This morning we begin a sermon series in the letter we call 1 Peter. Our text today is 1 Peter 1:1-2.

1 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.

In this greeting Peter introduces the concept of living as “exiles” in this world. The concept is quite easy to understand. An exile is simply someone who is living in a place where s/he doesn’t belong. If you are an exile, you aren’t really “at home.” You are probably viewed with suspicion, viewed as a threat. As we’ll discuss, Peter may be talking to people who had literally been exiled; but he uses “exile” as a metaphor for all Christians. Our citizenship is in heaven; we don’t really belong here on earth. The concept is easy to understand.

But the application will require great discernment and generous amounts of grace from God and from each other. Peter isn’t talking about feeling like an exile because we’re misfits or because we don’t like the Midwest. He’s talking about spiritual dissonance - not fitting in because of our devotion to Jesus Christ.

Increasingly, genuine disciple/apprentices of Jesus Christ and who seek to obey everything He has commanded (i.e. who seek to live out the Great Commission) are a minority. The dominant culture tolerates “faith in God” but is increasingly hostile to the Lordship of Jesus and the lifestyle that Lordship demands.

The book of 1 Peter is something of a manual for living in exile. In a very skillful, nuanced way Peter tells us how to relate to God as our Father and to society around us. As you might expect, if we’re not clear about our relationship with God, we will be very confused about our relationship with society. But if we understand the heart of our heavenly Father, we will be in a position to live as exiles in a very skillful, strategic, even subversive way (as Jesus did).

Today we will first look at the first two verses of chapter 1 in some detail, and then we will consider a couple of examples how Peter later applies the concept of living as exiles. Notice how Peter describes himself in verse 1.

1 Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia,

This is the same Peter we read about in the gospels. He was a fisherman before he became a follower of Christ. Peter followed Christ around Israel for three years, witnessed Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion. Peter also saw Jesus after he had been raised
from the dead. All of these experiences with Jesus are evident in his letters. He describes in some detail how Jesus responded to suffering and to His persecutors. In chapter 5 when Peter addresses the “elders among you,” he says he writes “as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ.” His firsthand knowledge of Jesus gave Peter a unique perspective on imitating Christ. The fact that Peter denied Christ three times gives us assurance that Peter understands the dynamics of temptation and repentance and restoration.

Here in the first verse of his letter, Peter simply identifies himself as “an apostle of Jesus Christ.” The term apostle simply means “one who is sent.” The original twelve apostles were Jesus’ disciples who had followed Jesus during His public ministry and had seen Him after the resurrection (see Acts 1:21-22). The apostles were analogous to the prophets in the Old Testament. They spoke for God; their writings were authoritative. Jesus had promised them that the Holy Spirit would bring to their remembrance everything He had taught; their writings are, in part, the fulfillment of this promise.

Peter writes this letter as “an apostle of Jesus Christ,” as one sent by Jesus to speak and act on His behalf. Peter isn’t writing, “Here are some things to consider; take ‘em or leave ‘em. . . whatever you find helpful. . .” No, he’s writing as an apostle of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the readers should receive this letter as authoritative, as coming from Jesus Himself. I would like to urge us to receive this letter in the same way.

Notice, as well, how Peter addresses the recipients: “To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. . .” Peter uses terms here that are reminiscent of Israel living in exile.

The term translated “exiles” is sometimes translated “foreigners,” “resident aliens,” or even “strangers.” The term was used to describe persons who lived in a city/country where they didn’t have citizenship. Therefore they were viewed as foreigners and didn’t “enjoy all the rights and privileges of citizens” (Jobes, p. 61). Those who were citizens often viewed such persons with suspicion and fear, thinking, “What if these people challenge and disturb our way of life?” That attitude is not uncommon today.

A valid question is whether Peter is speaking literally or metaphorically when he addresses his readers as exiles. As we’ll see throughout 1 Peter, he’s definitely speaking metaphorically. Since our citizenship is in heaven, we should avoid the behavior of this world; we should live in a way that’s compatible with our true home.

But it’s possible that Peter is also speaking literally in relation to his original audience. During the first century, Roman emperors sometimes sent Christians and Jews from Rome into exile, resettling them in other parts of the empire. They got rid of undesirables in Rome and populated strategic cities. Claudius, for example, who reigned from AD 41-45, forced residents of Rome to resettle in the very cities Peter mentions here in verse 1: Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. The cities/regions would be in the country of Turkey today. It’s possible that Peter is using the term “exile” both metaphorically and literally.
Whatever the case, Peter is stressing that his readers were different from the society around them, out-of-place in the culture around them. This was not a problem to solve in this life; this was a reality that should inform their living.

Peter calls them “exiles of the Dispersion.” The term Peter uses is diaspora, a term that originally referred to the Jewish population who lived outside of Israel after being exiled to Babylon. At the end of 1 Peter - in 5:13 - Peter writes somewhat cryptically that he is writing from “Babylon.” By using the term dispersion/diaspora and by mentioning Babylon, Peter is clearly making allusion to the Jews who were scattered among the nations after the Babylonian exile. He’s not necessarily implying that his readers were Jewish; we have reason to believe they were predominantly Gentile. But he is saying that their context was analogous to Jews living in Babylon: they lived among people who did not share their faith, their priorities, their way of life. They were as out of place in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia as Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were in Babylon. The book of Daniel has much to say about living as exiles.

Notice as well that Peter calls them “elect exiles of the Dispersion.” The term elect is often translated “chosen.” In relation to the society around them, they are exiles/foreigners; but in relation to God, they are elect/chosen. In society we may be outsiders, but with God we’re insiders. Repeatedly in the New Testament, genuine followers of Jesus are called elect/chosen. The purpose of this designation is to assure us as believers that God initiated His relationship with us, that He wants us, and that He will sustain us by His grace.

The NT doesn’t spend much time trying to explain how it can be that God has chosen us and that we enter into a relationship with God through faith (which inherently involves our will in trusting in Him). Genuine Bible-believing Christians disagree about the relationship between God’s choosing and our faith, but all of us should live with a sense, “I am among the elect, those chosen by God for His purposes.” Personally, I don’t think God intends us to figure out doctrines like this (at least not the way we tend to pose the questions). We are mainly responsible to discern the purpose of such doctrines and let them function in our lives as intended.

Here, we are told that we are elect so that we will have the security of knowing that we’re wanted by God. Even though we are at odds with the world around us, we are chosen by God. In verse 2 Peter qualifies their/our election in three ways and then gives a greeting. Peter writes to exiles who are chosen. . .

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.

. . . according to the foreknowledge of God the Father. When the New Testament speaks of God’s foreknowledge, it doesn’t merely mean that God knew something ahead of time. To be chosen “according to [or consistent with] the foreknowledge of God the Father” means that God chose us (either individually or corporately) to be part of a plan that was set in motion long before we we born, long before we believed. Our calling
as exiles in a foreign land is no mistake; the fact that we don't fit in this world isn't the result of poor planning on God’s part. We were chosen in a way that's consistent with His eternal plan in Christ.

Second, Peter addresses us as exiles chosen. . . . in (or “by”) the sanctification of the Spirit. Here Peter is saying that the Spirit was the One who actually set us apart for God's purposes. The Spirit convicts people of sin, opens our eyes to the glory of Jesus (In John 16:14 Jesus says, “[The Spirit] will glorify Me. . .”), and draws people to believe in Jesus.

Third, Peter gives the purpose for being chosen. . . . for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood. Peter is likely alluding to Exodus 24 when the children of Israel entered into a covenant commitment with God (what we call the old covenant). They pledged themselves to be obedient (24:3, 7); God pledged Himself to cleanse them of their sins, a cleansing that was symbolized by being sprinkled with blood from the sacrifice (24:8). In an analogous way, in the new covenant believers have been sprinkled with the blood of Jesus so that we now have a desire to obey God. We have been chosen to live as people who are in an exclusive relationship with God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit; He is our God and we are His people because of the blood of Jesus.

Peter’s greeting is simply: May grace and peace be multiplied to you. The life that Peter describes in this letter is characterized by grace; as we live as exiles God showers His favor upon us. At the end of 1 Peter he concludes, “. . . I have written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it.” The life that Peter describes is characterized by peace/shalom; it's not an easy life, but it yields wholeness in many different ways.

The big idea is simply that as believers we are called to think and live as exiles. We are called to live in a place we don’t belong; we live among people and in a culture that doesn’t share most of our deepest convictions. And this is not a mistake; it is God’s design. God’s very Spirit has set us apart as an obedient people living in the new covenant.

As I mentioned earlier, Peter will return to this theme throughout his letter. Interestingly, Peter has a very nuanced approach to living as exiles. He doesn’t advocate blending in with society so that we’re indistinguishable from those around us; he doesn’t advocate disengaging from society and retreating into a compound; he doesn’t advocate violating all sorts of social norms and condemning everyone and everything around us. He advocates a way of life that says, “Since God is my Father, my first loyalty is to Him (not the world around me). Like Jesus, I will live in a way that shows the beauty and glory of my Father so that others might know Him too. If this brings suffering into my life, so be it.”

Let’s consider a couple of examples of how Peter applies the principle that that as believers we are called to think and live as exiles.
Example #1: Behavior among people w/o Christ (1 Peter 2:11-12) In chapter 2 Peter once again refers to his readers as exiles, stressing how their behavior should be observably godly and honorable.

11 Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. 12 Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

We will consider these verses in detail in a few weeks, but Peter is calling believers to remember that we are called to think and live as exiles. Negatively, among other things, this will mean abstaining from “passions of the flesh which wage war against your soul.” We avoid indulging in things that will compromise our walks with God and that will limit our fruitfulness in this world (e.g., sensuality, greed, lust for recognition or power, etc.).

Positively, we “keep our conduct/behavior” excellent “among the Gentiles” - among people who don't yet know Christ. If our exile isn't a mistake, if we are exiles by God’s design, then it only make sense that we would be mindful of our mission to lead others to Christ. How we behave is our initial witness for Christ. Peter implies that virtues such as servanthood and humility and self-control are appreciated outside of the body of Christ.

Peter is acknowledging that some people will believe the stereotypes about Christians and mock or slander us (this is very common in TV shows and movies). But when that happens, Peter says, our behavior should speak louder and clearer. Undoubtedly Peter is reflecting what he’d learned from Jesus who had taught them, “Let you light shine before people that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”

The temptation for exiles is to become bitter and cynical, to withdraw and daydream about being somewhere else, or even to accuse God of not coming through for us. This was a real temptation for the Israelites who were taken into exile in Babylon. God had made clear that they were going to be in Babylon for 70 years. Instead of giving up or checking out, God told them become productive members of society, building houses and planting gardens; they should even seek the welfare/flourishing of the city where they lived. Peter is advocating this same mindset here in 1 Peter 2.

Example #2: Christlike Suffering (1 Peter 2:21-25, 3:13-17) There is a sense in which Jesus was the ultimate “exile” while on earth. He was living in a place where He didn’t fit in. He specifically said, “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). When He suffered, Jesus suffered in light of the reality of the kingdom of God. We read in 1 Peter 2:21–23 (ESV)

21 For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. 22 He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. 23 When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.
When Jesus was arrested and flogged, He didn’t curse His persecutors. When He hung on the cross He didn’t utter threats and insults. Rather, He “entrusted himself to” His heavenly Father. Peter tells us that Jesus was leaving us an example to follow. In chapter 3 Peter tells us to imitate Christ by “not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead” (1 Peter 3:9). He goes on to say that when we “suffer for righteousness’ sake” we shouldn’t be filled with fear, nor be troubled; rather we should be prepared to explain and defend our faith when others notice our lives.

This is purely the mindset of an exile. If we think we have a right to be “insiders,” respected and fully accepted by this world, we won’t suffer well. But if we understand that no slave is greater than his master, we will see that people are only treating us the way they treated Jesus.

In response to the Word this morning, I’d like to urge you to do two things this week. First, please read the entire book of 1 Peter. Begin to saturate your mind with the truths and images of this book, noticing especially the theme of living as exiles. Second, please pray for yourself and for the rest of the church. I’m convinced that thinking and living as exiles has the potential to give us a depth of unity we’ve not really had before; this unity could be the foundation of our influence in our community and beyond.