*Strangers in a Strange New World*

Introduction to 1 Peter

9/26

Over the summer, I worked through this book by Carl Trueman. In 2020, Trueman released a book called *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution.* It was a 430-page, academic exploration of our culture’s shift from its Judeo-Christian social and political underpinnings to embrace the post-Christian humanism that now defines our culture. At the encouragement of friends, he simplified that work into this more readable book entitled *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution.* In this book he explains how we got to this cultural moment. Although it was not an enjoyable read, it was helpful.

I want to read for you the opening paragraph of the final chapter, because it will set the stage for our new study (*read).* Trueman captures our cultural moment well. Society has shifted, and Christians are faced with three choices. 1) shift with the culture; yet this requires us to abandon portions of God’s word; 2) remain silent hoping to stay under the radar; yet this will keep us from fulfilling our mission to make disciples. Or 3) be salt and light in a culture more likely to cancel us than it is to receive our message. For the first time in our nation’s history, we face the real possibility of faithful Christians suffering for their beliefs.

I do not say any of this to alarm or depress us. On the contrary, I have great hope. My hope is not in a political or social reform that restores a culture where we feel comfortable. The last thing the church of Jesus Christ needs is to feel at home in the world, for this breeds spiritual apathy. Rather, my hope is in the ability of the gospel of Jesus Christ to pierce the darkness of this sin-riddled world. The gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. The blacker the night, the brighter the light shines. If the church will be and do the things God calls us to be and do, God will work in ways beyond our imagination. There is opportunity all around us if we will trust God, die to ourselves, and do His work.

I also take comfort in the knowledge that, although our cultural context is new and unfamiliar to us, it is not new to the church of Jesus Christ. The Christian experience in North America over the last 250 years has been the exception, not the normal Christian experience. Most Christians around the globe today and throughout history have known the cultural discomfort we are beginning to experience. So yes, we are treading territory new to us; but it is a well-trodden path for God’s people. God has left us guideposts to mark the way. That brings us to 1 Peter. It is my prayer that this study will equip and embolden us to live that 3rd option, where we are salt and light in a culture fleeing as fast as it can for the black abyss of sin. They will not know what awaits them in that abyss unless we love them enough to tell them the truth.

Our goal for today is to familiarize ourselves with 1 Peter, laying a foundation for our verse-by-verse exposition in the days ahead. We are going to do this by examining the five words you see on your handout. We want to know who wrote the letter and to whom they wrote. More importantly, we need to know why they wrote, and what they were communicating. Finally, we want to note the letter’s structure, so we know how they communicated the message.

When we study the Bible, we must remember that God spoke through people facing real, everyday issues. In this letter, God spoke through Peter. We learn that in the opening like of the letter. We noted when we studied Colossians that letters in the 1st century, especially formal letters like this one, began with the author identifying himself. Peter introduces himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ. This speaks of his authoritative position in the church. The office of apostle was a unique office held exclusively by 12 men hand-picked and trained by Christ. Churches would receive this letter based on his authority, even if that church had never met him.

Yet the title communicates more than Peter’s authority. It reminds us that his position and message pointed to someone else. His was a witness to what he had seen and heard from Christ. He was to point people to the Rock who was higher than him. This remains the sole responsibility of everyone who picks up the mantle of church leadership.

Second, we must consider the audience. Peter wrote to believers in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. I am going to reserve discussion of how Peter described these believers for next week; this morning we simply note where this was. The names mentioned are Roman districts located in Asia Minor, or modern-day Turkey. Peter is not writing a letter to one congregation, or even to a group of congregations in one location. He is writing a circular letter to be distributed throughout a large geographical area. Not all these churches were planted by him; many within them had probably never met him. Yet, because of his apostleship, Peter was able to speak God’s truth into their circumstances.

Third, we need to consider why Peter wrote to the churches in this region. As you read the letter, a theme emerges: suffering. The word suffer appears in various forms at least 16 times in the book. More than that, the theme of suffering runs through nearly every paragraph. Its focus builds as you progress through the letter, until you reach the climax in 4:12ff, which says:

*Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.*

These believers faced open opposition to their faith, which Peter described as a fiery ordeal. Their suffering was real and intense. Yet Peter says that they should not be surprised by it. It is not some strange thing happening to them. Jesus said *in this world you will have trouble/tribulation.* It is the normal Christian experience to encounter situations where our faith marginalizes us in the world. As we will talk about in a few minutes, the gospel transforms us, making us distinct from the world. Our different lifestyle will create awkward or even oppressive circumstances.

God has a purpose in for suffering. He allows suffering into our lives *for your testing*. If our faith costs us nothing, it is easy to say we are committed to God; yet suffering reveals and refines the strength of our faith. God was testing these believers. Failing the test would weaken their faith; yet passing it would strengthen their faith, preparing them for a future they did not know was coming for them.

Finally, Peter says that when we suffer for our faith, we are sharing in Christ’s sufferings. We ought to rejoice when we are deemed worthy to suffer for Christ’s sake. Peter says that the Spirit of glory and of God rests on us in our suffering, so that we can exult in the hope we have in Christ. Suffering rightly observed gives us an eternal perspective. Yet when we suffer, we are more likely to object to the violation of our constitutional rights and run to the courts for protection than we are to rejoice that we have been counted worthy to participate in Christ’s sufferings in the world. Peter is going to challenge our thinking in these areas.

Peter probably wrote this letter in 62 or 63 AD. At that time, there was growing hostility towards Christians. They were marginalized in society and occasionally suffered violence; yet the full force of Roman opposition had not started yet. It would be a few more years before systematic, widespread, and violent persecution broke out. In the providence of God, the Spirit compelled Peter to instruct the church on how to live in the context of suffering, preparing them for the fires that waited them.

Suffering was the occasion for the writing, but what was Peter’s message? In many ways Peter supplies the same answer we discovered in Habakkuk. In the face of suffering and hardship, we are to remain steadfast in our faith. The true follower of Christ has an ongoing concern to please Him in whatever circumstance God places them in. We should constantly ask *how do I please God in this circumstance? How do I display His glory and point others to Him?* Peter original audience was probably hurting, unsettled, and fearful. Into that circumstance, Peter sends this letter to teach them how to faithfully live for God in the face of a fiery ordeal. His instruction is summarized for us in 1 Peter 2:11-12, which serve as a purposes statement for the letter (read).

Three observations about these verses. First, notice how Peter defines Christians as *aliens and strangers*. The Bible teaches that the Christian’s citizenship does not rest in any earthly kingdom; it resides with our King in heaven. We are aliens, outsiders, who do not belong. This world is not our home, we are strangers in it. That alienation is something we should feel. If we don’t feel out of place in this world, there is something amiss in our relationship with Christ.

I have had the opportunity to travel to both Mongolia and Ecuador on mission trips, and I lived for 8 years in Canada. In each of those places, it was evident that I was an outsider. Culturally speaking, I did not *belong* in any of those places. There is an awkwardness that comes with being an outsider. This is how we should feel as God’s people living in the world.

Because we are foreigners in this world, Peter gives us two commands. First, abstain from fleshly lusts that wage war against the soul; second, keep your behavior excellent among the gentiles. In other words, there are things we are to avoid because they displease God by violating His nature; and there are also things we are to pursue because they reflect God’s character and therefore please Him. Peter answers the question *how do I live in the face of suffering* by saying flee what is evil and pursue what is good. Live as salt and light in the world, displaying the power of God to transform a sinner into a saint.

This gives purpose to our alienation. God does not give us rules because He wants His children to be weird. Rather, His standards are what is best for us. As we live them, we reveal who He is, how He acts, and the power of His gospel. Confronting the world with the gospel always generates a response. In some, it causes them to flee for the darkness of their sin, lest their evil deeds be exposed. In their flight, they seek to extinguish the light through slander, opposition, oppression, or even death of the light bearers. Yet, as we continue to do what is right in the face of their opposition, there will be those who observe our good deeds and turn to the living God for the same hope and freedom we have. Seeing someone arrested by the grace of God makes every moment of suffering worthwhile.

Peter is teaching us how to live as strangers in the world. Beloeved, we should feel out of place in 21st century USA. The materialism of our culture contradicts the gospel. The main sources of media and entertainment contradict the gospel. Our lack of morality, devaluing of marriage, and destruction of the family unit contradicts the gospel. Our culture will tolerate us as long as we do not shed light on the error of their ways; but the moment we speak truth, no matter how loving and gracious we are, we will be labeled as hateful, unloving bigots who need to either get with the program or be shamed into silence and canceled from cultural discourse. We are in an uncomfortable position facing cross-roads.

Sadly, for years many Christians have been trying to figure out how close they can get to the world and still be okay with God. The result is churches that do not look any different than the communities they live in. Our worldliness displays a distorted picture of the gospel and undermines our witness. Thankfully, our culture has reached a point of decline that many fence sitting Christians are realizing they cannot continue their course of apathy. 1 Peter is a wonderful resource as we learn to navigate what it means to be *strangers in a strange new world.*

Finally, a few brief comments about the structure of the letter. Peter writes very differently than Paul. Generally, Paul’s letters start with doctrine explanations. Then, usually around the mid-point of the letter, he says *therefore* and shifts to how these truths apply to our everyday life. Peter does not do that. This letter is a call to action. It instructs us on how we are to behave as God’s people. Yet this practical instruction is interwoven with the theological truths that undergird and shape our actions. He is just as doctrinal as Paul; he just weaves truth and practice together throughout the letter.

After a short introduction in 1:1-2, Peter gives a theologically rich explanation of how God works salvation in His people in 1:3-12. What follows in 1:14-5:9 is instruction on how we are to live in light of the salvation we have received. Peter is saying *if God has caused you to be born again to a living hope, then this is what it looks like to live in that hope.* Every paragraph in this section is built around a command. Yet as Peter gives these commands, he never loses sight of the gospel. He regularly returns us to this first principle, lest we forget that transformation is the fruit of salvation, not the cause of it.

There is flow to the commands that Peter gives.1:14-2:12 is a general call to pursue holiness as we build our lives around the revealed will of God. Then, starting in 2:13, Peter begins to instruct us on how that looks in various relationships. He describes how the gospel shapes our relationships with the government, with our spouses, with the unbelievers, with our fellow believers in general, and with church leadership in particular. Then he closes the letter with a simple benediction in 5:10-14.

As we launch into this study, we must be on guard against two common errors. The first is that we make ourselves acceptable to God through our actions. 1 Peter is full of commands…do this and don’t do that. If we are not careful, we can drift into the thinking that we maintain favor with God by what we do. This is to subtly integrate works into the process of salvation, making us susceptible to legalism. There are many modern-day Pharisees in our churches.

In guarding against this, many Christians have abandoned any serious consideration of personal holiness. I would suggest this is a greater danger to the North American church than legalism. We read gospel statements like the one Peter uses to open the letter (read 1:3-5), and we rightly say *it is all of God’s grace!* Which it is. Yet many of Christians are so busy crying *grace, grace, it is all of grace* that they fail to see the demands the gospel of grace places on its recipients. Many fail to see the connection between salvation and transformation. We think we can be saved without being changed. Those who embrace this distortion of God’s grace cringe at calls to holy living and are quick to label the pursuit of holiness as legalism. Yet they unwittingly make the grace of God extended to us through Christ cheap.

As we study 1 Peter, we will see the error of both approaches. Peter constantly points us to the full and final work of Christ as the only basis for our standing before God. It is the grace of God that saves us. Yet that grace remains operative in us after salvation, changing how we live. It is the ongoing work of His grace that makes us Strangers living in a Strange new World. It is His grace that will sustain us in the face of opposition. I look forward to how God is going to use this study to shape and equip us as followers of Christ.