

"Exiled At Home"

First in a series on Peter's First Letter

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1st Peter 1.1-2; 5.12-14

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The letter's beginning:

From Peter, someone sent by Jesus the Messiah.

To those who are chosen exiles of the scattering in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, who have been set aside in advance by God the Father, through the making-holy of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus the Messiah and for sprinkling with his blood.

May grace and peace be multiplied on you!

And it's ending:

I am sending this to you with Silvanus, whom I regard as a faithful brother. I have written this short letter to urge you and declare that this grace is the true grace of God. So stand strong in it.

She who is in Babylon, who was chosen like you, sends you greetings. So does my son Mark.

Greet one another with the kiss of love. Peace to all of you who are in the Messiah.

My translation, using the New Revised Standard Version
and N. T. Wright's Kingdom New Testament

Exiled. Forced from your home, to a place where you have not belonged, and maybe are not welcomed.

Statues rise along the Liffey River in Dublin. They remember those exiled by starvation from their Irish home in the 1840s.¹ By the Toronto harbour stand more statues, for

¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Famine_Memorial_\(Dublin\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Famine_Memorial_(Dublin))

those Irish who scattered to Canada.² But here, bigotry often left them unwelcomed.

This is the Al Housarya family, whom we've welcomed and supported over the past 5 years. They are doing well. Still, this is their exile-home. They never wanted to leave Syria. Like so many, war and murder exiled and scattered them.

W. E. B. Du Bois had been born free. So were his parents. They'd lived in their country for generations. But his people had been kidnapped, enslaved, and continued to be brutalized. In his book The Souls of Black Folk, Du Bois talked about being "*an outcast and stranger in [his] own house*."³ Even where he'd always been, racism had exiled and scattered him.

Beginning some seven centuries before Jesus, God's people Israel were scattered in waves to places like Syria, Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Greece, Italy, and further.⁴ Also, what is now Turkey.

First Peter, this letter we're beginning to read today, was for people there. They were scattered exiles . . . although that's a strange thing to call them.⁶

II

The people there were mixtures of Greeks, Latins and locals. Also, Jews. And a new sort. Folks called them *Christianoi*, "belong to the Christ."⁵

Some *Christianoi* were Jews who believed that Jesus of Nazareth is their Messiah. At the time, the Jesus-movement was part of the diversity within Judaism. There wasn't a clear division between Jews and Christians, not yet.

However, many of these *Christianoi* — Christians — were not Jewish. They had always belonged in these villages, cities, and countrysides. They had faithfully worshipped the many gods of Greece, Rome and their own local deities. But now they were belonging to this Jesus-Messiah too. Yet they were not becoming Jews.⁶

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ireland_Park

³ The Souls of Black Folk was published in 1903. Quoted in Dennis R. Edwards, 1 Peter, The Story of God Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2017), 33.

⁴ I've given the modern states that correspond to the Jewish diaspora after the 8th century C. E.

⁵ <https://www.blogos.org/exploringtheword/GG-Christian.php>

⁶ The key decisions by the early church's leadership regarding non-Jewish followers of Jesus are recorded in Acts 15. For the ethnic make-up of the recipients of Peter's letter, see N. T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, "Petrine Letters: 1 & 2 Peter" in The New Testament in Its World: An introduction to the history, literature, and theology of the first Christians (London, UK: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2019), 760ff.

Folks weren't sure what to make of these *Christianoi*.

III

But they are getting worried.

These Christianoi have stopped making offerings to the gods. Yes, the gods who protect and give success to our community, our livelihoods, our families. They are not sacrificing to the emperor either.

We need to understand that your religion was not your private concern. The health and cohesiveness of everything, from your family household to the whole empire, depended on everyone taking part. These *Christianoi* were refusing.

There's more. When they gather, all sorts of people are mixing together, unnaturally. Men and women. (Some women are leading them!) Slaves and citizens. (Some masters are giving up their slaves!) The balanced, layered strata of society are being fractured by these Christianoi.

And their Jesus . . . they call him the King! [That's what messiah and christ mean.] That's treason against the emperor.

They are worshipping Jesus as their god, along with the Jewish god and another they called "Holy Spirit." Then they say this is all one God. And the only God! So what about ours?

Wasn't their Jesus executed? Crucified, like a slave! For sedition! But they say he resurrected from the dead. Have you seen him? It's all nonsense, and dangerous.

That's what their neighbours, their colleagues, their closest kin are thinking. There is no formal persecution, not yet. Suspicion. Tension. Rumour. Insult. Ostracism. Exclusion. Their businesses are boycotted. Their fathers and husbands are throwing them out. Their friends are turning their backs.⁷

⁷ See Edwards, 20f. Douglas Harink writes, "Peter's readers also know suffering and grief, born of their alienation from the wider society because of their trust in God's electing grace and their loyalty to Jesus Christ. Their being formed as God's people in Christ brings about a loss of social and political standing in their cities and villages because they have separated themselves from practices that honor the false 'gods and lords' that ruled those cities, villages, lands, and the empire itself. 'You shall have no other gods before me.' 1 & 2 Peter, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids MI: Brazos, 2009).

IV

So Peter writes to them. (I'll say more about Peter next week.) He gives three key words to help them make sense of what's going on. These words might be about us too. These Jesus-Followers are *Chosen*. They are *Exiled*. They are *Scattered*.

Scattered. The Greek word here is *diaspora*. It literally means "scattered." Diaspora people live away from home, with a strong sense of where they came from. They are seeds blown on the winds, but their souls are still rooted with the tree that grew them.

Here's the thing, though. These people Peter is writing to, most of them have never gone anywhere. They are still living where they've always been. Yet they have become scattered from home.

Exiled. Exile wasn't simply a physical displacement. You were cut off from belonging, from identity, from protection, from sustenance.

These people Peter is writing to have not been physically displaced. Yet they are experiencing all the disconnection, and vulnerability, and suffering of exile.⁸

Here's the kicker! *Scattered* and *exiled* . . . Peter thinks this is good!

V

It is hard for us to get our heads into this. For many of our siblings in Jesus around the world, where they are a minority or even persecuted, it rings true. But in our society, church people called the shots and ran the show for centuries. We still have it very good. We don't feel exiled or scattered.

We United Church types? Back in the early days around Elora, those Methodists from whom we descend were weird.⁹ Our worship was peculiar, chaotic, and emotional. Our clergy were not respectable.¹⁰ We were not well-off; many were poor. We knew who God was calling us to serve and be.

⁸ "They have been made strangers in their own cultural, social, and political contexts and are unable to control the vents under which they suffer." Harink, 33.

⁹ Stephen Thorning, "Thorning Revisited: The Methodist Church in Early Elora," [The Wellington Advertiser](#) (February 17, 2021). This is a revised version of an article Thorning wrote in 1996; he passed away in 2015. www.wellingtonadvertiser.com/the-methodist-church-in-early-elora

¹⁰ In Upper Canada, only Anglican and later Presbyterian clergy were legally recognized and entitled to officiate at weddings and other legal ceremonies. Only those denominations had the support of the state.

Since then, we have cleaned up good! We learned to fit in. I think the unofficial United Church mission statement is, "We shall not be odd!" We're not the only ones, but we are really good at it! Proud of it, too.

Things change. We are going through a massive shift in how us *Christianois* fit in our society. It's happened over generations, and is speeding up. It is bewildering and disorienting to live through.

Maybe God is doing it?

VI

Peter uses a third word, you see. He's called them *exiled*, though they are still at home. He's called them *scattered*, though they've gone nowhere. What's changed?

They've been *chosen*. Jesus has called them. Now they belong to him.

Chosen . . . the first thing Peter calls them.¹¹ People of God are chosen, and because of Jesus now we are too.¹²

Chosen. We don't decide. In Jesus the Messiah, God has chosen us, and others. Not because we are better than the rest. We most certainly are not. For reasons only God knows, God has given us this job, this purpose, this mission, this **identity: Jesus's chosen, exiled, scattered people in our places**. Places where, maybe, we have always been.

Exiles. Now we know where we truly belong: God's Kingdom, God's New Creation. Until

¹¹ Peter's phrase in 1:1 is "elect exiles of the scattering" (*eklektōis parepidemois diasporas*). The NRSV's translation shifts *eklektōis* into another phrase in verse 2, which obscures the primacy of their nature as being elected or chosen by God.

¹² In this sermon I have not talked about how this description "elect exiles of the scattering" is a very Jewish description. Concerns of time and focus have not permitted it. Nonetheless, each of these terms has an important history and meaning within the story and identity of Israel. Peter applies them to the church, the mixed community of people who belong to Jesus, whom Peter believes to be Israel's Messiah (see Mark 8:27-29). Within Christian history this has helped cultivate a shameful and destructive understanding called supersessionism. It's the conviction that Israel's identity, mission, and purpose as God's people has been transferred to the church, with Christianity replacing Judaism and relegating the latter to the status of anachronism or worse. However, I believe that, rather than replacing the Jews as God's People, it is much better to see that in Jesus, those of us who are not "of Israel" have been brought alongside Israel within the People of God. Together we share the mission of being a blessing to the world and faithfully worshipping the God who brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt and who, Christians believe but Jews do not, raised Jesus from the dead.

God's will is done on earth as in heaven, we will live longing for it. So we no longer fit well in this world as it is. Instead, we share in God's work of making it what it will be.

Scattered. Not to far-off places, but our communities, neighbourhoods, workplaces, and wherever else God sows us. Small, often hidden, mysterious, and wonderful . . . seeds are scattered to plant and grow.

Peter's letter we're starting, it's about living faithfully with Jesus, when we don't quite belong where we are. Jesus . . . who chooses us to send us, exiles us to be different, and scatters us to be sown.

It's Jesus, so it's good. It's Jesus, so it's true grace of God. It's Jesus, so stand strong in it.

Peace to all who are in the Messiah. Amen.