

Letter to Exiles

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Preacher: Benjamin van Rensburg

[0 : 00] I grew up in South Africa and when you grow up in South Africa you quickly learn what is very important to people is that you become a good rugby player.

Many of you may know that at the moment the World Rugby Cup is taking place in England and Scotland participated, South Africa participated and tomorrow will be the final between New Zealand and Australia.

And I know that in both those countries almost everybody will watch the final. And I have learned that now that rugby is professional that even at a very young age players are evaluated.

The big teams will send their agents to school and when they recognize that somebody has potential they will immediately start to invest in that person.

Not just time in terms of coaching but also money. And I believe that that's also the same when it comes to football. That people would like to see good players in their teams and they would invest time and money into them to make sure they reach their full potential.

[1 : 25] And perhaps when we read about the potential of these people and when we see their talent perhaps we think well maybe there is something wrong with us.

Because nobody has approached us to invest in our lives and to develop our potential. And that certainly was the case with the people to whom Peter wrote this letter.

At the time Peter was writing this letter he was in Rome. And the people were living in the five Eastern provinces of the Roman Empire.

So there were churches in Bithynia which is where Istanbul is today in Western Turkey. And there were churches in Galatia and Asia which is part of Central Turkey today.

And then also in the province of Qantas which is on the Black Sea, the northern part of Turkey. But the people who went to the churches they were not the stars of society.

[2 : 43] They were not the people who were respected by everybody. When we look at the letter as a whole we get the impression that the people were of quite low standing.

Amongst them were household servants, resident aliens, people who didn't have the privilege of citizenship. They were married women who were not respected by society.

The Christians had a further problem that everybody around them were suspicious after. It was very important that harmony exists in society.

And people believed that in order for harmony to exist, in order for the Greek and the Roman gods to bless a town or a village or a city, it was necessary for everybody to act and think in the same way.

And that meant that people would go to the same temples and worship the same gods. And if something bad would happen to a town or a village, then immediately they would find out why the gods were not pleased.

[4 : 04] And if they discovered that somebody broke the practice of the day, they would blame that person. Now you can imagine in a situation where by far the majority of people believed this, it was difficult for the Christians to take a stand.

And to say that in spite of what the expectation is, we will worship God and we will worship Him in Christ alone.

And that put them against society. And as a result, people started to accuse them falsely. People started to slander them.

And the Christians started to feel the oppression. They knew that in the near future, full-blown persecution may break out.

And Peter then sent them this letter. Peter had some connection with the believers in that part of the world. Perhaps he met some of them on the day of Pentecost.

[5 : 11] You will remember when the Holy Spirit came, there were people from all over the world, the known world, to worship in Jerusalem. People who have accepted the Jewish faith. And among them were people from these provinces.

We know that in Acts 2 verse 9 and 11, some of these provinces are mentioned as having programs coming from there to Jerusalem to worship. And some of the believers could have heard Peter's speech.

And they certainly heard the gospel of Christ. And they may have gone back to those provinces and started the nucleus of the church.

We also know that Peter himself, even though we normally associate him with the church in Antioch and the church in Jerusalem and with the church in Rome, that he went on missionary journeys.

But we don't know where. In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul is saying that Peter and other apostles took their wives with them when they were traveling.

[6 : 20] So we know Peter did travel to evangelize the world. And perhaps he traveled into that part of the world and was involved in establishing at least some of the churches there.

It's also possible that Peter knew some of these Christians from Rome. Because by 49 AD he was in Rome and that was the time when Claudius was the emperor.

And he expelled a lot of people from Rome and established cities in that part of the world. And perhaps Peter knew some of the Christians who were expelled to that part of the world to populate the cities that was established by Claudius.

But we know that Peter had a connection with these Christians. If not physically, he may not have known all of them, but spiritually he felt himself connected with them through Jesus Christ.

And in this very difficult situation that they found themselves, he wanted to encourage them to be faithful. He wanted to remind them of their responsibility in the world.

[7 : 40] And he wanted to remind them of the fact that even though society was looking down upon them, that God the Father invested in them.

Maybe they felt that nobody cared about them. But Peter, right in the beginning of his letter, he reminds them that God the Father, and God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit invested in them. That God deeply cared about them and the details of their lives. That God is also God's word coming to us today.

And what we need to know is that God cares about us. And even though a lot of important people may not care about us. And even though some people may not want to invest in us and doesn't see any potential in us.

God invested in us. God invested in us. And he cared for us. Not because he saw any great potential in any one of us.

[8 : 55] But simply because he loves us. He came to us. Let's hear what Peter is saying. He says, Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who are elect exiles, after dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bethania, and then according to the foreknowledge of God the Father.

So Peter is saying that you are elect exiles. But you are elected by God. You are chosen by God. You are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father. So Peter is saying to these believers as they were gathering there to worship.

And we can imagine them gathering there early on a Sunday morning before the slaves needed to go to the houses, to clean the houses, and for other people to fulfill their responsibilities.

They gathered to worship. They gathered to worship. And somebody carried this letter to all the churches in that area. And on a given Sunday the person would read the letter to the churches.

[10 : 12] And Peter said that you are here. You are here worshiping God Almighty. You are here worshiping God Almighty. Because long before you prayed, long before you knew Him, long before you confessed your sins, when You were still an enemy of God, He put His hand upon you, and He set you aside to become a member of His household.

To become reconciled with Him through Christ Jesus, so that you can worship Him. But all this happened long before you could do anything good.

Long before you could pray or worship or come to church. Long even before you were born. God has set you aside to be His child.

I grew up in a city called Blumfontein and as an infant, I was baptized in one of the churches in the neighborhood in that city.

And my parents are still living in that city. And whenever we go back to South Africa to visit them, I like to drive around in that neighborhood. And I like to look at the church.

[11 : 32] And the church reminds me of my baptism. And I can't even remember my baptism. But I know that even before I was born, before I knew anything about God, before I turned to Him, He set me aside.

He chose me according to His foreknowledge. And this doesn't mean that God just knew what would happen in the future. It means that from the very beginning He was the one who took the initiative to bring me to Him, so that I could know Him as my Father.

What a grace we have received in Christ Jesus. What a comfort these words must have been for the first years of this letter.

That when they were gathering there and wondering what was happening, and perhaps some of them felt like, maybe we made the wrong decision to turn away from the temple and to start to worship God.

Maybe we made the wrong decision when we turned away from the synagogue. And gather here now as God's people. Peter is saying, ultimately this was not your decision.

[12 : 56] But God, long before you were born, set you aside for His purposes. Not because He saw any potential in you, but because He loves you.

Philip Jansi was one day looking at photos with his mother. And his father died when he was about one year old.

And he never knew his father. And as he was looking through these old photos with his mother, like children do with their parents, he saw a photo of him as a baby.

But the photo was in really bad shape. And he said to his mother, Well, there are many, many other photos of me as a baby. Why do you keep this photo?

And she said, this photo is very special to me. When your father was ill and dead ridden, he asked me to stick a photo of you and your brother on his frame in his bed.

[14 : 05] So even though he couldn't move, that every day he could look at this photo. Because he loved you so much. And Philip Jansi said, he said, I often thought about this crumbled photo.

For it is one of the few links connecting me to the stranger who was my father. A stranger who died a decade younger than I am now. Someone I have no memory of, no sensory knowledge of, spent all day, every day thinking of me, devoting himself to me, loving me as well as he could.

I mentioned this story because the emotions I felt when my mother showed me the crumpled photo were the very sane emotions I felt that February night in a college dorm when I first believed in the love of God.

Someone is there, I realized. Someone is watching life as it unfolds on this planet. More, someone is there who loves me. It was a startling feeling of wild hope.

A feeling so new and overwhelming that it seems fully worth risking my life on. And this is what Peter wanted the believers to understand.

[15 : 22] That long before they knew God, he already loved them. Peter also wrote about the work of the Holy Spirit. And he says, according to the foreknowledge of God, the Father, and then he says, in the sanctification of the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood.

So he said, in order for you to belong to the family of God, to be a member of God's holy and royal priesthood, it was not just the Father that acted, but also the Holy Spirit.

And the Holy Spirit worked in us and it stirred our hearts when we first came to faith, so that we can start to live a new life.

But God stirred our hearts, so that we can turn to him and surrender our lives to him, so that we can stand in a relationship with him.

And that relationship means that we become holy as God is holy. But we also know that in our own self, we cannot achieve this.

[16 : 37] Even if we try very hard, because of the sin of Adam and Eve, we have become inclined to do the opposite of what God wants us to do.

We have two daughters, Sarah and Rachel. And when I was in seminary, I learned about original sin. And when Sarah was born, we looked at her, and I thought, can she be a sinner?

She's such a cute baby. And we thought, she must be the sweetest person in this world. But it only lasted for 20 months. And then her sister was born.

And everything changed. And I remember the first day when my wife Elaine brought Rachel's sister home. She was feeding her in the sitting room. And Rachel and Sarah was 20 months at a time. She gave her one look, and she walked up to her, and she slapped her on the head. That was her welcome into our family. And the reason is that she's a sinner.

[17 : 49] And we all are inclined to sin. We can choose, but we are inclined to sin because of our natures. That became defiled. And therefore, we need the work of God in our lives to change us.

But Peter is saying to this church that God gave you his Holy Spirit so that the Holy Spirit can sanctify it. And surely, when the believers heard it, they could testify about it.

That God has changed them. Isn't it true that as we walk with God that he changed us? And sometimes it is much slower than what we want or expect.

But nevertheless, it's there. And when we look back, we see we're different from what we were 10 years ago. And it's because God gave us his Spirit to sanctify and to change us.

One Sunday after the service at our church in Istanbul where I served for 14 years, a young man came to me and he said, I want to meet with you.

[19 : 05] And we set a time and we met in my office during that week. And he said to me that for the past 14 years he hasn't been to church. He was living a wild life.

But he wants to do three things. He wants to know God. He wants to deal with sin. And he wants to serve God. And he asked me if I could help him.

And I said, well, I would be very happy to help you. And we started to talk. And we had several sessions. And eventually he was ready and he surrendered his life to the Lord.

And throughout our conversations, or through one of the conversations, I learned that he had a girlfriend. And his girlfriend also started to come to church.

And one day they contacted me and they said, we would like you to marry us. And I said, sure. You know, I would be very happy to do it.

[20 : 08] I thought they were a very suitable couple. And then they said to me, and I said, okay, when would you like the wedding to take place? And I thought they would say, like, in six months' time, like normally people do.

And they said to me, no, we want you to marry us this Sunday. And that was on the Tuesday or the Wednesday. And then I learned that they were actually living together.

But when they came to faith in Christ Jesus, through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, they realized that this was not the right thing to do.

And they wanted to bring God into their relationship. I didn't know they were living together. But the Holy Spirit addressed the issue. And I was so happy that Saturday to conduct their wedding and to sanctify their relationship before God.

The Holy Spirit is working in us. And he's sanctifying us. Can you imagine that group, small group of powerless Christians meeting there, hearing the word of God, and were set aside, chosen by God, before the beginning of time.

[21 : 25] The Holy Spirit, the very Spirit of God, is working in them and changing them. And, but Peter didn't stop there. And he continues and he said, In the sanctification of the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ, and for sprinkling with his blood.

Peter is saying that they were sprinkled with the blood of Christ Jesus. We live in a society that's very, very secular.

Just recently, one of the elders in our church in Arden, he said to me that he goes to elderly care every day. And it also means that people have a lunch together.

And he said for years, somebody before the lunch would say grace. And when this person died, he continued with that. And he would pray and thank the Lord for the food.

But he said to me, just in recent years, they asked him to stop. And not to do it. And they said, if you want to pray for yourself and by yourself, that's fine. But don't include everybody in the spread.

[22 : 42] And I thought, this is so, so secular. People don't even want to give thanks to the Lord for the food. In the time when Peter wrote this letter, there were hardly any secular people.

Most people went to the temples and worshipped there. And these temples were everywhere. And some of them were extremely extravagant and big. Some of them employed up to 6,000 people. So, wherever people wandered and walked and worked, religion was in sight and disgust. But the people that God addressed through Peter, they were not spiritual in a general sense.

They were not just religious in a general sense. But they were people who were sprinkled by the blood of Christ Jesus. They were cleansed by the blood of Christ Jesus.

And that made him unique and made him standing in a unique relationship with the Father. Where did this idea come from? From being sprinkled by blood.

[24 : 02] When we look at Exodus 24, we see the following. So, Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord and all the judgment. And all the people answered with one voice and said, All the words with the Lord are said, He will do.

And Moses wrote all the words of the Lord. And he rose early in the morning and built the altar at the foot of the mountain and twelve pillars according to the twelve tribes of Israel.

Then he sent young men and the children of Israel who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the Lord. And Moses took half the blood and put it in basins and half the blood is sprinkled on the altar.

Then he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, All that the Lord has said we will do and be obedient. And Moses took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, This is the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you according to all these words.

And when the people entered into this covenant with God, they were sprinkled with the blood of the sacrifice. This was a sign and a seal.

[25 : 19] And this would have meant that they should obey God, that God would be their God and be faithful to them. And that they should obey God by keeping His law.

But we know what happened after this. That the people rebelled against God. That they failed again and again. And we can see that the sprinkling of the blood of an animal was ineffective.

Now, Peter is saying, you were sprinkled by the blood of Christ. And he is referring here to the blood of Christ that was shed on the cross.

And on Sunday when we celebrate communion, we will remember the blood of Christ shed for us. For the forgiveness of sin. And Peter is reminding the people that they are there worshipping God. Because also in Christ Jesus God invested in them if you wish. That Jesus came and He gave His life for them. That He died on the cross.

[26 : 30] So that they can receive forgiveness. That where they fail, they can receive forgiveness. And when they believe in Christ Jesus, then their sin that they committed came upon Him and He died for it on the cross.

And through their faith, they received the righteousness of Christ. So that when God looked at them, He doesn't see their sin, but He sees the righteousness of Christ.

They are clothed to Christ. They are in Christ. Because the blood of Christ was shed for them. They were sprinkled with the blood of Christ.

They were forgiven. They were failures and sinners like all of us. But because we belong to God, because Christ Jesus died for us on the cross, we reconciled with Him and we became righteous. not because of anything we have done, but because we were sprinkled with the blood of Christ Jesus. This is the message that we have for the world.

[27 : 46] This is the Gospel. That people can experience the forgiveness of sin. Sigmund Freud's daughter, Anna Freud, she herself is a psychologist.

And one day she and other psychologists visited an old lady. And she said the following as they were leaving this lady. You know, before we say goodbye to this lady, we should wonder among ourselves what in the world we want for her.

Oh, I do not mean psychotherapy. She has lots of that. If it would take more years, I suspect, of psychoanalysis than the good Lord has given her.

No, she had her full of us. This poor old lady doesn't need us at all. What she needs is forgiveness. She needs to make peace with her soul, not talk about her mind.

There must be a God somewhere to help her, to hear her, to heal her. And we certainly aren't the ones who will be of assistance to her in that regard.

[28 : 54] And this person who doesn't know God and this person who doesn't know God realized that what this lady really needed was forgiveness. And this is what Jesus offered us.

He sprinkled us with his blood so that we could be cleansed, so that we could be reconciled with God the Father and could become righteous to the work of Christ.

In the beginning, I said that maybe sometimes we feel that nobody cares, nobody would invest in us. But God cared.

Long before we loved him, he chose us according to his foreknowledge and set us aside for himself. He sanctified us with the work of the Holy Spirit in us and changing us to become more like Christ.

And he sprinkled us with the blood of Christ so that we can be forgiven and be free and stand in a relationship with God the Father.

[30 : 06] Let's pray. Father God, we thank you for your word. We thank you for the testimony of Peter to these believers in exile.

Lord, we thank you, Lord, that together with them we can be encouraged because you set us aside. Not because of anything we have done to deserve it, but simply because you loved us.

We thank you, Lord, for the work of the Spirit within us and we pray that you will continue to sanctify us and to make us more like Christ. We pray, Lord, that we will come to you and receive the forgiveness of sin that you made possible through the blood of Christ.

And we thank you for the grace and mercy that we receive. And we pray, Lord, that we will live wise that will bring honour and glory to your name. Amen.

Amen.