

To Whom It Does Concern

1 Peter 1:1-2

Introduction - How Do You Start A Letter?

I have vague memories of time at school learning to write letters differently depending on to whom I was writing. There was the fairly generic, “To Whom It May Concern,” through to the very personal, “My Dearest Crumpet.” I don’t recommend using “My Dearest Crumpet” when writing to the police to query a fine.

Depending on how we write and to whom we’re writing, we will often modify a standard greeting with personal notes. We see something similar here. Peter uses a fairly generic way of starting a letter but also modifies it to make it very personal which gives us real insights into how he regards the readers.

The Writer (v.1)

Peter first identifies himself as the author of this letter. “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ.” We’re not certain whether Peter wrote this letter himself or whether Silas wrote it under Peter’s direction. In 1 Peter 5:12 Peter says, “With the help of Silas, whom I regard as a faithful brother, I have written to you briefly, encouraging you and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it.” This information combined with the fact that the Greek of 1 Peter is quite different to the Greek of 2 Peter makes me think that Silas is writing this letter under Peter’s direction.

While Peter doesn’t make a big deal about it, this letter comes with the authority of this key leader in the early church. Although Peter was identified as the Apostle to the Jews (whereas Paul was called the Apostle to the Gentiles) his position in the church is such that he choose to write to Gentile churches whom he would have had very little, if any contact, because he has heard that they are suffering for their faith and he want to comfort them.

To The Sojourning People Of God (v.1)

Who are these people then to whom Peter writes? I mentioned earlier that these are Gentile churches. I say this because of verses like chapter 4 verse 3, “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.” (cf. 1:18) However, although Peter is writing to Gentiles, he identifies them using terminology that was commonly used for the Jewish people. Peter writes, “To God’s elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia.” The people of Israel were regarded as chosen by Yahweh and here Peter describes his readers as chosen by God, God’s elect.

Not only does Peter describes them as God’s elect but these people are scattered. The word for a scattered people is “διασπορα” and you may have heard or read descriptions of the Jewish Diaspora. This was a term which the Jewish people used to describe themselves as they were scattered away from the land of Israel and now Peter applies it to his readers.

The final word I want to look at in verse one is ‘exiles’. Depending on the version you’re reading you may alternatively have, ‘refugees’, ‘strangers’ or ‘foreigners’. The use of ‘exiles’ is understandable because it has on the image of God’s people not being in their homeland, but Christians are not in exile, as if we were once in God’s country and have now been pushed out from it. The word which best fits is the old English word, ‘sojourners’. We are people who reside in one location while knowing that it is not our home or final destination. This image continues the use of words which are linked with describing the people of God. The Greek translation of Peter’s time used the same word when Abraham describe himself in Genesis 23:4, which the King James Version translates, “I am a stranger and a sojourner with you.”

So in the use of elect, scattered, and sojourner, Peter identifies his readers as God’s people in line with God’s choice of Abraham and the nation of Israel. Could we be described in such a way? If only I could do something great and so be regarded as

being one of God's people. In verse two Peter goes on to describe how his readers have become the people of God.

People Who Have Received A Triune Blessings (v.2)

“To God's elect, exiles, scattered throughout the provinces of 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, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood.”

This is a meaty verse and I can't do it justice, even in a message which only deals with two verses, but I will focus on what this verse means for how Peter's readers became God's people.

Peter starts by giving a little more detail as to what it means to be “God's elect,” that is, Peter's readers “have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father.” Now I realise that the mention of God's election can be a source of tension and even anger in some Christians as they believe that it denies human responsibility and turns God into an unpleasant despot as he arbitrarily chooses some people but not others to be his people. I'm going to plead time constraints and not engage in the intellectual debate (though I do invite you to chat with me about this over a cuppa if you have questions or concerns) and instead address the pastoral and personal nature of this teaching which is the reason why Peter mentions it.

God's election should be a great comfort and support to God's people. I facetiously said earlier, “If only I could do something great and so be regarded as being one of God's people.” But that's a real and great concern for many people. In contrast to that fearful questioning, Peter directs us to the great certainty of God's sure calling of his people. Not only is God at work in bringing us into a relationship with himself but also in keeping us there. Some of us may have found that our ability to do much over the past month has been limited because of the restrictions we've been under. Do we stop being God's people because we're not performing? No! We become and remain God's people because of God's will and God is always able.

The specific way in which God chooses us is next brought out. We “have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit.” The word sanctify and holy are essentially the same (and in Greek they are the same). ‘Holy’ means ‘to be set apart’ and that normally carries the idea of ‘set apart for God.’ Similarly, ‘sanctify’ means ‘to make holy.’ The Holy Spirit is not simply called the Holy Spirit because he is a spirit who is holy but also because this is the work which the Spirit does. The Holy Spirit makes people holy.

How does God make the people he chooses his? It is the work of Holy Spirit to make the person distinct from the world and set apart for God. This is something that has happened but is also an ongoing process. This is why Christians should remain humble even when we’re growing or when God blesses some ministry that we’re doing. Ultimately our growth and sanctification is the work of God in us through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit brings the growth which God already desires for us.

This statement continues, mentioning the particular focus of the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, “chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood.” The Bible never allows God’s election to be a topic of intellectual debate devoid of personal response and practical outworking. Here we see that the Holy Spirit holds together the tension of receiving a work done for us, which we can’t do anything to earn, as well as having a changed life.

God’s people have been “sprinkled with [Jesus’] blood.” If Peter is continuing with the images from the Old Testament, this mention of being sprinkled with blood could refer to the blood of the passover lamb that marked off God’s people in Egypt, protecting them from God’s wrath upon Egypt’s opposition to Yahweh and his people, or it could refer to the death of animals for a sin offering, or it could be a reference to the blood of bulls which was sprinkled on the Israelites when they affirmed their covenant relationship with Yahweh at Mount Sinai. While I’m not 100% certain, it could be that Peter was aware of and thinking about all three Old Testament images as we see connections scattered through the letter to all three references.

What's important for us is that this sprinkling with the blood of Jesus refers to an act of Jesus beyond our control and so we are God's people because the Holy Spirit applies this work of Jesus to us by the sovereign choice of God the Father.

However, this sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit and applying of Jesus' work impacts our daily lives. Specifically, we are "to be obedient to Jesus Christ." We are to be obedient to the commands which Jesus taught people but more broadly we are to be obedient to Jesus by displaying Jesus' character and demonstrating the values of his kingdom. I'm not sure about you, but when I compare myself to Jesus I am constantly aware of how much more obedient I need to be and how far I fall short and this realisation drives me back to my need for Jesus and his perfect and complete work, to be applied to me so I am comforted by the mention of being sprinkled with his blood.

Conclusion - Receive More Than Just Nice Words (v.2)

These two verse have made use of Old Testament terms for God's people and applied them to Peter's readers because of what Jesus has achieved and the Holy Spirit applying this to the readers' lives. Appropriately then the letter's opening finishes with Christian and Jewish words of blessing. 'Peace,' 'Shalom,' was a well known Hebrew greeting and blessing. 'Grace' was taken as a word of greeting and blessing by Christians as it described the receiving of God's blessing which they didn't deserve as well as the basis for our obedience as well as our continuing relationship with God.

With us being recipients of God the Father's election, God the Holy Spirit's sanctification and God the Son, Jesus', sacrifice and example, we are indeed people who have received grace and peace and it is grace and peace which we pray to receive more of, both for ourselves and others, going forward.