

The Gods, Persecution, and Hope

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[0 : 0 0] you're listening to the sermon podcast of grace reforms church in spring hill tennessee to learn more about us visit our website at grace.reformed.org and now today's sermon i probably don't say this often enough but i should i it's such a joy and honor and privilege to be able to serve you as one of the elders this moment for me to share with you it has been in my heart all week is also just one of the highlights of my week and so i'm just so i'm thankful to be part of your family and and receive your love and your kindness and hopefully today will be an encouragement for you as it has been for me if you turn with me to first peter we're going to begin this morning our journey with peter over the next two books that he has written we'll begin by just reading from him first peter chapter one we'll read his first five verses to the churches peter wrote an apostle of jesus christ to those who are elect exiles of the dispersion in pontus galatia cappadocia asia and bithynia 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 blessed be the god and father of our lord jesus christ according to his great mercy he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of jesus christ from the dead to an inheritance that is imperishable and defiled and unfading kept in heaven for you who by god's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last days this is the word of the lord amen when and where peter's forgive me if i say paul you know what i mean when and where peter provides this letter is extremely helpful it's important to know the status that the reader would have been reading this in it changes really how you think of peter's tone and the words that he uses from what we know peter's writing this as he's himself a resident in rome and the years been most likely that we think that this letters would have been written would have been 62 to 63 a.d and what is significant about these dates as you think about reading this letter together and as hopefully you've been reading it and will continue to do so as we go throughout our time together is that being that peter's in rome in 62 to 63 a.d would be at the same time that nero would have been the leader of rome nero was raised if you do not know this to be a horrible human being just as far as his actions are now listen there is none righteous no not on not one so we're not going to compare ourselves to nero but in just the way in which he conducted his life is informative to why peter would write what he wrote just before he was even um before the age of 20 i believe he had already killed his own mother believing that she was on her way to kill him and then he killed his first wife because she didn't like to party and she couldn't have children and so he married again and decided to kill a second wife even while she was pregnant with his child this guy was a tyrant yet greece loved him they loved him because he granted their freedom which meant there would be enormous tax breaks for them so he found his way to the people's heart through money it's a good tactic still used today

this is one historian wrote about nero's hatred and this is in relationship to not just how he was as a being but it was also connected to his religious belief and really the religious beliefs of the culture the historian writes the roman empire was a polytheistic society and the worship of traditional gods was seen as essential to maintain the favor of the gods and ensuring the stability of the state christianity with its rejection of the traditional gods and promotion of monotheism was seen as a direct threat threat to the religious and cultural identity of the roman empire so you can see how a man who's not afraid to take lives for that which he feels is an opposition to his pleasure or his agenda will then use it to also persecute even in a religious level i do want to speak about this for a moment only because it's important to really believe why peter found it necessary to send the letter there was a motivation behind it there was a desire behind it these christians are living in a culture that fully believes that worshipping other gods is the way in which they live safely and under the benefits of these gods and yet they are unwilling to pronounce or reject the one true god so to reject the gods and to turn towards yahweh would bring wrath of gods upon them and they didn't want this as a city they didn't want this as a culture and so the entire nation was objecting to this rise of christianity and this was not just a scare tactic to control people by nero but the whole city believed in these gods it had been a part of their culture for years and so what you have are really competing powers at play in the city among the people and peter helps them understand that the gods that may be threatening to destroy them and these people according to the romans are of no match to the power of god just if you're in chapter one look down at verse five again this is why peter says things like this who by god's power why because there's competing powers who by god's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last times to us other gods are not a threat in today's world don't even think about them but to this people and to this culture they believed in these other gods as they should and so did the christians they knew their awareness they uh they were faced with it daily and what they were faced with was either loyalty to god but yet faced persecution or loyalty to the gods and yet lose salvation yesterday at the men's retreat we learned a little bit more about this concept of the gods and how it has influenced cultures and really been influencing israel from the beginning of its time and this subject is important because it's it's shaped the world since the beginning this concept of gods and i want to open this topic up for a moment because it directly influenced peter's letter and how he wrote it and why he wrote it because it's dealing with the persecution he names he mentions persecution eight times in the letter and even directly at times using examples i don't want to spend too much time on this uh because we have a lot to cover but for us to be aware of what is happening in the minds of the people around them so that we fully are able to to drink in all that peter has for us and the benefit spiritually we have to make sure we are in the right historical mindset the word god that we use in the english language comes from the root word which is I

most of you probably have heard this before and the word gods would be plural would be elohim this isn't shocking to anyone i think everybody understands at that point but how we've come to use this word in the american culture in the american language is actually changed and morphed over time and not beneficially it's been confusing and how we use it we use god to describe a person as we know as yahweh the lord but elohim or gods when we're thinking about multiplicity of gods we associate them with idols right graven images but that's not what it means that's not what a god is according to the bible when we're thinking about i mean it would be foolish to think that nero would be destroying people and burning them at the stake because of idols that was that would be ridiculous no one would be that ridiculous or that israel would turn their back on god because of graven images when the bible uses the word elohim it is referencing to this is this is really important because it's going to help you it makes so much sense of your bible in the old testament it's referencing spiritual beings elohim means spiritual beings i mean if almost if we could reach we could uh re-translate this elohim to be spiritual beings it might help us understand the category spiritual beings is a category of a kind of person or a kind of thing in scripture let me put it to you this way we here on earth who are flesh and blood we describe ourselves as humans and those who are created in the celestial realm they are known as spiritual beings or we don't use the word in the bible as spiritual beings we use humans here they use elohim there does that make sense so when this title of elohim is used you can see it multiple times in scripture if you want to write some of this down psalm 104 4 says who makes his angels spirits so you can see he's describing angels as spirits but what you'll find out is he also will use elohim for angels as well just so you know angel all that means is messenger it's not a kind of being it's a title of a description they bring a message for instance not all humans are mailmen but mailmen happen to be humans do you understand this not all spiritual beings are angels but spiritual beings tend to be angels you could remove this word not all elohims are angels but some of them are we even know that jesus when he came and brought a messenger he was known as the angel of the lord he was the messenger of the lord but we know that jesus isn't an angel in the sense that we think about him having wings by the way angels don't have wings that's a whole nother conversation john 4 24 tells us that god is a spirit so this makes sense god himself can receive the word i spirit because he is a spirit being even the demonic it says in revelation 16 14 they're known as spirits and so this is a way in which the bible uses it but often when we think of lowercase g-o-d-s gods or elohim we have a negative connotation to it as if it's something that is bad but that's not how if it's a spiritual being not all spiritual beings are bad for example psalm 138 if you write that down psalm 138 1 it speaks of elohims or gods in a positive light it says oh give thanks oh lord with my whole heart before the gods i sing your praises well we know that god is surrounded by a host in heaven right and he's saying that this host that's singing before the lord are being described as spiritual beings or as elohim deuteronomy 32 verse 43 rejoice with him oh heavens bow down to him all gods now i know what happens when you read these

how many of you've read through the psalm the entire psalms in the last few years anybody come on now some of you have thank you and as you read them and you see lower g-o-d you're thinking oh he just mean idols but what idol is bowing down before the lord that's ridiculous he can't mean that so he's speaking of these spirit this is i can remember the day that i had first discovered the doctrine of god's sovereignty and salvation i literally felt like someone had added something into my bible who put that in there that word elect should not be in there i've never seen this word before and we kind of do this as we read our bibles and we don't have categories for words or sentences or concepts we just we kind of chop them over to well it doesn't either matter or i don't know what that is but i'm going to keep going and we lose its effect and so unfortunately we kind of have a lower view of this perspective paul helps us here it's always good to see how the new testament interprets the old the new testament commentators are very important to us so this is if you want to write it down first corinthians chapter 8 first corinthians chapter 8 and verse 5 paul tells the church of corinth for although there are for although there may be so-called gods in heaven or in earth as indeed there are many gods and many lords yet for us there is only one god the father from whom all blessings all things and for whom all exist so he's acknowledging there are multiple gods but there's only one for us the one true god last sunday i read the first one psalm 126 we know this phrase well but hopefully it makes sense to you now when he says he is the god of gods may his love endure forever which means there is no one greater than he he is the greatest spiritual being because he is the self-existent spiritual being he is the the triune god no one can compare to who he is he being a spiritual being is above all other spiritual beings let me rephrase that he being a god is above all other gods now where do these gods come from we do know that they are good he's not speaking of the gods in a bad way here he's speaking of them in a good way but yet when we get to the new old testament of immediately we start finding ourselves with problems and these problems are nefarious gods bad gods gods gods that are opposing who are not in allegiance to yahweh well most of us know of the fall of lucifer and ezekiel and isaiah and what was his desire he being a celestial being a spiritual being wanted to be greater than god he wanted the glory of god so we know of his fall and we're not going to spend time but there is um more information about other gods who have fallen for the same reasons who who want glory for themselves and they then become and pestilize the nations and become distracting to the nations and god gives them over to their own gods this is where we pick the story up in egypt i find it fascinating that moises is standing before the burning bush and he's being commissioned by yahweh to go and to free the children of israel from egypt and so the question's fascinating he says to yahweh well what god should i tell him you are do you remember this he goes who am i going to tell him you are he says tell them i am i am the god not a god i am the god i am who i am and so there's no way pharaoh is going to have a congregation with moises just because moises says i want to meet with you pharaoh it's not going to happen but moises stands before them and says i need to meet with pharaoh because i am the representation

of a god the god i am well that's interesting and intriguing for pharaoh because pharaoh believes in multiple gods and he believes in the gods because they provide power and protection and fertility so he's like sure bring on this god i might want to add them to my list of gods i already have moses comes with bad news he says oh no this is not a god you add to your list of gods this is the god of gods and you will bow before him and you will worship him and pharaoh's like no i won't and so what does he do he throws down the sticks throws down his shaft or staff and it turns into a snake and what do the representation of the gods so moses is representing his god there are men who also known as magicians are representing the gods they too throw down their staffs and they turn into snakes not as a magic trick but as an actual demonstration of the capacities of the gods now listen we do know that for example lucifer had capacities like this when job he brought great storms he brought boils they have capacities but they are very limited when you compare the power of the gods to the power of god the great one it's like a water gun to 10 nuclear bombs it's not even and so i find it not ironic that moses's staff consumes the other snakes what is that showing yeah prey versus predator right so moses goes to him and says this is the one and only true god and you will let the people of this god go or else you will receive the wrath of the god and so after 10 plagues pharaoh finally gives in and lets the people go so this concept of gods is not unique but what ends up happening with the children of israel get out into the desert all they know for 400 years this is all they know all they know is the gods of egypt there is no bible it's been verbally passed on they only know the very small lineage to which they come from abraham isaac and jacob that's all they know they're in egypt because of joseph that's it all we know is that there is a god that they followed so what do they bring with them into the desert they bring with them what they feel will protect them because what's the first thing that happens moses leaves goes up into the mountain for several weeks and they don't know where he's at like well he abandoned us let's go back to the god we know so what do they do they make a graven image often we think graven images are what they're actually worshiping it's not the image is the portal it's the way in which they gain the attentions of the god it's the way in which they show sacrifice to them because what is happening when moses comes back down the mountain they're worshiping and sacrificing and doing indecent things to get the god's attentions for their blessings and to show them the favor what does god do the very first command it makes so much sense the very first command in the ten commandments is what you shall have no other gods now he would never give us a command if it can't be done but it can be that's kind of the backdrop of the rest of the story israel continues to be plagued by this this constant going back to these false gods false meaning that they are claiming they are the one and true god but their claims are false but that does not mean that they aren't real so it is no joke when god warns against serving these gods this is how rome is built so many famous gods in this moment during this time between 58 a.d and to the 68 this time of nero so when you state to a people who believe this and have been believing it for a long time and their

[20 : 24] entire culture is built around it when you state that you are not going to serve that god and it's not that it's one person here's the thing it wasn't like it's one guy peter's like yeah i'm not going to do that they kill him it's over that's not the threat the threat was that christianity was actually growing among the romans meaning converts were coming to christianity and rome was like we will not abandon the gods and these people are going to bring judgment because the other gods are not to accept this god because you you can't have both they're saying you can only serve one god we don't want that and so there is danger as evangelism is going on even to the point where nero would turn christians against themselves turn themselves in because of the death threats that were upon of them the historian goes on to say the persecution of christians under nero was marked by extreme brutality and cruelty and some of the most horrific method of executions were reserved for those who refused to renounce their faith so being this about 30 years removed from the resurrection of christ some of these people may have actually been there peter was for sure there as an eyewitness and i mention this only because it's important to understand that you do not blindly follow your god or find blindly follow the words that peter is writing during the time of rome when jesus rose from the grave there was a theory out there that the disciples all packed together that jesus their god rose from the grave and so we they wanted to keep the religion going forward so they all embraced the lie and that's been done in the past with history the problem is with this is that over time with enough threat and enough persecution and suffering people tend to not want to die for a lie not only did these men who were the disciples proclaiming this truth of the gospel not die for a lie because they believed it to be true they saw it with their own eyes they were the eyewitnesses of it but those who they then taught it to also believed it was significant enough for them to die for you see the words that you hold in your hand they come to you by eyewitnesses who died for the reality of what they held and then taught those around them who also died it's stained with blood this is significant for us sometimes we just think that it's a blind faith but it's not do you know why you believe nero existed because someone wrote it down someone observed his acts the only way you know nero existed is because someone told you about it in a book that means when peter writes these words and they're not contradicting anything else in scripture these words are in line with everything that we know for thousands of years and hundreds of writers that he dies for it and these people die for it when you hold that book that creates a lot of confidence in what the book says so these are people who were fed to wild dogs and there's horrible things that it happened for the sake of the children i'm not going to tell you everything that has happened with them but it's gruesome so peter's now writing sending the letters to the outskirts of rome some of them have tried to get out of the city this is what he says to the dispersion to these cities that are outside peter himself remains ends up dying in rome eventually so who are these readers this is also really important to understand these readers are gentiles now that means they weren't raised in a jewish culture they were not raised understanding a triune god monotheism

they did not understand the moral values and the virtues of god they understood the way of rome they understood the pantheon of rome and the sexual ethics of rome and so as they are coming to christ and their the gospel is expanding they're realizing that everyone that they know and everything that they have believed is now changing these gods of their past promised them pleasure prosperity and power now that they come to christ they're receiving suffering persecution and hatred look with me at verse 13 this is why peter writes this to them first peter 1 13 therefore preparing your minds for action and being sober minded set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of jesus christ this is the exact opposite of the promises of their gods as obedient children do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance but as he who called you is holy you also be holy in your conduct since it is written you shall be holy for i am holy that word there is confusing we'll get to it but he means is a separation you you are separated from the way in which you grew up into the way in which god now calls you now we read this and it says you know as obedient children do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance we're thinking yeah i don't want to you know be that bad guy i used to be i want to be the good guy now that's not what it meant to them and i am just being hounded everyone hates me it's hard for me to buy things my family just was destroyed i think i'm just going to give up i mean at least i am promised pleasure they're happy and laughing they have wealth they're succeeding the nation's growing it's the biggest it's ever been and peter says don't give in to that it's not true it's a lie and then there are times we can feel this too in our world not to the level that they have but we definitely feel it here we look at the world around us and say it just doesn't seem that bad so this is peter's audience this is the cultural waters they're swimming in to share their faith could mean not only for sure persecution but also death now with that in mind kind of the introduction to the movie let's go back and read peter's introduction again in chapter 1 and verse 1 i'm thinking that there's a church huddled in a very small house in cappadocia and the elders stand up to read it to them as they are trying to be quiet so they're not heard by the neighbors and as the elders read it to them peter says peter an apostle of jesus christ to those who are elect exiles of the dispersia verse 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 now one of the problems that we're having at this moment how many of you were moved by the phrase sprinkling of his blood anybody moved by that some of you were grossed out by it this is a problem peter meant to be an encouragement we don't know this because we don't know the sacrificial system we don't know the old testament here's another one elect exiles why is this so significant for him to address them this way for the sake of encouragement that they may continue in the faith when you face real pain and suffering these words become significant and so for the sake of time

we are going to eventually look at phrases like exile and sprinkled with his blood and sanctification of the spirit but for today for the little bit of time we have left we're only going to look at the word elect and foreknowledge because he meant it for a purpose and for encouragement when death seems to be not a normal course of life we are old and pass away but death is waiting for you because of punishment there sets into you anxiety and fear and panic when safety seems impossible how do you find peace that peter says may grace and peace be upon you i would love there to be peace peter but how is that going to be this new life we've chosen and so peter uses a word that has significant meaning he says to them he calls them these people who are exiles he calls them the elect according to the foreknowledge of god this is from our confession one of the verses the writers uses in this section this is our confession chapter 3 in verse 7 they write the doctrine of the high mystery of predestination or election is to be handled with special prudence and care so that those heeding the will of god revealed in his word and obeying him may be assured of their eternal election by the certainty of their effectual calling in this way this doctrine will give reasons for praise reverence and admiration of god as well as humility diligent and rich comfort to all who sincerely obey the gospel now what does it mean to obey the gospel it means to believe to believe the gospel that means for those who sincerely believe it it produces comfort and assurance all christians for all time hold the unbelievable power this idea that god chose them now that doesn't mean anything for us maybe today for those of us who sit in a comfortable country and we're not really worried about us being captured and tortured but for those who are wondering where is god it seems like this whole situation is godless where is his power he says he's the most powerful god in the world that he is the creator of all things but yet all i see is chaos and pain and suffering and he reminds them of an identity they have he reminds them that they are a chosen adopted child turn with me to Romans chapter 8 this is significant the word elect is connected to a very significant word and that is an affection that god has towards those who elect and that is a word called love now we don't really use the word love as we should we often let the world define it love means you give me pleasure you make me happy right this is why we say things like

I like ice cream or I love ice cream are you going to die for ice cream no then you don't really love it Jesus says the greatest example of love is to lay your life down so let's read from Paul when he's talking about this concept of the elect those who God chose to put his love upon Romans 8 35 who shall separate us from the love of Christ oh this is think of what he starts with tribulation or distress or persecution it's not that somehow the persecution pulls you away from God it's that your heart under the weight of it and questioning his goodness and questioning his will you start to wonder am i under the condemnation of God because look at what my life is full of you may be experiencing persecution or trials but that doesn't mean the persecution and trials are there because God has removed his love from you this is important you're not being separated from

God's love because there's trials in your life man so many Christians suffer with this man i don't know if God loves me look at what's happening in my life how could he say he loves me if this is happening and Paul says you can't be separated because of this tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword as it is written for your sake we are being killed all the day long we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered no in all things we are more than conquerors through him who what loves us not through him who we stayed faithful to who loved us for i am sure that neither death nor life listen to this nor angels spiritual beings nor rulers like Nero nor things present nor things to come nor powers like Satan nor height nor depth nor anything else in all of creation heavens above or below will be able to separate us from the love of

[34 : 18] God in Christ Jesus our Lord so when Paul says to the elect that's what he has in mind to those who have received God's love I know you are watching your world being destroyed not just from a flick of a wrist but through torture mockery and it feels like God is distant but remember the title that you hold chosen why does this matter because there are times that our faith wavers and it is weak we become scared we falter we hide our beliefs we are weak we give in to sin and temptation what is designed to draw you comfort and confidence it's not your love for God it's God's love for you that gives you the confidence which is interesting he says by the foreknowledge of

God what he means by this is that before the world began he chose to do this that means it's not a response it's not a transaction between you and God it's not for who you are he loves you it's for who you are not that he loves you this is why Peter ends the paragraph with this may grace and peace be multiplied to you what's the guarantee of the grace and peace upon you it's not your performance it's not your stability it's not your faithfulness it's God's faithfulness to keep his promises that's why he says you who have been elect so grace is the loving favor of our God and mercy is the removal of his judgment and fear you should never be afraid of your God and you should always know he will provide everything that you need why because he chose to there is no greater comfort to the one who was suffering and maybe faltering in faith to realize I do not have salvation because I have done well

I have salvation because he chose to save me so no matter what we face for the rest of our lives as these believers in Rome the word saint can never be removed of their title they will always be the chosen saints of God so Peter is saying do not let the fear of this life steal the joy of the next I really don't know how you can understand the weight of these words from Peter and how they will and should affect us if we do not understand those contexts and so as a church I encourage all of us doctrine matters most when life is at its worst you have weak theology you'll have weak faith but if you are grounded in the knowledge of

Christ and you know who he is and what he has done for you when worlds collide and everything goes chaotic and you can't see up from down where do you stand thank you Mr.

Boomer on the solid rock is where you stand Christ the solid rock do you know what Peter is offering the one whose name is little rock Mr.

[37 : 48] pebble below Jesus the herald of the true rock he says I know what you're suffering but you're suffering this because you belong to the God of gods and the gods hate him the gods oppose him this is why he says be sober minded be vigilant and set your hope not on this world can I confess church that is so hard there's so many things in this world that make my flesh happy and I like them a lot and I like to indulge in them and more important I like to trust them and at times God allows you to go through suffering to say child this is what happens when you trust the pleasure of this world so be alert watch out for the false advertisement set your hope fully on the world to come because this world will advertise you you can have all of your heart's desires now you can have it you just have to walk away from

God you walk not from gods all together just walk away from that God because there are other gods there are other options do you know the American culture is being swayed by this just start paying attention ask yourself this does the American culture accept the concept that there possibly is other gods that are beneficial Hinduism and Buddhism is in the rise here in the United States it's being brought in another form of gods is things like celestial beings or aliens anything that provides you the protection and comfort and the future of your hope is a god god says we do not serve them our god says we do not serve them there will come a moment in our country where we're mocked and some of you have already experienced this if you work in the secular realm or work for large corporations you can feel the mockery that Christians face no to the level of

Rome no but it's still there it causes us to question ourselves at times should I even believe in Christianity should I even trust this chaotic mess I mean I'm not going to ask you to vote because this would be embarrassing for all of us I think but most of us that admit Christians are just weird like culturally weird right they just do weird things and sometimes you're like yeah somehow can I be associated with Jesus and not associated with you but then I'm reminded do you know who God hands the power of God he says this is the power of God do you know who he hands it to and says use it you know he hands it to the weak the frail the unwanted the awkward he hands it to us do you know who he does not hand his power to which is called the gospel you know he doesn't hand it to the angels the seraphims the gods he doesn't give it to them they can't have it he tells us you're going to change the world you're going to tell people how to come to life and receive my love you're going to show them that by your words so then how do we respond

Peter we'll get to this later in the letter but I'll allude to it now then how to respond do you know what's happening is that these people are watching their loved ones die they're suffering and Peter writes to them and says there's going to come a moment where these Romans are watching you they're watching you suffer and they're not going to be able to make sense of why you didn't crack why you didn't give in he says this phrase you all know this phrase he says be ready to give them an answer of the hope that they don't have they're going to watch you die and as you do they're going to say why don't you quit what hope do you have oh I've been chosen you too can have his love can I share with you the good news of the gospel I'm excited about this book because

I think our world is in the same place just a different time we need the same hope we need the same gospel we need the same instructions how do we as exiles of this world encourage and love those who hate God but yet are like us they need his gospel let's pray our father we are so thankful that we are not left to wonder you tell us what you are doing but we don't always understand why or how you do it Lord we believe help our unbelief some of us are weak and frail and can barely even stand spiritually speaking I pray today that you will comfort them they will know they are loved not because of their strength but because of your strength that cannot be separated from them in Christ name Amen thanks for listening to the sermon podcast of Grace Reformed Church in Spring Hill Tennessee where everyone is in equal need of grace to plan a visit or to learn more about us visit our website at [gracereformed.org](https://yetanother sermon.host)