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## Greetings from Peter

(1 Peter 1:1-2)

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 (vv. 1-2).

The opening of this letter follows a standard form found in several other New Testament letters. It indicates who wrote the letter and his role, and then identifies the people who will receive the letter. A greeting then follows at the end of verse 2.

### a) The letter's author

The author identifies himself as the apostle Peter of whom we read much in the Gospels and the Book of Acts. He was a brother to the apostle Andrew and made a living as a fisherman before being called by Jesus to follow him (Mark 1:16-17). His believing wife accompanied him on his travels for the Gospel (1 Cor. 9:5; Matt. 8:14). Jesus himself had changed this man's name from Simon<sup>1</sup> (a Hebrew name meaning 'hearing' and linked to the Old Testament prophet Samuel's name 'God has heard') to Peter. The name change occurred after Simon had

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1 Or Simeon, see comments on 2 Peter 1:1.

become the first person to confess that Jesus was the Messiah of whom the Old Testament prophets had spoken. He also proclaimed that Jesus was the Son of the living God. Jesus explained that this great confession of faith had come directly from God the Father and then, in a play on the word 'rock', Jesus named Simon by the Aramaic name Cephas meaning 'rock' (Petros in Greek and hence 'Peter'). As he did this, Jesus added: 'on this rock I will build my church' (Matt. 16:16-18). Peter thus becomes the first in a long line of believers throughout the ages who confess the same faith: that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.

The word **apostle** is used by Jesus in Luke 6:13 and applied to his closest twelve disciples.<sup>2</sup> From the Day of Pentecost onwards, when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples in power, the apostles have had the leading and guiding role in the church of Christ. The nature of the office and its authority, derived directly from Christ himself, is affirmed here by the addition of the phrase **of Jesus Christ** which is not attached to any other office in Scripture, not even that of prophet or teacher. Thus Peter, like Paul in the opening of his epistles, establishes clearly the authority with which he writes.

#### b) The recipients of the letter

Peter now provides a rather longer description than is usual of the people to whom he writes. He establishes the geographical area in which they lived and then describes the recipients in deeply theological terms drawn from the Old Testament.

*Residents of modern day Turkey.* Geographically these people are **scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia**. These were Roman provinces in modern day northern Turkey, an area where Peter had travelled and evangelised. The province of Pontus and Bithynia and the province of Cappadocia had coastlines bordering the Black

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2 The word 'apostle' means 'messenger' and is first given to the twelve disciples chosen by Jesus. Later the apostle Paul was added to this special number. The fact that the apostles were eye-witnesses of Jesus gave their message a unique authority. They were God's choice (e.g. Luke 6:12-13) and appointed by him as 'servants of the word' (Luke 1:2). In their ministries, therefore, they carried the authority to be speaking from and for God in the way the prophets had spoken in the Old Testament. Though many go out as messengers of the gospel even today, the ministry of these apostles was unique in its authority and foundational status.

Sea while Asia (bordering the Aegean Sea) and Galatia lay to the south. The description of these people suggests they were probably somewhat isolated groups scattered across wide areas and lived in many villages and towns.

*Strangers.* Peter refers to these people as **strangers in the world**. (We shall return to the **elect** shortly). The single Greek word translated in this way is used of those who are temporary residents in a land, not necessarily 'strangers' to those around, but also not citizens of that area. The same Greek word is sometimes translated by the old word 'sojourner' which is used of Abraham, for example, who was a temporary resident in the land of the Hittites in Genesis 23:4. Currently I am a 'resident alien' of the United States with British nationality. Technically this means that I am not established permanently in the USA but have a permanent home elsewhere in the UK, to which I can return. This is what Peter has in mind here, but he is thinking theologically and building on the Old Testament at the same time. These Christians, as descendents of Abraham, are people who live in the Roman provinces mentioned but whose true home lies elsewhere. Their status, like Abraham's in Hittite Canaan, is temporary. Later Peter will show that they will one day be truly confirmed and established in the glory of God (5:10). The question that Peter will therefore address in various ways in this epistle has to do with how Christians who find themselves to be like resident aliens, both at home yet not at home in this world, should live.

*Scattered.* The word translated **scattered** provides us with the English word 'Diaspora' which is used twelve times in the Greek version (LXX) of the Old Testament to refer to the scattering of the Jews among the Gentile nations (e.g. Deut. 28:25; Jer. 34:17 LXX; Jer. 41:17; see also Jer. 29:1-7). After the judgment of Israel and their transportation to Babylon and the subsequent captivities, those Jews who had been taken from the homeland of Israel were referred to as 'the Diaspora', the dispersed or scattered ones. Of course, they looked forward to the time when they would once again be gathered to their homeland by the Lord. Here Peter is not thinking only of converted Jews; rather he is transferring themes from the Old Testament and showing that they should be applied to all God's people. The church of the New Testament age is the continuation of the

people of God from the old covenant, and the church now finds itself 'dispersed' among the nations and its members are resident aliens longing eventually to be brought home to the place that God has in store for them. Peter describes this place in 2 Peter 3:13, following Isaiah 66:22, as the 'new earth, the home of righteousness'.

*Elect.*<sup>3</sup> *The letter's recipients are elect ... chosen.* There is great comfort in this word. These people, as we shall see in the epistle, lived in difficult situations. They were and often felt like **strangers** in the world where they were serving God. But they are God's **chosen** people. Like the Israelites before them, called by God to be a people who would serve him, so the readers are reminded that God has always intended that they should be his people and should serve him where he has placed them, in these Roman provinces. Their election by God reminds them that they are Christians simply by God's grace, his undeserved mercy and love; it also reminds them that they are chosen for a purpose, and that God will keep them and protect them as they fulfil his will for them. In Deuteronomy 7:6-8 we capture a picture of the joy involved in being God's chosen people. Peter no doubt had these ideas in mind as he wrote to these Christians:

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers ... (ESV)

*Foreknown by God the Father.* In three brief clauses Peter now describes how they came to be God's people, and the goal of their life. This is a strongly Trinitarian passage involving Father, Spirit and Jesus Christ. **According to the foreknowledge of God the Father** refers to the heavenly Father's activity in knowing not only facts in advance but in knowing what he will *do* in advance. Again this brings comfort to Christians

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3 Since the Greek is very compressed here, the translators of the NIV have repeated the word chosen in verse 2 for the sake of clarity.

because it reminds them that God has known them personally with a deep fatherly love and has known where he will place them, how they will live and what varieties of sadness they will face, and therefore he will provide the right resources for them.

*Sanctified in the Spirit.* Normally we see the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit as a process of becoming more and more Christlike throughout our lives. In other words, sanctification by the Spirit is his ongoing work in each believer's life. But here Peter is thinking about how people of this dispersed church came into being. This people of God were formed by the electing grace and foreknowledge of the Father and **through the sanctifying work of the Spirit.** That is, the Holy Spirit is involved in the 'setting apart' of the people of God. Again Old Testament ideas are being drawn into the New Testament understanding of the people of God. In being called out by God from among the nations to be God's people they become a 'holy' or 'set apart' (sanctified) people. The apostle Paul refers to this initial work of sanctification in 1 Corinthians 6:11: 'You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.' It refers to the past activity of God in calling his people into being. Of course, this **sanctified** people must live out life in holiness and so we find that, although the Holy Spirit separates them in the first place as part of God's calling work, his continuous presence is also needed to help them *be* the holy people they should be. The combination of these two ideas is seen in Leviticus 20:26: 'You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own.' Below in verses 15-16 Peter will speak to the fact that a holy people need to live as holy people.

*Obedient and sprinkled.* These people have been chosen for a purpose, that is, **for obedience to Jesus Christ.**<sup>4</sup> Peter again refers to their initial response to the gospel and what happened as they found themselves a chosen people. But

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4 More literally the Greek says, 'for obedience and sprinkling with the blood of Jesus Christ'. There is a question therefore whether Peter means the obedience is specifically to Christ or whether Jesus Christ should be placed simply with the sprinkling of his blood. It matters little in the end. The obedience is to God and hence to Jesus as Lord.

this also leads to the ongoing life of obedience where Peter insists that gospel people are to be 'obedient children' (v. 14) not conforming to the world. The purpose of God's choosing a people for himself is that they should be obedient to Christ.

Furthermore, these people were chosen with the purpose that they should be recipients of the grace and forgiveness achieved by Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Thus, they are a people sprinkled **by his blood**, that is, who have come to know that Christ died for them and that his blood was shed for them in order to bring them into a covenant relationship with God the Father. Peter is probably thinking of the account of the great ceremony of covenant initiation in Exodus 24:5-8. There Moses sprinkled the blood of sacrificed animals on the people. For Christians chosen by God their initiation into the people of God required the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross. They have been, as it were, sprinkled with his blood. They have been brought into the new covenant established not by the blood of animals but by the blood of Jesus. This theme is picked up in more detail in Hebrews 12:23-24 which speaks of the sprinkled blood of Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant.

This lengthy description of the recipients of this letter is all about *encouragement!* These Christians who have been called to live in a difficult world of temptations and persecutions are to be greatly encouraged as they reflect on the fact that God himself has chosen them and planned out their life as individuals, but also and more importantly as the church, the people of God. They have been set apart for God in order that they may be a people who obey the Lord as those living in a covenant relationship with him established by the blood that Jesus shed on the cross. They are indeed God's covenant community, in a wonderful relationship with him. Because of his electing love, they will be kept safe in this relationship forever.

### **Further application**

As we shall see throughout this epistle, Christians must understand that they are different, a 'set apart' (sanctified) people. Sadly many Christians today seem very like the people around them. By no means do they see themselves as



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