

STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND

As a nation we are in a very serious time. We are at war. We don't know from day to day if we're going to be attacked by terrorists. Many have lost a great deal of money in the stock market. In addition, we are in a very tense presidential campaign between two men who are very different in their ideologies. It is a hard time, but it is not the first time people have gone through such difficulties.

Today, we will look at people who lived many years ago who also went through some very difficult circumstances. These people are spoken of in the little book of 1 Peter. If you remember the scene at the last supper Jesus had with his disciples, he said to Peter in

Luke 22, "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."

Writing the book of 1 Peter is one of the ways that Peter did what Jesus told him to do. It is a book of encouragement. In fact Martin Luther called it one of the most precious portions of the New Testament.

It seems that Peter wrote his book in AD 64, the year that Emperor Nero burned Rome. The city of Rome burned with a vengeance. With narrow streets and multi-storied wooden tenements it was a tinderbox ready for devastation by the flames. The city burned non-stop for three days and three nights. After 72 hours of holocaust the fires finally slowed down only to break out with even greater ferocity. Many lost their lives and much of the city's large population was left homeless.

Nero needed someone else to blame, so he chose to blame the Christians. The result was that a horrible persecution broke out. In Rome, Christians were tortured, covered with animal skins and attacked by dogs, thrown in prison, and made into human torches. Other Christians were publicly crucified.

How, then, do you encourage Christians who are going through hard times? You might tell them to not worry because everything will get better. But what if things do not get better? What if they get worse? As believers, our encouragement comes from knowing spiritual truth. The truth of Scripture lifts us up and sets our hearts on something better than what we see and experience here below. So, Peter begins his letter of comfort by explaining some basic truths about our relationship to God and to this world.

1. Our Relationship to the World

You may remember the story of a missionary and his wife who were returning to the states after many years of service in another country. As the boat pulled up, there were people with signs saying such things as, "welcome home." It was a festive time, and the missionary was very grateful that people would come out and welcome him in such a way. Then he found out the real truth. It was not the missionary who was being welcomed. It was a politician who was being welcomed home. No one was there to welcome the missionary home. That night in their room the missionary confessed to his wife that he was discouraged that no one showed up to welcome him home after so many years of faithful service. His wife wisely responded, "You're not home yet." When things don't go well and people do not appreciate us, we have to remind ourselves that we are not home yet.

1 Peter 1:1-2, "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, 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: Grace and peace be yours in abundance.

The key word here is "strangers in the world," which is sometimes translated as "aliens" or "foreigners." The Jews would likely remember the time in their nation's history when many of them were taken by force into Babylon where they lived in a very pagan culture with false idols everywhere. Even at the time of the writing of this book, they were under the domination of Rome in another pagan environment. But the word goes farther than that.

The word "stranger" applies just as much to us today as it did in Peter's day. We live in a land that is becoming increasingly pagan. Before you know Christ, that doesn't seem to be a real problem because it is all that you know. But when you come to know Jesus, you begin to learn and live by his standards, and little by little, you begin to feel uncomfortable with the kind of sinful living that surrounds you. The more you become like the Lord, the less you feel like you fit in with people in our world who don't know Christ, and the less they feel like they fit in with you. When I first became a Christian, I was very excited about the Lord, and I began to tell my friends what I was learning. One of my good friends shunned me for years until he got saved. While I was sitting in another friend's house talking to him about the Lord, he got up and opened the door indicating that I should walk through it. I began becoming a stranger to people I had known for years.

People without Christ just don't understand the spiritual life, and what they don't understand, they often attack. I have been amazed at how the liberal news has attacked Sarah Palin for her Christian beliefs. One commentator said Sarah reminded her of Hitler. Another said Sarah scared her because she was afraid that she would try to "Christianize" America. Another said she was afraid that Sarah would try to "pray away the gay." It reminds me of what Peter said in chapter 4.

1 Peter 4:3-4, "For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you."

When you become a Christian, the non-Christian just doesn't get it. Why don't you do the things you used to do?

- If you are a Christian businessman and have decided not to lie and cheat in your work, you are a stranger in the world.
- If you are a husband and you have decided to be faithful to your wife because you are a Christian, you are a stranger in the world.
- If you are a Christian teenager, and you have decided to live for Jesus in the halls of your high school, you are a stranger.
- If you are a worker on a job and you have decided to do your work not as pleasing men but in order to please God, then you are a stranger in the world.
- If you are depressed and discouraged and you refuse to turn to drugs or alcohol to handle your problems," you are a stranger in the world.

That's our relationship with the world. We are strangers in the world.

2. Our Relationship to God

1 Peter 1:1, "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, 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:

Peter uses three phrases to describe our relationship with God.

a) We were Chosen

The word translated "foreknowledge" is the Greek word "prognosis." When a doctor gives a prognosis, it is an educated guess, but God's foreknowledge isn't like that. He doesn't make educated guesses. He knows what is going to happen because he has determined to make it happen. God knew you and me before we were born, and he loved us and chose us to be His own. An old gospel song has a chorus that goes like this:

Oh, how I love Jesus,

Oh, how I love Jesus,

Oh, how I love Jesus,

Because he first loved me.

You are not just accepted by God. You are chosen by God, and there is a great deal of difference between accepting something and really wanting it. You may accept the responsibility of giving food to an old dog that wanders up to your house, but that does not mean you chose it. God, on the other hand knew everything about us before we were born, and he chose us. That should be something very special to us. If we really understood that fact, it would change our Christian experience.

Sometimes I go to visit my mother who lives about 5-6 hours away from here, and I can tell you that there is something special about being there with her. It is as if all is well when I'm there. I started thinking about why that is, and I came to this conclusion. When I am staying in my mother's house, I am with someone who has known me all of my life. She knows the good the bad and the ugly, and yet she loves me with an unconditional love. I have no doubt that she would lay her life down for me in a minute. It dawned on me, that all of those things are true of my relationship with God. He has known me all of my life. There's nothing I have ever done or ever will do that he doesn't know. He did in fact lay his life down for me, and he loves me with an unconditional love. When life gets you down, and you feel like a "loser," remind yourself that God knew all about you before He chose you, and He chose you anyway, and He is not finished with you yet.

b) We were Called: "sanctified by the Spirit"

To sanctify means to "set apart for a holy purpose" You did not just suddenly wake up one morning and decide to come to Christ. The Holy Spirit drew you to God. He convicted you of your sin and turned your heart toward God. And do you know what? He is still doing the same thing. It is His job to continue separating you from your sinful thoughts and behavior and turning your heart toward God.

The author of this book, Peter, is a great example of this truth. Peter was not always the most stable individual around. He was impulsive and often spoke and acted before his brain went into gear. He is the only disciple who openly denied Christ after the crucifixion, but God changed His life. Jesus changed Peter's life so much that he became a rock and lived to the end of his life being faithful to God.

c) We were Cleansed: "sprinkling with his blood"

When Peter began to talk about the sprinkling of the blood; he was drawing upon the knowledge that his hearers had of what the blood meant in the Old Testament. There were different occasions in which blood was sprinkled in the Old Testament.

First when a leper was cleansed there was the sprinkling of the blood on the leper signifying his cleansing. The priest would sprinkle the blood of that dove upon that leper. In the Bible, leprosy is a picture of sin. Just as blood cleansed the leper, the blood of Jesus Christ cleansed us from all sin.

A second occasion when blood was sprinkled was when priests were consecrated into the priesthood. An animal would be slain, and half of the blood would be placed on the altar, and the other half of the blood would actually be sprinkled on the candidates for the priesthood to show their consecration to God as priests before the Lord. In the Old Testament, there was a special body of men who formed the priesthood. In the New Testament, every believer is a priest.

1 Peter 2:5, "You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

In the church every believer is a priest. The essence of being a priest is having access to God. What does that mean to us as a congregation? I am your pastor, but I am not your priest. You don't have to come to me in order to pray or read your Bible. You can talk to God on your own any time you like.

There is another way to look at what it means to be a priest. The Latin word for priest is pontifex, which itself comes from two words which means "to make" and "bridge." A priest makes a bridge between God and man. Jesus left us on earth to be bridge-builders for him.

As priests, you have the privilege of going to God directly through Jesus Christ, but you also have the responsibility of going to God on the behalf of others.

Insights

1. We are not citizens of earth trying to get in to heaven. We are citizens of heaven living on this earth.

Most people in the world have some kind of concept that they would like to go to heaven when they die. For most people, that concept is very hazy, and they're really not sure about how to go about getting there. For the Christian, however, the concern is not getting to heaven. The most basic aspect of our faith is the fact that Christ died for our sins. Our concern is not whether we're going to heaven. Our concern is whether we're going to bring the message of heaven to earth while we're still living here.

1 Peter 2:9, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."

We are called by god to make him known to those who don't know him. We are to live in such a way that people become hungry to join us in the journey.

2. We may be strangers in the world—but we have God's grace in abundance.

1 Peter 1:2, "Grace and peace be yours in abundance."

The word "grace" is one of the most important words in the bible because it tells us about how God deals with us. God does not deal with us according to what we deserve. That would be justice, and we don't want that. God deals with us according to his grace. When we decide to serve the lord, God asks us to do things that we cannot do. Then he does those things through us by his grace. When you are discouraged and want to quit, God's grace becomes your strength. When you are upset with someone and want nothing more to do with them, God's grace gives you the ability to forgive. When people think you are strange because of what you will and will not do, God's grace gives you the power to not compromise.

Following Sunday worship services on January 8, 2006, five young men attacked and threatened to kill a Protestant church leader in Turkey's fourth largest city. Kamil Kiroglu, 29, had just left his church in Adana when he was ambushed and beaten so severely that he fell unconscious twice.

"They were trying to force me to deny Jesus," Kiroglu said. "But each time they asked me to deny Jesus and become a Muslim, I was saying, 'Jesus is Lord.' The more I said, 'Jesus is Lord,' the more they beat me." One of the attackers pulled out a long butcher knife and threatened to kill Kiroglu if he did not deny his Christian faith and return to Islam. Kiroglu refused. After the incident, Kiroglu said, "I am praising God—not because he saved me from death, but because he helped me not to deny him in the shadow of death." That is God's grace in abundance, and it is available for you and for me.

3. We are called to a mission that is greater than ourselves

In our American culture, the Christian life is something that is all too often tacked onto an already busy schedule. The prevailing attitude seems to be that we will serve the lord as long as it seems to be to our advantage to do so. We will serve the lord as long as something else does not come up that is more important at the time. It was not that way in the early Christian church. People did not get burned alive because it was convenient. The early Christians were consumed with the fact that Jesus was Lord, that He was the Savior of the world. Maybe Paul best summed up their attitude where he said,

"However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace." Acts 20: 24

The movie Braveheart tells the story of how a 13th century Scottish commoner named William Wallace led his country to freedom from an oppressive English rule. The Scots are vastly outnumbered and begin to flee before the battle even begins. Wallace rides onto the scene and makes a passionate speech that inspires the band of brothers to fight for what they believe in. The Scots rally and follow Wallace into battle, winning the first major victory of the war and turning the tide against the English.

The thing that makes this story so compelling is not the blood and the battles, not the face paint or the horses and spears. What makes the story of William Wallace so compelling is summed up in the conviction Wallace had that there is some things worth dying for. And that is what made the early church great. Its victories came because men and women believed their faith was worth dying for. It was that conviction that allow them to go on during very difficult times, and it is that kind of conviction that we need today. What does it take to stop you from serving the Lord?