace,
I am for peace, and thus I speak;
But they are for war. (Ps 120:5-7)**

You arrive at work, or at school in the morning, seeking peace and harmony in relationships, but out of everyone's mouth comes hatred, enmity and strife. You feel alienated. But that is our relationship with the world. We are aliens, we are sojourners. This place is temporary.

Let me give you three important implications of this truth. First, I would say that we experience no permanent or abiding contentment in this life. Nothing in this life is permanent, whether it be a relationship, a job, a home, whatever. God is calling us to be pilgrims. When you enter into relationship with Christ, the first thing he asks you to do is to leave your earthly home and journey by slow stages through many dangers to your heavenly Zion. “Is there no joy?” you ask. Yes, there is joy, but, as one commentator says, “We taste the joy, but only as the wanderer drinks of the brook by the way.”

To symbolize this sense of transitoriness, the patriarchs had a symbol. They lived in tents. Whenever you meet Abraham in the Old Testament as a patriarch, even in the Land of Promise, he dwells in a tent. Tents symbolize that life is transitory. They offer mobility and freedom.

Here is what the writer of Hebrews says about Abraham:

By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow-heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which had foundations, whose architect and builder is God. (Heb 11:9-10)

And with every tent comes a number of tent stakes. God designed life so that we pull up our stakes one by one and become more and more free on our journey to Zion.

The first stake I pulled up as a young man was when I went away to college. I felt alienated when I came up here to Stanford and found a whole university in turmoil and an anti-God sentiment among the faculty. I felt like an alien leaving home. For many, the next stake that is pulled up and discarded is when God calls us into marriage and we leave our mother and father for good. You are no longer under their headship. You journey off into a new adventure. Next, you may have to leave familiar territory and relocate to a new geographical area. God calls you to live somewhere else that is foreign and alien to you, so you move. Next, your parents die and you pick up those stakes. Then your children grow up and leave. That stake is pulled up. Finally, and most painful of all, your spouse dies and you're left alone in your tent. At last you die. You take down your tent and go home. You could say that life is a series of pulling up stakes. We find no permanent abiding possession here at all. But the place you are going to is permanent.

The second thing I would say is that if you drive your stakes too deep, and allow your roots to go too deep, it will cost you dearly. This is what happened on occasion with the patriarchs. In their narratives at times there is no mention of tents. That is because their roots were going too deep. There is no tent mentioned when Abraham went to Egypt. There is no tent mentioned when Jacob went to Shechem. He was told to journey to Bethel to meet God there, but instead he stopped in Shechem and put his roots down deep. But in the next chapter we find that his daughter was raped. His sons take on all the characteristics of the world and even abuse the holy symbol of circumcision as a means

to murder all the male inhabitants of a city. Jacob becomes odious to the Canaanites because he had allowed his roots to go too deep.

The third thing I would say is, do not oppose being scattered in the world. Be willing to venture forth to new arenas, to meet new unbelievers. We are living in an age of great opportunity. Everyone is talking about this sense of alienation. Everyone is looking for a home. Thousands are leaving East Germany. Thousands of Chinese are leaving mainland China and Hong Kong and coming here. They feel alienated. They are seeking a home. Look at all the so-called latch-key children who feel alienated in their own homes. Many couples in this church are being asked to go to other countries for a time on business. This is very exciting to me. Learn to be a pilgrim. Pick up your roots. Travel with God.

Elizabeth Singer Rowe expresses this very beautifully in her work "Devout Exercises of the Heart":

I am but a stranger and a pilgrim here,
In these wild regions, wandering and forlorn,
Restless and sighing for my native home.
Longing to reach my weary space of life,
And to fulfill my task. O haste the hour
Of joy and sweet repose! transporting hope!

That is our relationship with the world. We are scattered in the midst of it, but we feel alienated in it.

II. Our Relationship to God: Elect

Peter goes on to say that Christians have another relationship—our relationship with God. He tells these believers, "Though you sense alienation in the world, to God you are the elect, you are the chosen, according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, that you may obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood."

The two great pillars of Israel's faith that set her apart from the Canaanite religion were monotheism and election. In other words, there was one God and Israel was his people. This is reiterated over and over again in the Jewish faith. In the words of the famous *Shema*, from Deuteronomy 6:4: "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!" There is one God, and Israel is his people. Now the glorious truth is this, that through Jesus the Messiah, Gentiles like you and me are grafted into the people of God and called elect as well. What a privilege! Therefore, as we make our journey through this alien world, the whole point of pulling up the stakes is that you get to know this God who loves you and has elected you. While the symbol of the sojourner in the Old Testament was the tent, the symbol of knowing God was the altar. When God revealed himself to the patriarchs in the Old Testament, and showed his grace to them, they would build an altar of stones in appreciation. There they offered sacrifice and prayed to God, and also used the altar as memorial to preach and witness. So there were two symbols: the tent and the altar--aliens in the world, but loved of God.

A. The Source of Our Election: The Father

"To the elect, according to the foreknowledge of the Father." At times when people hear the doctrine of election, many feel a sense of revulsion. They think of God as randomly sorting people, like a computer--the elect and the damned. They feel that all of life is determined, and this results in a fatalistic view of things. This world view is destructive to relationships. But that is not what election means. I would rather replace it with the word love. This is what happens in a marriage. Out of all the women in the world a man selects one he wants to be intimate with. Election does not destroy relationships, it enhances them.

Peter tells us here that our election involves all three persons of the Trinity, the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. In fact, the word used in the Old Testament to describe election is the word "to know intimately." God told Israel and Amos, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth" (Amos 3:2). Hosea says, "It was I who knew you in the wilderness" (Hosea 13:5). If you asked him what is the basis of election, Peter would say, "We were the elect according to the foreknowledge of God." That means that before history began God knew you and everything about you. He chose to have an intimate relationship with you despite you. Before time began he wrote your name in the book of life. David writes in Psalm 139:

Thine eyes have seen my unformed substance;
And in Thy book they were all written,
The days that were ordained for me,
When as yet there was not one of them.
How precious also are Thy thoughts to me, O God!
How vast is the sum of them! (Ps 139:16-17)

What amazes David is not that God knows everything, but that God knows him intimately and wants to have a love relationship with him.

Peter experienced this in a dramatic way in his own life. Before the day of Pentecost, he denied Jesus and discovered what a wretch he was in his own arrogant strength. After the resurrection he went fishing again for the umpteenth time, contrary to the Lord's command to fish for men. Jesus appeared to him and told him to cast his net on the other side of the boat. He caught so many fish the net began to break. It began to dawn on Peter, "This is a rerun. We've been here before." He's caught again. This is after the resurrection, after he has denied the Lord. So Peter swims to shore and gets out dripping with shame. Imagine how you would feel if you were the apostle. You had just denied three times that you even knew Jesus. Even after God had vindicated him, now you've failed again. But rather than a word of rebuke, Jesus prepared breakfast for Peter. All he says to him is, "Do you love me?" The only answer Peter can come up with is, "You know me pretty well. I can't say I love you like ought to, but I love you like a friend." Jesus says to him, "Today you're a pastor." That's what this love does to us. The love of the Father is so great that although he knows all about us, what wretches we are, he loves us anyway. He wants to be intimate with us. He believes in us and wants to use us.

B. The Means of Our Election: The Holy Spirit

Then Peter gives the means of our election: "By the sanctification of the Spirit," he declares. The apostle understood what he was like before the Day of Pentecost. He saw God in Jesus. He knew about God's love. He saw the power, but it couldn't change his heart. But after the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit comes without measure and puts the love of God in his heart, he no longer knows about God; he knows God. After Pentecost, instead of being outside the courtroom when Jesus was condemned, Peter is inside the courtroom, talking to the same crowd that crucified Jesus Christ. He puts them on trial. "I'm not on trial here today," says Peter, "you are. We have a heavenly court going on here. You denied the power of Jesus Christ. God raised him from the dead. He is the judge, not you." That's some transformation. The Holy Spirit had come into his heart.

Some of you may be between those two stages. Perhaps some of you teenagers are here because your parents brought you. You know all about God but you've never entered into this experience of the Holy Spirit coming into your life and putting the love of God in your heart. But that is what it's all about. We are elected by the foreknowledge of the Father, and it is the Holy Spirit who makes our election real in our hearts.

C. The Purpose of Our Election: Grateful Obedience

What is the purpose of our election. Peter says, “to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with his blood.” Notice what it doesn’t say. It doesn’t say that we might obey the law. Parents know the difference. Your children can obey to the letter of the rule but still be angry with you. In a relationship with Jesus Christ we don’t serve God out of duty. If you are here today out of duty, then you do not know God. The Christian who has the Holy Spirit poured out in his heart wakes up every morning and knows that he can come to Jesus Christ no matter what he has done the day before, the night before, the moment before; he can be cleansed by that blood and given new life. He is so touched by appreciation for what Christ has done he wants to please him from the heart, to please the Person who walks with him every day. That is so much higher than duty and law. That is the new covenant.

This is illustrated the book of Deuteronomy. At the end of his sixth year in service, a Hebrew slave was to be set free. His labor was over, his duty was done. But the slave could say, “No, I don’t want to go free. I love my master! I want to serve him for life.” The master would then take the slave and place his earlobe against a doorpost and drive an awl through it. Then he would place an ear-ring in his ear. In the Old Testament, the ear is the symbol of obedience, so what that ear-ring symbolized was that the slave was serving his master because he loved him. That is what a Christian does. And that is what our election is all about. You are elected by the foreknowledge of the Father who loves you. The Holy Spirit sets you apart and communicates that love to your heart. Then he writes the Ten Commandments in the spirit of your heart. That is your identity. You hunger to obey Jesus Christ out of love and appreciation.

III. The Result of Our Two-Fold Identity

Peter ends by telling us the result of that two-fold identity. He says to these Christians, “May grace and peace be yours in fullest measure.” As we live in the world we have these two relationships: an alien world and a loving God. This creates a tension. Peter says that the tension between the two, the sense of alienation and love, hatred and hostility, rather than being a threat to your soul actually enhances God’s grace in the soul. This is what David expresses in Psalm 58. Here is what he wrote when he was a wanderer, an aimless fugitive fleeing from Saul,

**Thou hast taken account of my wanderings,
Put my tears in Thy bottle,
Are they not in Thy book? (Ps 56:8)**

David says that in the world he is restless, and filled with melancholy, but that pain gives birth to trust. That is why I have entitled this message, “Joy (In This Life Is Always) Wrapped In Tears.”

A brother shared with me on our trip that he had been dating a girl who really impressed him. I asked him what impressed him about her. “Her beauty,” he told me. It wasn’t a physical beauty, he said, but her spirit that was beautiful. When I asked what made her this way, he told me that as she was growing up she was emotionally abused by her father. She suffered a tremendous amount of verbal and physical abuse. As early as high school she decided that her father really could not be a father, and that she was going to have to get a father if she was going to be healthy. That was when she decided to make the Heavenly Father her father in practical ways. When she had emotional and physical needs, she would pray to him. She began to write poetry to God. Over the years this produced in her the most beautiful spirit. Joy wrapped in tears.

I discovered that this is what happened to us in Eastern Europe. Our love for these people was intensified, being birthed in the midst of persecution. The police were hounding us. We had to stand guard every time we met together. Toward the end of the week as we taught I Peter and the love relationships began to build, it became obvious to us that we couldn’t leave the campground (it is illegal for citizens to have dealings with foreigners) with these people because the police had put a roadblock at the end of the highway, checking every car that went out. Our host wanted to have a dinner and reception for us at his house, and although he had planned a wonderful party of appreciation and love, I had to look him in the eye and say, “David, we can’t go back with you. We’ve got to leave now. We have to pretend we don’t even know you.” We began to share our gifts with them, and the leader took me aside and said, “This is like the time when our friends escaped from prison and the police were watching us. The escapees came to our house but we couldn’t talk. We just looked at each other for two hours and wept.” That is the way we left those people; we were torn apart, and yet our love was enhanced.

My question to you is: Do you know God this way? Do you have a sense of alienation in the world? Does this pain drive you to the love of the Lord? Or is your relationship reversed? Perhaps you don’t know God because these roles are backwards: you are at home in the world and a stranger to God. No matter what your age, my prayer for you today is that you will answer the call and become a pilgrim. Take out all your stakes, get in your tent and travel this journey with God.

When I returned from Eastern Europe, I wrote a poem of appreciation to Jesus Christ for the marvelous experiences of joy in the midst of tears that I had there. In closing, I would like to share it with you.

Who am I, and what is my house
That you have brought me thus far.
To take me on chariot’s wings,
Down into your greenest pastures,
Where You give your people a feast in the wilderness.

Was it not enough of your grace,
To see love Divine,
In the Book
And in the eyes of those simple ones
From upon the shores.

But to drink from the river,
To know its tracking over the earth;
And to wade deeply in distant lands,
O this is too much for me.

Who can forget their faces
Their eyes full of pure light,
Their hearts swelling with love,
Their voices in sweet song.

O this is to dwell in your temple,
To meditate on your glory,
Living stones in Antimony!
I love you, my friends in Babylon.

Who am I and what is my house,
That you have brought me thus far?

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