

## ***Remember: You Are Special • 1 Peter 1:1-2***

On July 19, AD 64, the City of Rome was on fire. It was a city of wooden tenements and narrow streets and the fire spread quickly, burning non-stop for three days and three nights. After seventy-two hours the fires finally started to subside and everyone thought that at last it was over, but suddenly the flames burst out again with even greater ferocity. Some of the most famous and significant landmarks of the empire's capital city were forever destroyed. Many lost their lives and much of the city's large population was left homeless.

Among the people of Rome there was little doubt as to who was responsible for the fire. They blamed Emperor Nero himself. They said he wanted to rebuild Rome to his own design in order to make himself forever famous. They believed that the only way he could accomplish that was for the old city of Rome to be destroyed by fire. Rumors were that he ordered his soldiers to block the firefighters and to reset the flames when they started to burn out. People began turning against Nero. Resentment against him and his leadership grew.

Nero needed someone else to blame for what had happened. Up until then Christianity was considered a denomination of Judaism and thereby had legal protection under Roman law. But there were rumors and allegations against the followers of Jesus. They were accused of cannibalism because they had secret meetings where they ate the flesh and drank the blood of their leader. They were accused of having sexual orgies because they claimed that they loved one another. And they were accused of opposing family values because new converts were more loyal to their Lord than they were to their parents and families. So Nero seized on these popular misunderstandings and announced that the Christians had burned the city. He authorized and ordered broad and severe persecution and punishment.

The Roman historian Tacitus reported that a multitude of Christians suffered terrible pain and died awful deaths. He described what happened in graphic detail. Christians were arrested and large numbers of them were crucified. Under Nero's orders others were wrapped in the skins of wild animals and the skins were sewn tight around them. Then wild dogs were

set on them and they would rip them to pieces. But perhaps one of the cruelest and most notable historical parts of all of this was that Nero took large numbers of Christians, covered them with pitch and set them on fire to light his gardens through the hours from sunset to sunrise. The worst of criminals in the city of Rome had compassion and pity for the Christians because their treatment was more severe than that of any criminal.

It was a hard time to be a follower of Jesus Christ. But two amazing things happened. One was that the persecution of Christians spread across the Empire. The other was that the number of Christians increased. Unbelievers saw how Christians responded to cruelty and death and decided that they wanted what the Christians had!

How were Christians to live in the face of such persecution and suffering? One of the most famous leaders of this emerging Christian church sat down and wrote a short book to give guidance and instruction to those Christians. His name was Peter, and his book was so popular and so well received that it was eventually incorporated into the Bible. Today we call it I Peter.

While there are millions of Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century who still suffer extreme persecution in places like China and Sudan, most of us will never be threatened with torture or death for our faith. But that doesn't mean that our lives are always easy. We all have our challenges. No matter how good life is now there are always chapters of challenge, pain and problems. In our biographies we have chapters with names like illness, divorce, unemployment, broken relationship, business failure, personal disappointment, depression and maybe even persecution. So what Peter wrote in AD 67 is good for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, too.

Peter's 20 principles, explained over five short chapters do more than help us cope with hard times. These principles show us how to live a truly good life. It is no wonder that 1 Peter is one of the most encouraging and beloved parts of the Bible. So let's look first at 1 Peter 1:1-2 and then let's be encouraged with Principle #1 on Peter's fascinating list.

***Unbelievers saw how Christians responded to cruelty and death and decided that they wanted what the Christians had!***

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.

This letter actually follows a pretty standard form of first century letters. In it Peter begins by identifying himself as the author. It is much like the way we use stationery for business letters. We identify the name and address of the company at the top of the page.

Peter describes himself as "an apostle of Jesus Christ". The word "apostle" means a person who is specially sent out to do something. Peter was one of the original Twelve followers of Jesus who were sent out to tell the story of Jesus Christ.

His name wasn't always Peter. His parents named him Simon. He was born near the shores of the Sea of Galilee to a family that was in the fishing business. One day his brother Andrew met an itinerant rabbi named Jesus. He was so excited about this rabbi that one of the first things he did was to find his brother Simon and introduce him to Jesus. Soon Peter became one of Jesus' closest friends.

For three and a half years Simon Peter, Andrew and ten other men followed Jesus just about everywhere he went. They drank in every word he said. They memorized his sayings and observed his miracles. The more they saw of him the more they liked him. But it was Simon who first blurted out what everybody was already thinking: "Jesus, you are the Messiah. You are the Son of God." Nobody had ever said it out loud like that before.

Jesus responded by giving him a nickname that stuck. Jesus said that Simon had gotten it right and that he was a solid-rock-kind-of-guy. Jesus called him "Peter" which means "Rock". If Jesus were nicknaming Simon today in English he would be called "Rocky" because that is exactly what Peter means.

Sometimes Jesus didn't take with him all twelve of his most committed and closest followers. On very special occasions or when space was tight he narrowed it down to his three best friends. And the three that he always took with him on special occasions were Peter and James and John. Peter was there. He was in this inner circle of trusted friends and colleagues.

Peter just loved the action. He was thrilled when

crowds of thousands of people would gather around Jesus. He was enthralled with the way Jesus' words could mesmerize huge numbers of people and the way he confronted powerful politicians. But he was also moved by the tender touch Jesus had as he dealt with hurting people and little children. He was dazzled by the miracles that Jesus performed. One time Peter even jumped over the side of a fishing boat in the middle of the Sea of Galilee and Jesus enabled him to miraculously walk on water. Those were the good old days!

But Peter was what we call a "fair-weather friend". He did very well when things went well. But when there was an enormous turn of events in Jesus' life, Peter took a very different approach. When Jesus was arrested and tried for treason and crucifixion became a real possibility, Peter denied that he even knew who Jesus was. He skipped out on Jesus when he really needed him the most.

That remained a painful memory and regret for the rest of Peter's life. But he did something we all should do when we miserably fail. Peter learned a lesson from his mistake. After that he remained steadfastly faithful to Jesus for the rest of his life.

Peter was there when Jesus reappeared alive after his death. Peter talked to him and touched him and listened to him and ate meals with the resurrected Jesus. He was there when Jesus left this earth and returned to heaven. And then Peter and his wife became missionaries who traveled broadly across the Roman Empire telling everyone who would listen about the good news of Jesus.

But during Peter's travels life became very hard. He experienced persecution and suffering first hand. And in the final chapter of his biography we read something absolutely amazing. He was arrested and sentenced to die on a cross because of his Christian faith. When the soldiers were nailing him to his own cross to die in Rome, Peter requested that they crucify him upside down because he was not worthy to die in the same way Jesus had died.

Peter understood how hard life can be and how to succeed when life gets really tough. So out of the voice of experience his letter is addressed to "God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia." In other words, he was writing to Christians.

Peter describes Christians as "strangers in the world". He's saying that Christians are foreigners. Their permanent residence is some place besides this world. If you're a Christian, you probably know what Peter meant. As Christians our real home is heaven,

not earth.

Heaven has been incredibly misunderstood in our generation. We often think of heaven as the place we go when we die. The assumption is that everyone goes there, no matter what. That is little more than silly wishful thinking.

Imagine the person who does not believe in God. He doesn't even really like God. He has never wanted to live life to please God. God has never been very important to him. Why would he want to go to heaven when he dies? Do you think he would be happy living in God's house, hanging out with people who are all Christians, spending the rest of eternity living by God's rules? Probably not! Heaven might be a nice place to visit, but it would hardly be a happy eternal home. Heaven is the home of Christians.

Like many of you, I've traveled a lot. I've seen some wonderful sights, experienced some unusual cultures and have had some fascinating experiences. But those places aren't home and they are not where I would choose to live. In every case, I've been a visitor, a foreigner, a stranger in someone else's country.

Heaven is where Christians make their home. That's where we fit in. That's where we're comfortable and happy. Heaven is the place where we are citizens. It's where we speak the language. It's where our friends are. It's the place to which we are loyal. Earth is okay, but it's just not us. We're always kind of uncomfortable. We don't quite fit. We don't fully belong. We're visitors. Or, as Peter says, we're strangers.

At the same time, we do have a local address. While heaven may be our permanent residence, we still have ZIP codes in Minneapolis or Eden Prairie or Denver or Chicago or Los Angeles or wherever it may be. For those Christians in the first century, their local address was in the northeast quadrant of what is today the modern country of Turkey, but it was then called by the names of "Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia."

Christians are temporary residents of earth and permanent residents of heaven. We are not Christians because we belong in heaven. We belong in heaven because we are Christians. Christians are those who believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior from personal sin and as the Lord and Leader of their lives. When a person officially believes in Jesus she or he is imme-

diately and eternally registered as a citizen of heaven rather than earth.

The life-transforming principle from Peter (the voice of experience!) to Christians (citizens of heaven) is this: Remember that you are special! We are not special just because we think we're special. In fact, the truth is that we're special to God even if we don't think that we're special. Special means we are different. Special is wonderful. Special stands out from everyone and everything else.

The Ford Thunderbird is a special car. Of the thousands of cars designed and manufactured it stands out as different from all the rest. Drive a Thunderbird down your street or into a parking lot and every head will turn and watch. Your neighbors will talk. Buy most cars and no one will notice or remember what you drive, but

it's different with a Thunderbird. Everyone will talk about it and many will refer to you as the person with the T-Bird.

The first Thunderbird sports car was manufactured on October 22, 1954. It was a 1955 model and there were 4,000 orders for it waiting in advance. It cost \$2700 and today that car is a valuable collector's item. Motor Trend magazine has given the Thunderbird the "Car of the Year" award in 1958, 1987, 1989 and 2002. In the six decades of the magazine it is the only car that has gotten the Car of the Year award four times.

How special is this car? When Katie Couric signed a \$65 million contract with NBC to host the Today Show for four years she celebrated by trading in her 13-year old Honda on a 2002 Thunderbird. She could have bought any car and she chose a Thunderbird. It is a special car.

But all T-birds combined are not even close to being as special as one Christian. If you are a Christian, you are special to God and that makes everything else in life completely different and wonderful.

Every Christian is described as God's "elect . . . who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father." God looked at all the people of the world and he decided he wanted you. He chose you off the showroom floor of all human models. And he knew what he was doing. God knew in advance what he was getting into when he decided he

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wanted you to be a Christian.

We sometimes make choices that we later regret. Some people say they never would have married if they had known the kind of person they were marrying. Others would never have had children if they had known that their kids would turn out the way they did. Still others would never have chosen their career or taken a job if they knew in advance what would happen.

God knew with you! God knew what he was getting into. He knew everything that would happen. He knew what kind of person you were and what kind of person you would become. He knew all your problems and potentials, all your involvements and idiosyncrasies—and he chose you anyway. You are God’s “elect . . . who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father.”

God loves us and he’s chosen us to be Christians. But he also realizes that we need a lot of work. Peter says that God plans to fix us up “through the sanctifying work of the Spirit.” The Spirit refers to the Holy Spirit of God coming to work in our lives. “Sanctifying” refers to the process of making Christians holy, fixing us up to God’s original design.

Every now and then I enjoy reading the classic car ads in the classified section of the newspaper. I have a mental temptation to buy an old car and restore it to its original condition. It’s amazing how much those old cars can cost and how much work needs to be done. An ad says that a ’57 Chevy or a ’65 Mustang needs an engine or a transmission or fenders. Sometimes it merely says “needs work”. What they are really saying is that it would take \$30,000 and the next 30 years of my life to make that beat up old wreck into the car it ought to be. I’ve always decided that it wouldn’t be worth it.

God looks at us and sees our problems and sins and the damage we’ve done to our lives and he wants us anyway. He commits to assign the Holy Spirit to the next 30 or more years of our lives to sanctify us—make us the way we ought to be.

And we’re not cheap. To choose us, buy us back and fix us up cost God his Son’s life. Jesus died as the price for God to reclaim us and make us Christians.

God’s long-term vision for us is also special. It’s “obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood.” God wants us to live our lives obeying Jesus Christ—sort of showing off for Jesus, letting everyone see what Jesus is like by the way we behave.

The term “sprinkling by blood” sounds strange to us, but it really isn’t. In ancient Israel they sacri-

ficed animals on the Temple altar. Some of the blood was used to specially consecrate or bless the people. It was used to commission a priest. It was part of the ceremony. In our culture we break a bottle of champagne on the bow of a ship when it is named and sent to sea. This line refers to when we are named “Christians” and are sent out to serve Jesus Christ.

But what’s in this for us? Peter says, “Grace and peace be yours in abundance.” God chooses us, fixes us up and shows us off as Christians and we get grace and peace in abundance. Grace is God’s generosity and peace is a calm and confidence for every situation in life.

Every car is labeled. There is a name stamped on every one of them. It says Chrysler, Ford, BMW, Mercedes, Volvo or Chevrolet. And it’s the same with people. These words are written to everyone who wears the name of Jesus Christ. These are words for those who are labeled “Christian”, who have accepted Jesus Christ as Savior and committed to obey him as Lord.

You are special! Remember that! Never forget. God loves you. God chose you. God gave his Son for you. God’s Spirit is working in you. You are more valuable than any car. You are God’s Person of the Year—every year. You are a Christian. You are special to God himself!

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