

Navigating with Hope

Navigating a Post-Christian Culture Series, January 7 & 8, 2023 | 1 Peter 1:1-12

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How do we navigate a world that is changing quickly?

In Stockbridge, Massachusetts, nothing seems to change.

I went to the Norman Rockwell Museum outside of Stockbridge a couple of years ago.

While there, my wife and I bought a puzzle of Rockwell's famous painting, *Home for Christmas*. It was painted in 1967 and depicts downtown Stockbridge at that point.

After touring the museum, we were hungry and decided to drive into town to get something to eat. I wondered out loud, "Will we even recognize downtown when we get there."

Almost at that very instant, downtown came into view. The answer was "yes."

Downtown Stockbridge today looks almost identical to the painting from 1967.

In Stockbridge, Massachusetts, nothing seems to change.

Our culture has certainly changed, though.

We have changed from a culture largely shaped by Christianity to a post-Christian culture.

At one time, most adults in North America, at least nominally, professed Christian belief. In the 1970s, roughly 90% of the population of the United States professed to be Christian.

Consequently, the Christian faith largely shaped our culture—our language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, values, etc.

That shaping influence has been in decline across Western civilization since the Enlightenment.

A recent study by the Pew Research Center projected current trends over the next 50 years. If trends continue, in the next 50 years, fewer than 50% of the US population will be professing Christians, and more than 50% will profess to have no religious faith.¹

We live in a post-Christian culture.

It's easy to feel lost in a post-Christian culture.

For those of us with a memory of days when Christianity was more clearly the majority faith, these days can be disappointing and frustrating. We are watching people hurt themselves.

For those of us new to Christianity or considering faith, we recognize that faith in Christ may mean changing everything from the way we talk to how we spend our money and time.

Christian faith teaches and demands things that are at odds with the beliefs and behaviors of most people in our society. We all sense the tension.

Sometimes we want to fight the culture! Sometimes we want to give in, conform, and make the pressure stop. Sometimes we want to think of our lives as castles, and we want to pull up the drawbridge and live safely inside a bubble of our own making.

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america/>

https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2022/09/US-Religious-Projections_FOR-PRODUCTION-9.13.22.pdf

How do we navigate a post-Christian culture?

The writers of the New Testament understood what it was like to live in a culture at odds with and fighting actively and passively against Christian faith.

1 Peter was written to a group of people dealing explicitly with that problem.

So, we are going to turn to 1 Peter for insight.

We learn a great deal from the first words of First Peter.

1 Peter 1:1-2 tells us that we are reading a letter, who wrote the letter, and who first read it:

Peter, 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.

We know Peter, the author of this letter.

Peter was one of Jesus' original twelve disciples, the ones Jesus designated as "apostles."

Peter is relatable.

When Jesus asked his disciples what people said about him, they were unclear.

Then Jesus asked, "But who do you say I am?" Without hesitating, Peter boldly confessed, "You are the Christ! The Son of the Living God!" Jesus affirmed Peter.

In the very next breath, though, when Jesus shared that he would be crucified, Peter chastised the Lord, and Jesus ended up calling Peter "Satan."

We know Peter—a man of action and clarity, a leader, a deeply spiritual man, yet so human.

Peter knows himself.

Peter was born Simon.

When Simon confessed that Jesus was the Christ, the Lord changed his name and started calling him "The Rock."

Jesus probably used the word "Cephas." That's "The Rock" in the language Jesus and his disciples likely spoke. That's probably what Simon was called back in Galilee and Judea.

However, out in the bigger world on mission for Jesus, Simon would have met people who spoke Greek, and "The Rock" was "Peter" in Greek.

So, the man born Simon no longer went by that name.

Plus, the man nicknamed "Cephas" no longer went by that name.

He was "Peter," "The Rock," an apostle sent by Jesus the Christ to the world-wide Church.

Peter can speak authoritatively for and about Jesus.

Peter was there for Jesus' teachings and miracles.

He was there at Jesus' resurrection and ascension.

Peter was there when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Church at Pentecost.

Peter had led the Church, preached widely, worked miracles in Jesus' name.

Peter was close to Jesus. He is sent by Jesus to the Church and to write this letter.

I'm reminding all of us of this. Yes, all Scripture is inspired by the Holy Spirit and perfect in conveying God's will to us. But I want you to know, as we ask how to navigate a post-Christian culture, that we are getting our instructions from Peter. He knows what that is like, he knows Jesus, he speaks for Jesus, and he is sharing God's insight with us!

This is going to be an important and helpful instruction from "The Rock."

We learn even more when we ask who first read First Peter.

Peter's readers lived in five areas of Asia Minor.

They make up an area roughly 1000 miles from east to west and 350 miles north to south.

It's an area just slightly smaller in landmass than the state of California.

It was home to between 4 and 8 million people.

The land was united under the Roman military control and commerce but comprised of many fiercely independent groups of people with different languages, cultures, and customs.²

Peter called all of his readers in this land "exiles." Why?

Were Peter's readers exiles because of the Diaspora?

Peter used the term "of the Diaspora" or "of the Dispersion."

Those terms refer to all Jews living beyond the Holy Lands.

There were perhaps one million Jews living in these lands in Asia Minor when Peter wrote.

They settled there in the period between the Old and New Testaments.³

Were Peter's readers Jews of Asia Minor who converted to Christianity?

That would make them exiles.

Were Peter's readers exiles because they were colonists?

The Romans had a difficult time uniting and controlling the people of Asia Minor.

So, they built multiple Roman colonies from scratch and upgraded existing cities.

They flooded the region with people from other places in the empire.

Some moved for opportunity. Others were sent because they were a problem for Rome.

Were Peter's readers exiles because they had come from other parts of the Empire and were now considered outsiders by the locals? They would definitely be exiles.

While Peter's readers were exiles, they were also chosen by God.

Our Bibles read "elect." The term means "to be chosen." (Or does it mean simply "chosen?")

God was the one doing the choosing, so the people reading Peter's letters may have been exiles to people where they were living, but they were people chosen by God. They were Christians.

Their situation helps us to understand our own situation better.

² Karen Jobes, *1 Peter from the Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), 19-22.

³ *Ibid.*, 19-23.

Christians are all strangers living in a foreign land.

We cannot definitely say what led the people reading Peter's letter to feel like exiles.

It seems highly likely that at some point they came from elsewhere.

However, their faith certainly set them apart with its new beliefs, values, and behaviors.

Their reality became a metaphor for us all.

Since Peter wrote this letter, Christians have understood that we are all "elect exiles."

We are citizens of the Kingdom of God living in the kingdoms of this world, pilgrims, strangers living in a foreign land. That's why we frequently feel so out of place.

Peter clarifies our source of hope as strangers living in a foreign land.

1 Peter 1:3-5 tells us about the source of hope:

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, undefiled, 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 time.

Hope comes from the work of God.

Before we delve too deeply into verses 3-5, we have to remember verse 2. Verse 2 told us that we were chosen by God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit, made to obey Jesus, and sprinkled in Jesus' blood. As a result, we get grace (the Gospel) and peace (the Gospel working).

God is working, and it is according to his "great mercy." That's his nature!

Because of Jesus, we are born again by God.

Our new birth is based on and like the resurrection of Jesus. It's a living hope (a hope that is not dead and a hope that keeps on living).

Our hope comes from the work of God.

Hope is being kept safe.

Peter describes our future as an inheritance.

He says that the inheritance is "imperishable, undefiled, and unfading."

That's interesting because nothing else in this world is like that. Everything else in this world decays.

Our inheritance doesn't perish or fade, though, because it isn't kept in this world. Instead, Peter says that our inheritance (our future) is being kept safe in heaven. It is waiting for us!

Plus, Peter says that we ourselves are being guarded by God's power. God is protecting us in a sense until we can get that inheritance. We are being guarded by God's power until our salvation is revealed at the last time, that is, when Jesus returns and the end times begin.

Our hope is being kept safe by God himself until the end times.

Hope is sustained through faith.

God's power is doing the guarding and the keeping safe, but he is working through us.

He is giving us faith. This is that belief we've been talking about. It's the ability to agree with the Gospel, trust in Jesus, and obey Jesus.

God gives us faith so that our hope never fails, and we never quit.

That is important because God is pointing us toward the future and does not want us to quit.

Hope flows from the Gigantic Nature of the Good News.

The Good News is always bigger and better than we think.

Take salvation, for instance. Peter shows us that salvation is bigger and better than we think.

Back in verses 1 and 2, we discovered that God chose us as his own (chose to save us) according to his foreknowledge. Don't get caught up in questions of predestination and whatnot right now. Just know that God's part in salvation started before time began.

Back in the Old Testament, God was revealing his plan for salvation to and through the prophets. Later in chapter 1, Peter says that those prophets longed to see what we see. Angels long to see what we see. Salvation is bigger and better than we think.

If you have turned to faith in Jesus, then you probably think of your salvation as something in the past. You "got saved" when you accepted Jesus, and that's true.

But Peter is telling us that we are being saved along the way. God is pouring faith into us all along, and the Holy Spirit is sanctifying us all along.

And Peter is saying that we will be saved fully and finally at the end when Jesus returns; we are resurrected, and we live forever with him.

Salvation history is like a line that stretches from before the beginning of time, all the way through time, and beyond the end of time as we know it.

When we sense the bigness of it all, we become like Peter and praise God. That's what he means when he says, "Blessed be God!" He means, "God is praiseworthy, so let's praise him!"

Why are we praising him? We are praising him because salvation is big, and we are getting caught up in something so big that we can't begin to understand it all!

That's Good News when you feel like a stranger in a foreign land.

Hope flows from the Gigantic Nature of the Good News!

Peter proposes that hope points us homeward as we navigate a foreign land.

1 Peter 1:6-9 points out that the elect exiles faced trouble:

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

We may recognize the elect exiles' trouble.

Peter was writing before persecution became widespread and violent in the Roman Empire.

Don't misunderstand. Some people had died already, and more would die.

However, for most Christians, the trouble they faced was less violent and more familiar.

They would face discrimination and might lose jobs, contracts, and business opportunities.
They would face ridicule, lose friends, and cause family arguments.
There were cases of violence in some neighborhoods.
They may be arrested, questioned, pushed to change their minds, and even forced to move.
Some aspects of what Peter's readers faced sound eerily familiar for many of us.

However, Peter insisted that glory comes on the other side of trouble.

Trouble serves as a trial. It doesn't just refine faith, but it tests whether faith is genuine or not.
When we endure trouble, we bring glory and honor to Christ.
Beyond that, Peter was saying that when we endure and someday see Jesus, then we will be glorified.
We will be resurrected, made right, made glorious and live eternally.
Trouble happens here and now; glory happens there and then.
Trouble comes before glory.

Christians living in a post-Christian culture face trouble.

Trouble will come our way because of our faith.
We are citizens of the Kingdom of God, living in the middle of the kingdoms of this earth.
Our culture is out of sync with the culture of the people around us.
Our beliefs and behaviors are different from the beliefs and behaviors of everyone else.
People will disagree with us, argue with us, criticize us, and even condemn us.
We will face pressure to change our beliefs and behaviors at work, among our friends, and even in our own families.
Sometimes the trouble will simply be the frustration we feel at their beliefs and behaviors.

But that leaves us with a question, a dilemma: How will we respond to trouble?

Will we give up? Will we despair? Will we become cynical? Will we become combative?
Or will we remain hopeful, faithful, and on mission with God?
How will we navigate this post-Christian culture?

May hope point us homeward as we navigate the post-Christian world.

Hope keeps us going. The Gigantic Nature of the Good News, the power of God at work in the world, is big enough to save us. May we as followers of Jesus always cling to that hope.
Hope keeps us engaged. And if the Gigantic Nature of the Good News is big enough to save us, then the power of God at work in the world is big enough to keep saving people right up until the end. May we as followers of Jesus always cling to that hope as well and keep storming the gates of hell.
Hope is pointing us homeward. If you are a disciple of Jesus, then this world is no longer your home. Your home is the Kingdom of God in eternity. That's where we are headed.
May hope point us homeward as we navigate the post-Christian world.