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WHAT A BABY CAN’T KNOW

1 Peter 1:1-5

What a strange and difficult time this past year plus has been. There has never been anything like it in our lifetimes and we all hope there never will be again. One of the negative things that has happened is we have been told for the past 14 months that we should avoid each other as much as possible. We are to literally distance ourselves from other people, even to wear masks, creating another form of a barrier between us and others. The inevitable effect of this has been to create isolation.

Some have been extreme about it. I’ve noticed when Laurie and I have been on walks that a few people though outside and wearing a mask when approaching from the opposite direction will cross the street to avoid coming within a few feet for even a second or too. Do they think this virus has magical power? It reminds me of when I was a kid that it was common knowledge that there were some people that you should avoid because you could get cooties from them. I never knew exactly what cooties were or just how you got them, but I knew you didn’t want them. Turns out cooties are a virus! People will cross the street so they don’t come anywhere close to you because they fear they might get cooties from you.

I have thought people were being ridiculous, but I have learned that all of this distancing has had an effect on me. We were given the chance to go to an actual in person Padre game a couple of weeks ago. It was really nice to be able to do that. Though capacity at the stadium was significantly reduced we still got within cootie range of a lot of people as we walked to our seats. I was fine with that. But the seating was safely distanced and it was quite comfortable. However, after we had been in our seats for a while four young men arrived and sat in the row ahead of us just to our left. I was surprised at how that made me feel. I felt they were too close. It made me uncomfortable and I thought they weren’t supposed to be there that close to us. It bothered me and I thought about asking an usher if they were supposed to be there. I thought I was being dumb. I’m fully vaccinated and those guys were no threat to me. I actually wasn’t afraid of anything. I just had this irrational discomfort at them being near.

After maybe 20 minutes apparently an usher thought that didn’t look right. He asked to see their tickets, and sure enough, they were in the wrong seats. They had to move over to the next section. It was weird how much better I felt when they moved. It made me wonder what this year has done to us. We hear a lot about how COVID has changed the world. One change I think and hope is not permanent is to isolate us, to make us want to stay away from other people.

We are made to live in relation and close contact with others. It is not good for us to be separated from people. This reminds us that there is something about being a follower of Jesus that is difficult. If you follow Jesus, you will be different from the world around you. You will be out of step. You will be part of a minority that the world will be suspicious of, often may not like. Today I am starting a series on 1 Peter that I call *Aliens Are Here*, because we are aliens in this world. We are different, apart, and that can be hard. This is a theme that runs throughout this book. Being apart is hard. Today in 1 Peter 1:1-5 we will see some truth that can help us deal with this situation.

WE ARE ALIENS

The letter opens with Peter addressing it to “God’s elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia.” Those were areas in what was called Asia Minor back them, and today is Turkey. The word translated “exiles” actually meant temporary residents or a refugees. In 1:17 Peter referred to them as “foreigners,” and that term shows up again in 2:11. The term he used there often is translated “aliens” or strangers.”

It’s possible that these believers were literal refugees, people who had fled to their current location to escape persecution. However, it appears that Peter had a larger idea in mind. His point was that as followers of Jesus Christ they were aliens in this world. They didn’t belong here. They were strangers, outsiders. This is also true of us. Paul wrote in Philippians 3:20 that our citizenship is in heaven. That is our home. In this world we are living in a foreign land where we will always be outsiders, strangers. We don’t belong here.

Both of our kids spent a significant part of one summer while they were in college on missions projects in other countries. Carissa did hers in Honduras, and Toby did his in China. Carissa was part of a Christian band that did evangelistic concerts throughout Honduras, so she had to learn to sing in Spanish. Toby was part of a team that did evangelism on a college campus in Qindao, which required some careful work, given that it is illegal in that communist country.

They both had some interesting experiences. One thing they never forgot even for a moment was they were not at home. The language, the customs, the food, the culture, all were very different. Toby can keep you in stitches by talking about his experiences with the very different respect for personal space in China, about the restroom facilities there, and about some of the bizarre foods they eat. I’ll just say it is not like going to P. F. Chang or Panda Express. They both talk about how much they looked forward to getting home and being able to eat a hamburger, just regular old American food. They talked about how wonderful it was to get home.

As a believer in Jesus Christ, you are a stranger here. You are an alien. You don’t fit in. You should not be surprised by this. You are made for another kingdom. That is your home, and as long as you are here you are going to sense that you don’t fit in. You will always sense that ache, that longing for your home. This was very clear to Peter’s audience. In his commentary on 1 Peter Scot McKnight wrote, “This group of churches…was composed almost entirely of persons drawn from the slave classes and the disenfranchised …They were socially marginalized people, and their faith led to an association that had no social acceptance and therefore, at the very least, exacerbated their social conditions.”

We’ve been hearing a lot about marginalized, disenfranchised people. From the earliest times Christians have been marginalized, often oppressed people. That is true today in many parts of the world, and while up until now it has not generally been the case here, it is going to become increasingly true in this country in coming years.

We should always remember that the New Testament says that Satan is the god of this present age. It is he who shapes cultures. So generally cultures are either subtly or overtly aimed at carrying out Satan’s designs for people. That means that being at home in our culture is to be at home with Satan’s designs and plans. Obviously that is not a good thing. It would be a concern if we did *not* feel out of place in the world’s system. We’d be fitting in with Satan’s system.

How is that working out in our culture? There are a number of different ways that we can see how our culture is running contrary to following Jesus. It teaches that life originated and operates without regard to any divine involvement. The evolutionary model is assumed to be the key to understanding not only our origin, but our continued existence and even our behavior. In this worldview God does not exist at all, but even if one believes he exists, he is irrelevant to modern life.

Our society teaches a materialistic and relativistic frame of reference. It asserts that there is only the material world, so there is no spiritual realm, no real spiritual part of humans. This inevitably means there is no absolute right and wrong, no metaphysical truth. It means that no culture, no lifestyle is better than any other, since there is no such thing as better. Finally, our world teaches that the core of human identity is sexual, so that the key to human dignity and fulfillment is totally unfettered sexual activity and expression.

To disagree with any of these premises is to be viewed and labeled as ignorant, superstitious, judgmental and bigoted. Increasingly it is to be told one has no place in a civilized society. Obviously to actually follow Jesus Christ, to affirm what he taught, is to be totally at odds with our society. So we should not be surprised to feel alienated. Again, it would be disturbing if we did not.

Throughout my years of ministry and continuing today I have heard from Christians who insist we need to “take back our country” or “redeem society.” I don’t want to be a pessimist, but I must point out that Peter teaches none of that, nor does any other part of the New Testament. The reason is we are never going to be able to do that. We are not going to be able to redeem Satan’s work, or take it back. As you will see as we go through this book, our role is not to control or change our culture, but to be faithful to our Lord and be light in the darkness.

It is actually helpful for to grasp that we are aliens here. We feel that estrangement. But understanding why it is there helps us accept it and know how to respond to it. It can save us from trying to fix it and fit in with the culture around us.

WE ARE CHOSEN

Something else Peter tells us is very uplifting. It is that we are God’s chosen. Our translation calls God’s people his “elect.” That means “those chosen.” Peter says we were chosen according to God’s foreknowledge. Let’s think about God choosing people. We struggle with that for a couple of reasons. First, it doesn’t seem like we were chosen, but that we chose to believe in Jesus. Second, the whole idea of God choosing people seems kind of unfair. Why should he choose some and not others unless it is based on something that makes them more worthy than others? But the Bible says that is not the case.

Throughout the Bible you will see two seemingly contradictory ideas asserted. One is that as many as choose to believe in Jesus will become God’s children. It is up to us to choose. But the other idea is that God has chosen us. Ephesians 1 says God chose us before the foundation of the world. So we choose, but God chose us first. We don’t see how both of those things could be true. And even if they are we don’t see how God seeming to arbitrarily choose some people could be fair. This is the place where we encounter the mystery of an infinite God. It might frustrate us that we cannot understand how God could make things that seem like paradoxes to us, work together. But this is where we should suspect if we could understand everything about an infinite God, we have something wrong.

We should remember what happened when Job couldn’t understand how what happened to him was fair, and he sort of accused God of being unjust. Do you remember how God answered his accusations? He said, “So, Job, where were you when the stars were created? Were you there participating when the foundations of the earth were laid? Were you the one who created the depths of the ocean? Did you create whales and elephants?”

God was saying to Job, “stay in your lane, bro.” Job had gotten way out of his lane and wandered into matters that were far above his pay grade. At the end of the book Job said, “Oops. My bad.” And as we question both God’s ability to do something we don’t understand and his justice in doing so, we should end up in the same place. My bad. My job is not to *understand* all that God does, but to *accept* it and trust in him.

Consider how powerful it is to be chosen by God. Being chosen is a huge, huge thing. Because Michael had to go to Atlanta for a month for training on a new airplane, Laurie and I had to pitch in and help Carissa take care of Wesley while she was working. During that period Anna had to have a surgical procedure, so she and Toby needed help with their 3 girls. So there were days when Laurie and I had to divide and conquer. She went to help with the girls and I went to help with Wesley for a few hours. I do the best I can, but let’s be honest here. I’m the third string. Mom and Dad are first string, and Laurie is clearly the next best option. I’m a distant third. Yet one day when I had been taking care of him at one point when Carissa was free and was holding him, little Wesley reached for me, wanting me to hold him. He was choosing me, the third stringer. Isn’t it ridiculous how incredibly good it feels to be chosen by an 18 month old child? Ridiculous it may be, but boy that feels good.

Laurie and I have been watching the TV series called *The Chosen*. It is a terrific retelling of the life of Christ in a way that reveals Jesus to be both compelling and appealing. He’s actually quite funny, which I know is accurate. In one episode they depict a conversation between Matthew and Philip, two of Jesus’ disciples. The show portrays Matthew accurately as a man who was hated by his countrymen, but also as a quirky character who might have been a bit on the autism spectrum. In the conversation Matthew draws a circle in the dirt. He says, “This represents all the people in the world.” Then he makes a dot outside the circle and says, “This is me.” His whole life he had felt outside, felt like he didn’t fit in anywhere.

I’m not on the autism spectrum. I’m not anywhere as quirky as the Matthew in that show. But what he said in that scene resonated with me. I have always felt just a little bit on the outside. I recall thinking that all the way back to high school. I had friends, but I remember kind of feeling left out. That was just high school, which I think is pretty much an emotional disaster for many people. But it didn’t end there. I’ve never really gotten away from the sense that people don’t really want to be my friend, that they don’t naturally gravitate toward me, that I am sort of on the outside. I know that many people feel the same, about themselves, I mean, not about me.

I don’t believe that is a completely accurate perspective. I do have friends. Even in high school I had friends. The problem is, our feelings don’t necessarily give way to objective facts. We can be aware that something maybe isn’t necessarily true, and feel it nonetheless. Emotions aren’t always controlled by rationality. We kind of feel what we feel, and years of ministry have taught me that an awful lot of people feel like I have, just kind of on the outside.

You have heard from me about my great love and appreciation for my precious bride, Laurie. I’ve reflected on this before, but one of the many things that make me so thankful for her is that she chose me. Not only did she choose me one time in the past on the day we got married, but she has been choosing me every day ever since. What a powerful thing it is to be chosen by a person, to have a person say, “I choose you over everyone and everything else.” In that one place that touches the deepest part of my being, I am on the inside, and that brings a tremendous sense of peace and joy. I am filled with gratitude for her every day of my life, because she chooses me. I have no idea why she would choose me. I can see many reasons why she should not have done so, and should not continue doing so, but I rejoice that for some irrational reason, she has chosen me and keeps on doing so. That relationship becomes a loving, warm and joyful refuge from a world that often feels like it ranges from indifferent to cold and harsh.

There is something we have in Christ that is even greater than that, as powerful and beautiful as it is. We have been, and will always continue to be, chosen by God. In the English Standard Version of Galatians 1:15 Paul said God, “set me apart before I was born and called me by grace.” Paul knew that God had chosen him and called him before he was ever born. That is also true of us.

In 1 Corinthians 1:27 Paul said, “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.” When I read that it brings calm to my soul. I am, certainly in the eyes of the world and often in my own estimation, foolish in the world. I am certainly weak. I think about where I am strong and I pretty much come up empty. I’m good at spelling. Not the best, but very good. I can even sometimes figure out the spelling of words derived from French. That’s impressive because the French have weird ideas about how to pronounce things. Their word for water is eau. It consists of 3 vowels and none of them are O, which is how they pronounce it. Maybe I’m off track here. My point is being good at spelling doesn’t count for much. We try to create an image that we are wise and strong, but I know the truth. I am neither. But God chose me because he apparently has a fondness for the weak and the foolish.

This has some enormous implications for us. It means we don’t have to impress God or prove anything. God chose us, not only before we were born, but before the world was born, a fact that stuns me. I can’t even imagine that, yet Ephesians 1:4-5 says it is true. That means his choosing of me has exactly zero to do with how deserving or worthy I am. It happened before I existed. That is what enables me to just be me.

One of the things that is amazing about being chosen by my bride is that while I do everything I can to please her and make her happy, I know that her choosing me had nothing to do with how deserving I actually am. When I get up in the morning I sometimes think that Laurie must have a hard time even looking at me. I am unshaven, what little hair I have is sticking out at bizarre angles, and I am at the low end of my personal range of attractiveness. I know she would prefer that I not go around looking like that all the time, but the amazing thing is she continues to love me and choose me anyway, even at the breakfast table. While I want to do the best I can for her at all times, I am always free to just be who I am.

God’s choosing of us had nothing to do with how deserving we are. So we are always free to be who we are with him. We do the spiritual equivalent of waking up with our hair sticking out at all angles, looking our worst, and knowing that we will still be loved, still be his chosen. I am not impressive to the world. But God has chosen the weak and foolish, so I qualify!

WE HAVE A LIVING HOPE

When my kids were on their trips to foreign lands, one thing that gave them strength was knowing that it was only for a period of time. They had in the back of their minds that eventually they would get to go home. They greatly looked forward to the day they could go home where life would be much better.

We are aliens and strangers in this world, sensing that we are not at home, but we also have the hope that one day we will get to go home where life will be much better. Peter says we have been born again to a living hope. I think it important that he described it as a “living hope.” What is the difference between a living hope and a hope that is not living? A living hope is one that is alive, whereas a hope that is not would then be dead. It is a hope that is DOA, dead on arrival, meaning it is really no hope at all, because it has no chance of being fulfilled.

My son recently texted me a story from the news asking if I had seen it. It was a story that one member of the Spanos family was suing the NFL team that formerly was based in San Diego, in an effort to force Dean Spanos, the member of the family who runs the aforementioned team, let’s call them the Los Angeles Unmentionables, to sell the team because they are so far in debt due to the fact that they had to pay $650 million to move the team out of San Diego. We both got some glee from it. We’re not bitter. Not at all. But that brings up the fact that when Dean the Demon moved the team to that accursed metropolis to our north I hoped that the NFL would not abandon San Diego. Surely they would want a team in America’s Finest City, one of the larger cities in the nation. I have realized that is not a living hope. It indeed is DOA. It is never going to happen, and all the hoping in the world won’t change that. Peter said that was not true of our hope. Our hope is a living hope because it is grounded in a fact that Peter witnessed personally, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Peter knew that Jesus had beaten death because he saw him and touched him after he had been dead and had returned to life.

Many people have hope for life after death, but that hope is not a living hope. That’s because it is not based in a certainty, but in a wish. Peter says we have an inheritance. An inheritance is a great thing. It is something to look forward to. It is a big blessing. To describe our inheritance Peter used 3 Greek words that sound very similar, *aphtharton, amianton and amaranton*. They mean that nothing can cause the inheritance to decay or be polluted in some way, or to somehow fade away. It is certain and it is permanent. There is nothing on earth that is like that.

I mentioned spending some time with my little grandson, Wesley, who is a one year old toddler. He’s super cute, and he’s fun to watch because to him everything is new and wondrous. The thought hit me that I was once like him. I was that little. I was that new. I’m not new any more. The mileage shows. No one would describe me as super cute. We decay and fade away. Everything in this world does. It is all temporary, all passing away. I was thinking about how much I like our bathroom that we had redone last year. It is fresh and modern and new. But it won’t stay that way. It will get old, out of style and worn. That is true of everything in this world. But not of our inheritance. It is sure, because it is protected by God’s power.

In their book, *The Sacred Romance*, John Eldredge and the late Brent Curtis wrote, “The best human life is unspeakably sad. Even if we do manage to escape some of the bigger tragedies (and few of us do), life rarely matches our expectations… Friends move away. Our careers don’t quite pan out…Of course we’re disappointed, we’re made for so much more.”

We were made for permanence, for that incorruptible hope. We have a wistfulness, a poignant and nostalgic sense of this. There will be moments in our lives that are so deep, so beautiful that we get almost overwhelmed by them, and we want to grasp them, hold them, live in the reality of them. But they pass, leaving us only with memories that lose intensity over time, and with a longing for something we can’t even identify. Haven’t you had those moments that were so full of love, of joy, of beauty, that you desperately wanted it to never end, that you wanted to somehow hold onto it, but then it became only a memory? Don’t you wish you could somehow go back and live that again? In his classic book, *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis said, “Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exist.” We feel hunger, well there is such a thing as food that will satisfy it. He goes on to say, “If I find in myself a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.” He says we should never mistake the blessings of this world for something else of which they are only a copy.

One recent early Sunday evening Laurie and I turned on the television to see if we could find something to watch. Laurie surprised me as we were looking through what was on when she said, “Hey, there’s the last part of *Field of Dreams*. Let’s watch that.” That is one of my favorite movies. It makes me feel sappy because I get choked up every time I see it, but I still love it. But why would Laurie want to watch it? It turns out that the movie touches her, too. We watched the last 25 minutes or so, and sure enough, both of us got pretty teary eyed. Afterward we discussed why that movie affects us emotionally so much. A big part of the movie is about the main character resolving pain in his heart over estrangement from his long dead father. But neither of us has daddy problems. Laurie identified one aspect of the impact of the movie. She said she thinks it is about joy, and the hope of experiencing joy. I believe she’s right. My contribution is I think the movie speaks to the sadness of life. Eldredge and Curtis are right that life is unspeakably sad. All of us know that, as Laurie said, life has those moments of incredible joy, but they are fleeting. They pass and leave a deep and powerful longing to be able to keep them, to not lose them, to live in that joy, but we cannot. That brings a deep sadness to us. And we know in the end life is going to be terribly sad. The movie is about resolving that sadness, about actually experiencing joy. It really is about heaven. There is a scene late in the movie when Ray, the central character is asked by his father, “Is this heaven?” Ray says, “It’s Iowa.” Then Ray asks his father in a wistful, hopeful tone, “Is there a heaven?” His father says, “Oh yeah. It’s the place where dreams come true.” Ray says, “Then maybe this is heaven.” I’ve been to Iowa. It’s not heaven. But the message is correct, heaven is the place where the dream comes true, we can finally live in the joy we only get brief tastes of in this life.

Again, Eldredge and Curtis wrote, “If for all practical purposes we believe that this life is our best shot at happiness, if this is as good as it gets, we will live as desperate, demanding, and eventually despairing men and women. We will place on this world a burden it was never intended to bear.”

It’s hard for us to envision what that inheritance would be like. But I would like you to think of an infant still in the mother’s womb. Anna recently gave birth to her third daughter, Bria, who is also our fourth grandchild. I thought about what a rude experience birth is for the baby. She is warm and cozy in the only place she has ever known, a place where she is safe and every need is provided. Suppose you could have a conversation with that baby about the impending birth. You would tell her that something amazing is about to happen. But think about that event from the baby’s perspective. She is going to be unpleasantly shoved out of a place where she is very comfortable, the only place she has ever known, the only life she has ever known, and she will emerge in a world that is to her chaotic, loud, cold, confusing and painful. It would feel like a terrifying and horrible event, the end of life as she has known it. Trying to prepare her for that event you might tell her, “This is really the beginning of your life. You are going to experience colors, sounds, you can’t even imagine. You’re going to see the sun and the moon, and flowers and birds and trees. You’re going to hear music, and see the ocean, see beauty you can’t dream of right now.” She would say, “What is the sun? What is the moon? What is an ocean? I don’t know what you are talking about.” There is no way to explain to her what those things are, no way for her to envision any of this life. This is kind of where we are. Our hope is that, yes, this life will end, but that the end of this life is actually only the beginning of our real life. What will that life be like? We cant envision it. We cannot conceive of it any more than an infant in the womb could conceive of life in this world. But the life that awaits us is far more superior to this life, than this life is superior to life in the womb. This is the certain hope we have in Christ.

CONCLUSION

ACCEPT YOUR ALIEN STATUS

When my kids were in those foreign countries they tried to do their best to relate to the local citizens. But they accepted that they were foreigners. They did not try to hide or ditch their culture. They knew they wouldn’t be totally accepted, but that was all right. We need to do the same. We don’t belong here. We should do our best to relate to the locals, but let’s not ditch or hide our true culture. Let’s understand we won’t be accepted and be all right with that. Let’s not forget that we don’t belong here.

REJOICE THAT YOU ARE CHOSEN

Because you are an alien here the world is not going to understand you or accept you. It may mostly ignore you, consider you insignificant, or even reject you. But that’s all right. You are chosen. You’ve been picked out and have a special role to play. The rejection from the world means nothing compared to the special privilege you have been given of being chosen by God.

LOOK FORWARD TO YOUR HOPE

Having the hope of heaven is critical. Without it, the only hope we have is found in trying to make this life as palatable as possible. To do that you must compromise to fit in here. The only way you can make this life somewhat pleasant is to go along with the people of this world. To do that you will have to refuse to go along with God’s plan and instruction for you. What enables us to be faithful to God when it is difficult to do so in this world, is knowing that not too far down the road we will be going to our true home.