



BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: 1 Peter: Hope Filled Living in a Culture of Despair wk. 1

By Pastor Bryan Clark

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The Bible tells us that there is a core temptation, maybe referred to as “the” temptation, out of which all other temptations we face flow. The core temptation—that all of us as people made in the image of God wrestle with—is this desire to be our own god. In one sense it makes sense; it seems like the most likely way to happiness and fulfillment. We learned in The Proverbs, “*There is a way which seems right, but it ends in misery.*” The farther we as a culture drift from God, the more we experience despair; the more we experience despair, hopelessness and anger. There is kind of this intuitive sense within us as a culture that things are unraveling, and we just don’t know what to do about it. Yet in the middle of a culture of despair, God has called a remnant of people to live as hope-filled people, to bear testimony to the reality of the Gospel of Jesus.

But that does raise a couple of questions: What exactly does that look like? And how do we do that? How do we actually live as hope-filled people in the midst of a culture of despair? Well, that’s what we’re going to talk about. So, if you have a Bible, turn with us to 1 Peter, Chapter 1:

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, (*NASB, 1Peter 1:1a)

So, this is a fairly typical introduction in a first-century letter. Immediately the writer is identified. In this case it’s **Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ** and the recipients are identified as **those who reside as aliens**. The word **alien** is a reference to someone who has their citizenship in one country but lives in another country, with all kinds of the struggles, the troubles, and the awkwardness of that. But it also then provides kind of a metaphor that Peter uses that we as Christians have our citizenship in heaven, yet we live out that citizenship as aliens on Earth. Our values, our beliefs, our way of life, our purpose in life are all dramatically out of step with the world in which we live. We live essentially as *aliens*. He identifies **aliens scattered**. That Greek word talks specifically about the Jews dispersed out of the land of Palestine, or what we would refer to as Israel. This is written approximately thirty years after the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, so well within the lifetime of the eyewitnesses of those events. This is when Nero came into power about AD 62, so it’s sometime during the reign of Nero, probably early in his reign. It’s sometime during this time period that the Apostle Paul is beheaded in Rome. Shortly after Peter writes his letters, he will be executed, crucified-up-side-down on a cross. This is probably just the beginning of the persecution under Nero, and it is about to ratchet up ten times as the persecution will intensify a great deal.

So, in Palestine (we would think of as Israel) during this time, there is a high level of persecution, so many of the Jews have fled. It’s estimated that approximately a million Jews remained in Palestine, but as many as three to four million had now fled out of Palestine, in this case to Asia Minor, or what we’d

refer to today as Northern Turkey. So, the recipients, Jews and Gentiles, are beginning to go through pretty severe stages of persecution. And then the introduction goes from fairly normal to one of the most in-depth, rich theological introductions in the New Testament:

...to those who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure. (Vs. 1b-2)

So, he identifies the recipients, and this would be true today of anyone who has trusted Christ as Savior. First you have been chosen by **the foreknowledge of God the Father**. I don't know what you are going through. You may feel abandoned; you may feel forgotten; you may feel at times like God doesn't care; but actually, the opposite is true. At one time you were nothing more than a sinner, misfit, and loser, with virtually no hope. But for reasons unknown, this magnificent, confusing mystery of God is He in eternity past chose you to be His child, to be the recipient of His magnificent salvation. Through no merit of your own, through no deserving of your own, God chose you!

The idea of **foreknowledge** is not just that God knows the future. In both the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament, the word *know* is used to describe sexual intimacy between a husband and wife. It is then this word that is used in the word, foreknowledge. It carries the idea that this is a warm, personal, intimate choosing by God. For reasons only God understands, with a heart of a father, lovingly God has **chosen** you to be His child, to be **sanctified by the Spirit of God**, to be set apart for God's special blessing. Why? In order **to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood**. The idea of **sprinkled with His blood** is a reminder that you, on the basis of the shed blood of Jesus, stand right in the presence of a holy God. You stand justified, righteous in the presence of God, and the idea then is you have been set free to walk in obedience. The idea of obedience is not this is what God has done for you; therefore, you have to follow the rules. The idea is more than apart from this salvation, you are confused and lost and desperately searching for that which will ultimately satisfy. But on the basis of this salvation that's come through the choosing of the Father and the sanctifying of the Spirit, God has redeemed you so that you get it. You understand the path of God, and you are able to walk in obedience. The last part of the introduction captures it: **May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure**. On the basis of God and what He has done for you, you can experience the fullness of God's grace and peace that God intends for you to know as His child. So, a magnificent introduction that kind of establishes some themes that will be unpacked as we work our way through the letter.

It's important to understand in the Greek language this is a sophisticated, elegant, impressive paragraph. As a matter of fact, Peter's use of the Greek language is so impressive, so elegant, and so sophisticated, that there are some modern-day scholars who dismiss the idea that Peter wrote the letter, by no basis other than he was just a dumb fisherman. "There's no way that a dumb fisherman wrote this letter." It is kind of this reminder of an attitude that pervades our culture today: There are certain people, there are certain vocations that kind of have this elitist attitude—that there's a certain group that is smarter than everyone else, and they kind of get it and everybody else, by and large, is kind of dumb. There's this idea that unless your college-educated with all these degrees behind your name, you really can't be very intelligent.

Now I have a high view of education; I have a fair amount of it myself. But there needs to be a reminder that going to college is only one of many ways to get educated. I would suggest to you some of the smartest, most intelligent, most thoughtful, most deeply-thinking individuals I know are blue-collar trades people—farmers, ranchers, people that work with their hands and make their living that way. These are people that are incredibly intelligent. It's very important to remember that while the culture around you may underestimate what God can do through you, never limit the possibilities. The world around you may say you're average and maybe even a little bit dumb, because that's what they said of Peter. Yet the reality was that under the power and inspiration of the Spirit of God, Peter, the dumb fisherman, wrote one of the most intelligent, elegant, sophisticated letters in the New Testament. If you're willing to trust God, God can use anyone to do amazing things for Him.

The opening word in verse 3—**Blessed** is a powerful Greek word that would be similar to the Old Testament kind of explosions of praise and worship. A lot of scholars refer to this as kind of an opening explosion of worship, a doxology that opens Peter's letter.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, (so he's praising God for what?) who according to His great mercy... (Vs. 3a)

I'm going to take this a phrase at a time because it is just so loaded. So first of all, the idea is that this is something God has done. This is something God has caused. This is not something you've earned. It's not something you deserve. This is not something you somehow merited. It is fully caused by God and it flows out of **His great mercy**. When the New Testament uses the phrase, **according to**, it means in-proportion-to. It is very different from the phrase *out of*. So, here's the idea: If I am a multi-millionaire and I want to help the hurricane victims and I send \$10, that's \$10 out of my fortune. But if I was going to give according to my fortune, it would be \$10,000 or \$100,000...something that's much more proportionate to what I have. This is not just a little bit of mercy out of God's great mercy; this is actually **according to His great mercy**. Paul describes God as rich in mercy and out of the richness of His mercy, *according to His mercy*, God has caused this to happen.

...according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, (Vs. 3b)

So, He's **caused us to be born again**. You can only imagine that Peter's reflecting on the discussion that Jesus had with Nicodemus, recorded in John chapter 3, when Jesus was telling Nicodemus, "You must be born again." Not remodeled, not fixed a little bit, not spray-painted over the rust, but it is a transformation that is so radical it can only be described in radical terms such as **born again...born again to a living hope!** In the New Testament the word **hope** is never used in the sense of wishful thinking like, "I hope the sun shines tomorrow." It is always used with the sense of something that is absolutely guaranteed but it is yet future. It is a **living hope** because the one that made the promise is still living and will keep His promise. It's connected to Jesus' resurrection from the dead. So, God has caused you to be radically changed—**born again**—to what? To a **living hope** that is made possible because Jesus was resurrected from the dead and He is a living Savior.

Years ago, when I was living in Chicago, I worked for a guy that owned a music studio in downtown Chicago. A few blocks from that he owned a loft where he would take clients and guests to entertain them. Most of my work was at the loft and it was kind of a crazy place. This was in the '70s. He had a Jacuzzi; he had a whirlpool; he had all this crazy neon art. Clear back in the '70s, all of that was kind of

wild and unusual. Well, over the months we kind of became friends and on one occasion he said, “Bryan, you tell me a Saturday night and I will vacate the place. You can invite all your friends, and you can have a party in the loft.” Well, as a student living in the dorm that seemed like a rather appealing offer. So, we picked a date after spring break. I began to invite people to the party, and we were getting everything basically ready. I went home for spring break and when I got back, I went to the music studio to get the last updates for the party and I was informed that the owner had died in his sleep over the break. I’ll never forget the receptionist looking at me when she informed me, “That means no party!” I believe that the owner was fully sincere when he made the promise that I could have a party there. I think he believed that with all of his heart, but once he died, the promise died.

This is the significance of a **living hope**. This isn’t some religious guru from two thousand years ago offering crazy promises with no power to fulfill them. This is the resurrected Savior who is alive in the presence of the Father today, who intends to fully fulfill every promise He’s made. It is a **living hope**.

...to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, (Vs. 4)

So, what is this **living hope** that is guaranteed but yet to come? It is this absolutely magnificent **inheritance**. We have been made an heir to the family fortune of God. It is a fortune that is so magnificent it can never be destroyed; it can never be corrupted; it can never be diminished. Oftentimes you’ve heard me describe our future with those terms: “It can’t be destroyed; it can’t be corrupted; it can’t be diminished.” This is the text where that comes from. It is an inheritance that is so sure, it is so guaranteed that it’s actually already in place in heaven, reserved for you! Whether you understand this or not, if you have trusted Jesus as Savior, this is something that is the fulfillment of God’s elective choosing since before the foundation of the world. This is something that God has caused to happen that flows **according to His great mercy**—that you would be radically **born again with a living hope** that is guaranteed because Jesus is the living Savior. You, as God’s child, have been made an heir to the family fortune that is so sure, it’s actually already in heaven reserved for you with your name on it, ready for you.

Cara: Bryan, Peter's letters are written during a time where the Christ followers were getting really persecuted. So, Peter's picture of a living hope must've been so encouraging to them. But it's also a great picture for us as well because we are dramatically out of step with the world as you say. And that's going to bring about some trial.

Bryan: Yeah, absolutely. It's going to, I mean, I would say probably nothing like it was in the first century. Under Nero, things were going to get very bad and we probably won't face something like that in the near future in the U.S., but I think we'd also say the climate's changing. Christianity is falling out of favor, so none of us know what lies ahead. But I always remind myself, we have brothers and sisters in Christ around the world, that today their circumstances look a lot like the first readers. And it just reminds us how relevant this book is.

Cara: So, there's wishful thinking hope for the world, and then the “living hope” that we're hearing Peter talk about. Can you contrast the two?

Bryan: Yeah, so this gets really confusing for people, because we use the word hope as kind of a wishful thinking: I hope it rains tomorrow; I hope the Cubs win; I hope... But biblically, that's never how the term

is used. It's always talking about something that's future, but it's something that is for sure. So, the hope of the Gospel is yet to be completely fulfilled, but it's absolutely certain; so certain that Peter says it's already reserved in Heaven for you. So that's the hope of the Gospel. Nobody can change that. Nobody can take it away from you.

Arnie: What I love about your teaching Bryan, is that you constantly remind us that God can use anyone. That you don't have to be some hot shot theologian, but we're all kind of losers struggling on the journey. And that's very encouraging. And once again you tell us about Peter and Paul, they were so different from each other, yet God used both of them in a significant way.

Bryan: Yeah, it is very encouraging. I mentioned in the message that there are scholars that think Peter didn't write First Peter because the Greek language is so elegantly used, and the idea is, he's a fisherman, he must have been stupid. [Right.] And I think we struggle with that in our culture. So maybe you'd say Peter was blue collar, was in the trades, which I happen to love. I think people that are in the trades are really smart. I think they're amazing craftsmen and women. But Paul was really different. He was highly educated. I think most people would say he had the equivalent of two PhDs in his twenties. He was very religious - he was a religious zealot - so very different. And yet Paul himself was a tent maker. So, then you're back to kind of this trade piece, but very different personalities and God used them both in significant ways.

Cara: It's encouraging. When you talk about our culture as being a culture of despair, are you referring to our current culture or more about the overall state of mankind?

Bryan: Yeah, that's a great question. So, the state of mankind is always full of despair, because we're lost and desperately in need of a Savior. But I think there's certainly times when it's more and less and there's places in the world where it's felt more and less. I think as Americans; we're becoming more and more secular. I think most culture watchers agree with that. More secular means more despair. So, in a world where you're removing God, where do you go to find that which satisfies? There's a really interesting book. It's called The Progress Paradox, by Greg Easterbrook, and in the book, he seeks to make the case that we're more prosperous. We have more than any people have ever had in the history of the world, but we're also more unhappy, we're more dissatisfied, we're more miserable. And he actually gives a lot of information to support what he says. They aren't just statements he makes. I would also suggest people feel it deeply. Something's wrong. Something's coming unraveled. We feel the despair. We just don't know what to do. So, I'm saying our American culture, I think is more deeply in despair today than it was 50 years ago.

Cara: Yeah, we would agree.