

WHEN WE DON'T BELONG

SERIES: FLOURISH: HOPE IN A STRANGE LAND



Catalog No. 20200913

1 Peter 1:1-2

First Message

Scott Grant

September 13, 2020

1 Peter 1:1-2

Many people who come to the Silicon Valley from someplace else say that this is a strange place. Indeed, we could say much about how different our place is from other places. Moreover, these are strange times, are they not? But the reality is, if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, this land—any land, in fact—will seem especially strange.

Peter, by the way he describes believers, indicates that wherever we're living, our home is elsewhere. Our home is in heaven. For now, we are resident foreigners, so to speak. As such, our first allegiance is to our heavenly king, which will inevitably bring us to into conflict with some of the ways of the land in which we live.

Peter is clear regarding the purpose of his letter. If we encounter suffering and distress in this land, he wants us to “stand firm” (1 Peter 5:12). He inspires us to stand firm by giving us hope. He gives us hope in a strange land. Thus, he helps us to flourish here and now, even though in a very deep way, we don't belong here. Thus the title for our series: “Flourish: Hope in a Strange Land.”

I'm excited to begin this study with you. Up to this point, I've spent way more time with the letters of Paul than I have with the letters of Peter. I'm familiar with 1 Peter, because I've read it and referred to it countless times, but only now am I really diving into it. I'm excited for what I'm going to find. I'm excited for what we're going to find.

Where everybody knows your name

I grew up in a wonderful neighborhood, which was brand new when we moved in.

Back then, the words “play” and “date” were not thought to be related. Parents never scheduled a “play date”; kids just knocked on doors until they found someone to play with. Parents weren't afraid that their children would be abducted; we had the run of the neighborhood—and beyond.

The neighborhood, which included thirty families, fostered friendships, among both kids and adults. The much-loved theme song from the 1980s television show *Cheers* expresses a universal longing: “Sometimes you wanna go / Where everybody knows your name / And they're always glad you came.” I didn't have to go to such a place; I lived in such a place.

Do you live in such a place? Do you feel that you belong? If you don't live in such a place, if you don't feel as if you belong, what can you do about it?

1 Peter 1:1-2:

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,

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

We're getting the truth

The author is Peter, who was one Jesus' original disciples and who was commissioned by him to be a messenger of the gospel. The gospel proclaims that Jesus Christ died for our sins and that he was raised from the dead on the third day. In short, the gospel proclaims that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Jesus commissioned and sent Peter, one of his apostles.

In the post-truth world we now inhabit, it's hard to know who's telling the truth, or even to know whether people who are espousing what they say is the truth even believe in something they would call truth. Sometimes it's hard to distinguish the truth from “cleverly devised myths” (2 Peter 1:16). It is therefore reassuring to know that when we read 1 Peter, we're reading the words of one who walked with Jesus and was commissioned by Jesus to write the truth.

Peter, presumably writing from Rome, identifies his readers as followers of Jesus who are living in regions of Asia Minor, all of which are located in what is now the country of Turkey. Near as we can tell, the letter was written in the early 60s A.D.

Called sojourners

Literally, Peter calls these followers of Jesus “called” and “sojourners.” They have been called by God, through the gospel message, to believe that Jesus is Lord and to follow him (1 Thessalonians 1:4-5).

A sojourner is a resident foreigner. Perhaps this was true in a literal sense for Peter’s readers: they were living away from their original homes, for whatever reason. Such was the case for both Abraham and Moses, who identified themselves as “sojourners” among the Hittites and the Midianites, respectively (Genesis 23:4, Exodus 2:22).

However, the next time Peter identifies his readers as “sojourners,” he urges them “to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul” (1 Peter 2:11). If they were only sojourners in a literal sense, then they could engage in the passions of the flesh just like the pagans.

Moreover, the writer of Hebrews observes that Abraham and others were “strangers and exiles” (“sojourners”) on earth who were not seeking to return to where they came from but were seeking a different “homeland” and desiring “a better country, that is, a heavenly one” (Hebrews 11:13-16). Likewise, the apostle Paul writes to the Philippians, “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philippians 3:20). No doubt the same is true for Peter’s readers, whether or not they were literally resident foreigners.

Inconsolable secret

If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, you are a foreigner, even if you live in the same place your entire life. Your home is in heaven. Until Christ returns or calls you home, you’re a sojourner.

Frequently I ride my bike to visit my father, who still lives in the house in which I grew up in Mountain View. Almost everyone else who lived in the neighborhood when we moved in is dead or gone. Last I checked, of the original 130 or so, only three are left.

When I visit the neighborhood, no one knows my name. When I circle the neighborhood on my bike, before or after visiting my dad, and some of the residents see me, they don’t look as if they’re glad I came. At best, they look indifferent. In fact, when they see me, I wonder if they’re worried about what this unannounced stranger might be up to.

At such times, I don’t think about the Cheers theme song. Another song might come to mind: “I wandered again to my home in the mountain / Where in youth’s early dawn I was happy and free / I looked for my friends but I never could find them / I found they were all rank strangers to me.”

When I go home, to the place that formed me and launched me and meant so much to me, I’m a stranger. I don’t belong. I used to belong, but that was a long time ago.

Wherever we live, we can expect to eventually feel a certain sense of alienation—as if we don’t belong. C.S. Lewis puts it this way: “The sense that in this universe we are treated as strangers, the longing to be acknowledged, to meet with some response, to bridge some chasm that yawns between us and reality, is part of our inconsolable secret.”¹

Our homesickness, then, is chronic, and no church can cure it. The best a church can do, if God is good in a really specific way, is to form a community that gives you a foretaste of your true home. Even then, you have to roll with the changes, as people come and go and as a church, if it’s faithful, tries to adapt to and reach an ever-changing culture while clinging to eternal truths.

Four aspects

Do you ever feel that you don’t belong? You’re supposed to feel that way, at least to some degree—especially if you believe in Jesus.

How then does Peter expect us to live as foreigners, as sojourners—as strangers in a strange land? He tells us that we are “called.” We are not only foreigners; we are also called. We are called foreigners—even called to be foreigners. Being called makes all the difference, especially when we consider who has called us: God.

Peter highlights four aspects of God’s call that can inspire us to live as sojourners, as resident foreigners. We who believe in Jesus have been called in these ways: according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in

the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience, and for sprinkling with the blood of Jesus Christ.

All members of the Trinity were involved in this call—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—which makes it especially powerful. “Praise the Father, praise the Son / Praise the Spirit, three in one.”

According to the foreknowledge of God the Father

First, we have been called “according to the foreknowledge of God the Father.” God’s decision to call us was not an afterthought. No, it was something that he planned ages ago.

To put it another way, God the Father dreamed of you. To make that dream come true, years, decades, centuries, and even millennia before you were born, he set in motion a series of events, especially designed for you, by which one day you would hear the gospel. Jesus Christ died for our sins. Jesus Christ was raised from the dead. Jesus Christ is Lord.

However we were called, it was “God the Father” who called us. He called us to be in relationship with him as his sons and daughters, to receive his love and to love him in return. To say that God the Father called us according to his foreknowledge is to say that God wanted us—and wanted us in time for all time.

If someone ever threw you a surprise party, and you were truly surprised, there probably came a moment when you saw all the people at the party and realized that many plans had been made, unbeknownst to you, to get you and everyone else to this place at just the right time in just the right way. God the Father planned a surprise party for you, so to speak, so that you could hear the gospel.

God has called us according to his foreknowledge—that is, God dreamed of you.

In the sanctification of the Spirit

Second, we were called “in the sanctification of the Spirit”—that is, the Holy Spirit. To “sanctify” something is to set it apart for some special use. For example, implements that were used in the temple were “sanctified.” When God called us, he sanctified us: he set us apart from the world. He did this through his Holy Spirit, who has set us apart to serve God’s redemptive purposes in the world.

I’ve been on about two dozen short-term mission trips. Living overseas in a different culture, even for a short period of time, poses certain challenges. When setting out, I never know how difficult it will be, but I know there will be challenging aspects. However, I also know two other things: I’m serving God’s redemptive purposes, and the trip will end.

The most difficult trip I took was a two-month sojourn in Bulgaria. The first month was great: I served with some fellow short-term missionaries. Then they left me, and I spent the next month alone because I was exploring the possibility of moving there long-term. I was lonely. I was dealing with culture shock. In the end, I discerned that I wasn’t cut out to be a long-term overseas missionary.

Now when I set out on a short-term mission trip, I assure myself, “If it all goes very badly, at least it’s only a few weeks. I can take anything for a few weeks. At the end of it, I’ll be coming home.”

Think of your sojourn this way: you are on a short-term mission trip. Really, it won’t last long. It’s only for a few years, a hundred or so at the most. For now, the Lord has given you things to do to serve his redemptive purposes on earth. One day, you’ll be returning to him. You’ll be going home.

God has called us in the sanctification of his Spirit—that is, for his redemptive purposes.

For obedience

Third, we have been literally called “for obedience,” not “for obedience to Jesus Christ.” By all means, we have been called for obedience to Jesus Christ, but strictly speaking, that’s not what Peter says here. He simply says we have been called “for obedience.”

Elsewhere, Peter uses both the noun “obedience” and the verb “obey” to speak of one’s receptivity to the gospel. When people believe the gospel, they become obedient to “the truth,” to the word,” and to “the gospel” (1 Peter 1:22, 3:1, 4:17). Likewise, if people don’t believe the gospel, they are disobedient to it.

The gospel proclaims, most succinctly, that Jesus Christ is Lord. The gospel announcement demands a response. When we believe the gospel, we obey it—and begin a lifetime of obedience to our Lord, Jesus Christ. God has called us to believe the gospel.

God is infinitely creative in the ways he calls each person, because each person is unique. Francis Spufford, an acclaimed English writer, was an atheist for many years. Now he isn't. In fact, he's written a book titled *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense*. How did he hear the gospel?

I was surprised by mercy, having royally screwed things up in my mid-thirties. At first it was just a nagging sense that light I couldn't account for was getting in to what should have been, rationally, a solidly dark outlook—that I was hearing a repeated whisper of “excuse me?” in the margins of my awareness, in a tiny, tiny font size. It took me a while to conceive of what was happening in the dusty old terms of sin and redemption, and another while to feel that experience was confirming an adult version, weirdly enough, of the faith I'd ditched. But I was sitting in churches, keeping my big mouth shut and listening hard, from quite early on in the process.²

God has called us for obedience—that is, to believe the gospel.

For sprinkling with the blood

Fourth, we have been called “for sprinkling with his blood”—that is, the blood of Jesus Christ.

When the Lord entered into a covenant relationship with Israel, Moses threw the blood of sacrificed animals on the people and said, “Behold the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you” (Exodus 24:5-8). When Jesus shared the cup with his disciples at the Last Supper, he told them, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20). Jesus became the mediator of a new covenant, or new partnership.

The writer of Hebrews, alluding to Exodus 24, observes that “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” and that Christ has “appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.” He urges us to draw near to God “with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean” (Hebrews 9:22, 26; 10:22).

God has called us to believe the gospel, which features not least the death of his Son, and to thereby be forgiven for our sins so that we can be in relationship with him.

You may not mind being sprinkled, especially if you're being sprinkled by warm water coming out of

a shower head on a cold morning. You probably like that kind of sprinkling. I make my showers as quick as possible to conserve water, but really, I'd like to spend a lot more time in the shower than I do.

But how would you feel about being sprinkled by blood? You probably wouldn't want to spend an extended amount of time in the shower if it's blood that's being sprinkled on you. The very thought of being sprinkled by blood is repulsive.

Our sin is repulsive. It takes the blood of God's Son to wash it away. The image of sprinkling with blood reminds us of the repulsiveness of our sin and what was required to cleanse us from our sin. But rest assured, if you believe in Christ, his blood cleanses you from your sins. You are clean before God. You can—you must—draw near to him.

God has called us to be sprinkled with the blood of Christ—that is, to be forgiven for our sins.

Strength to live as foreigners

Do you feel as if you don't belong? If so, what can you do about it? Praise God! That's what you can do: you can praise God. You don't belong! Or, you do belong. You belong to God! God has called you, and called you in these powerful ways, to live as a foreigner. Peter's first sentence after his greeting reads thus: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!”

In God's powerful call of us, we find strength to live as foreigners on earth. God dreamed of you, he set you apart to serve his redemptive purposes, he called you to believe the gospel, and he forgave you for your sins.

Let me speak for a moment to those of you do not yet believe the gospel. Do you feel that you don't belong here, as if maybe your home is somewhere else? Are you hearing something like a repeated whisper of “excused me?” in the margins of your awareness? Could it be that God is calling you?

Jesus Christ died for our sins. Jesus Christ was raised from the dead. Jesus Christ is Lord. Turn from your rebellion against God, which is repulsive, and turn to Christ. Believe in Christ, and you will be sprinkled clean.

When I returned to the states from my two-month sojourn in Bulgaria, I landed in New York and came through customs, tired and bleary-eyed after the long flight. When I approached the booth, the agent looked

up at me, stamped my passport, and said, “Welcome home.” I choked up. I was home.

I wonder: What will it be like when we finish our sojourn here on earth and our king looks at us and says, “Welcome home”? And when you get there, I have a hunch that everybody’s going to know your name.

Endnotes

- 1 C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Essays* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 35-36.
2. John Williams, “Despite Everything: Francis Spufford Talks About ‘Unapologetic,’” *The New York Times* (October 24, 2013).