

WELCOMING THE STRANGER

**You are God's Spiritual House for Immigrants and Resident Aliens
(1 Peter 2:1-11)**

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A. Introduction

1 Peter was written to encourage people who were suffered as refugees in Asia Minor (Turkey). To this people Peter writes, "Keeping coming to Jesus and be the spiritual temple of God." That is the sermon in a nutshell.

It is important to understand who Peter is writing to.

B. People under *Pax Romana*

First, he is writing to people living under *Pax Romana*, the Peace of Rome.

Pax Romana refers to the social, political, and economic system imposed by Roman military might. The Romans ruled through coercion and power. They intimidated local client kings. They crushed any opposition. They leveled cities and called it peace.

In 66 AD, the Judeans thought they could throw off the Roman yoke. So they started a war. It was a bad decision. The Romans legions came and crushed Jewish opposition.

The people to whom Peter is writing lived under *Pax Romana*. They lived under a system of injustice and violence.

C. People without a Temple

Second, Peter is writing to people without a Temple, without a religious center.

When the Romans came and crushed Jewish opposition, they also demolished the Jerusalem Temple in 70 AD.

Without a Temple, Jews and Jewish Christians were thrown into a state of crisis. The loss of the Temple was a 9/11 event on a grand scale. Jews and Jewish Christians became refugees. They left Jerusalem. They left the region of Judah. Many traveled to Asia Minor.

With the destruction of the Temple, where could people go to meet God? How could religious life continue?

C. People without a homeland

Third, Peter is writing to people without a homeland. They fled Judea and went to Asia Minor (1 Pet. 1:1). In Asia Minor, they lived on the margins of society.

1. "Transient strangers" (*parepidēmoi*) (2:11)

Peter calls them "transient strangers" (*pare-pee-dē-moi*; παρεπίδημοι). This means they were foreigners away from their homeland. They lived without legal protection and without political power.

2. "Resident aliens" (*paroikoi*) (2:11)

Peter also called "resident aliens" or immigrants (*par-oi-koi*; πάροικος).⁶ This means they were non-citizens. They were day laborers without hope of permanent work. They were below citizens, but above slaves.⁷

3. Suffering people (1:6)

Peter is also writing to people who were suffering. Suffering is mentioned 22 times in 1 Peter.⁸ Their suffering was not the result of an official anti-Christian policy by the Romans.⁹ There is no indication of Roman hostility, trials, or executions in 1 Peter. In fact, Peter advises them to respect authority and honor the emperor (2:13-17); advice hardly conceivable, if they were persecuted by Rome.¹⁰

Why were they suffering? It is likely they suffered because they were simply foreigners living in an xenophobic world.¹¹

They were verbally attacked and humiliated. Peter tells us they were "blasphemed" (4:4), "insulted" (2:23; 3:9), "slandered" (2:12; 3:16), "disparaged" (3:16), and "reproached" (4:14).¹ The letter offers one clear explanation why they were abused.

4. *Christianoi* (4:16)

They were abused "because of [the] name of Christ" (4:14).¹³ They were labeled *Christianoi* or "Christians" (4:16). The label *Christianoi* originated in Latin-speaking

circles.¹⁴ From a Latin or Roman perspective, Christ was a criminal, who was shamefully crucified. Anyone following Christ was considered foolish.¹⁵

Thus, *Christianoi* was not originally a self-designation, but came *from others* (Acts 11:26). It was used in a mocking way (Acts 26:28). This explains why the term is absent in most of the NT (only three times 1 Pet 4:16; Acts 11:26; 26:28).

So Peter is addressing a group of immigrants, who are being harassed for being foreigners and Christians. What does Peter tell them?

D. "Come to Jesus" (2:4)

In verse 4, Peter tells them, "Come to him!" or "Keep coming to Jesus!"¹⁶ It is a *present imperative participle* (*pros-er-komenai*; προσέρχονται). Peter sees their crisis. They are immigrants without a homeland, without a Temple, living from hand to mouth, ridiculed and despised... and he tells them "Keep coming to Jesus!"

What does "Come to Jesus!" mean? I think it means at least three things.

1. Follow Jesus (purgation)

First, it refers to following or imitating Jesus. Following Jesus means thinking and acting like Jesus. This corresponds to *purgation*. Purgation refers to getting rid of harmful and destructive habits and acquiring habits of justice and compassion.

That's why Peter says:

1 Pet. 2:1. Rid yourselves ... of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander.

1 Peter 2:11-12.¹¹ ... as aliens and exiles ... abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. ¹² Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles.

2. Experience Jesus (illumination)

Second, "coming to Jesus" means experiencing Jesus, which corresponds to illumination or enlightenment. The Risen Christ is an experienced reality.

God can be encountered in many ways, but there are at least two time-tested practices that have positioned people for such encounters: *Lectio Divina* and *Centering Prayer*. Both require practice. Both can lead to an experience of God within.

3. Be God's House (unification)

Third, "coming to Jesus"—as the context indicates—means being a spiritual house of God. Notice what Peter says in verses 4-5:

Come to him, a living stone ... and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house (*oikos pneumatikos*). (2:4-5; NRSV)

a. Metaphor

This is metaphor—to speak of one thing in terms of another.

Christ is "a living stone" (*lithon zōnta*). The word for "stone" (*lithos*) refers to a stone that has been quarried, hewn, and readied for construction.¹⁷

Peter (meaning "rock") is calling Christ a *lithos* (a large stone):

- In verse 6, Christ is the "cornerstone" where the building was aligned
- In verse 7, he is the "capstone" above the rest
- In verse 8, he is the "stumbling stone" on the ground

Cornerstone, capstone, stumbling stone.... Its metaphor! What does it mean? What is it saying to me? How does it pertain to our church?

In the least, I think Peter is saying Christ is the most important, but overlooked part of our spiritual house. When we build our spiritual house or life together, don't leave Christ out!

In verse 5, Peter continues the building metaphor. The *Christianoi* are identified as "living stones" aligned with the "living stone". Together they are built into "a spiritual house".

What is "a spiritual house"? There are two possible meanings:

b. House/family

On the one hand, the term "spiritual house" (*oikos pneumatikos*) can refer to a spiritual household or family. Peter thinks that the Christian family—the church—is good news for people without a permanent home, namely, immigrants. The church, as a spiritual family, is good news for people without a permanent home.

c. House/temple

On the other hand, the term “spiritual house” could refer to the Jerusalem Temple, which was often called “the house of God” (e.g., 1 Chron. 28:10-13 and 2 Chron. 7:5 LXX). The Temple was an impressive structure—one of the seven wonders of the world. Now Peter is saying that Christ and Christians form the New Living Temple.

Again, this is good news for the *Christianoi* in the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple. Peter is saying to the *Christianoi* that they don’t need the Jerusalem Temple, because God is present in, with, and through the people themselves.

E. Priests of God

Next Peter connects the idea of Temple with priests.

1 Pet. 2:5. ⁵ Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

The Temple had priests that served God and mediated God to the people. The priests offered sacrifices, prayers, and forgiveness. They also taught about God’s grace, justice, and mercy.

Our passage ends with Peter linking the *Christianoi* with the mission that God had given to the people of Israel during the time of Moses. The people of Israel were given the task of being God’s people and God’s priests to the nations, that is, to the foreigners.

Exod 19:5-6. ⁵ Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, ⁶ but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites." (NRSV)

1 Peter 2:9-10. ⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (NRSV)

Like the children of Israel (priests to the nations), the *Christianoi* are also priests for God to the nations or foreigners. Like the priests in the Temple, we have the priestly duty to reconcile or bring people to God. How do we do that?

- By calling people to imitate God’s character (holiness),

- By proclaiming God's forgiveness,
- By teaching about God's grace, justice, and mercy

F. Three problems, one solution

Peter suggests there is a "spiritual" solution for the problems facing the *Christianoi*. The problems were three-fold: (1) They lived in an empire that perpetrated injustice. (2) That empire destroyed their spiritual center and (3) forced them from their homelands. Peter addresses each in this passage.

1. The temple of God

First, the *Christianoi* thought they were without a Temple. They thought there was no longer a religious center on planet. They had lost confidence they could find God anywhere. They had no certainty about where they could find God. They are wrong!

Peter tells them they are God's Temple when they keep coming to Jesus. That is, Peter tells them they themselves are *good news* for people looking for God, for people who feel they have lost their religious center or spiritual moorings.

2. The family of God

Second, the *Christianoi* thought they had no permanent home. They thought they were cut off from family back in the homeland. They were wrong!

Peter tells them they are God's Family or Household when they keep coming to Jesus. That is, Peter tells them they themselves are *good news* for people who are homeless, for the resident alien, the immigrant, or anyone else who feels they are without family.

3. The people and priests of God

Third, the *Christianoi* thought they must bear the pain of *Pax Romana*, living with derision and insult, one step from slavery, without status or citizenship. They were wrong!

Peter tells them they are God's People and Priests when they keep coming to Jesus. That is, Peter tells them they themselves constitute the *good news* for people who are alienated, exploited, and treated unfairly. They have ultimate citizenship as God's people. They enact the God's grace, justice, and mercy as God's priests.

G. Conclusion

Peter encourages the *Christianoi*—and we are *Christianoi*—not to be passive observers of traumatic events. We have our 9/11 event. But we are not victims. We have our crises. But

we are not powerless. We can come to Jesus. We come by imitating him (purgation), by experiencing Christ (illumination), and by discovering God abides with us (unification).

Peter suggests that when we come to Jesus, we become God's Temple, God's Family, and God's Priests.... Not for ourselves only.

I think we need to ask ourselves:

- What does coming to Jesus mean? For me? For this congregation?
- How can coming to Jesus help address problem I face and we face?

Notes

1. With the fall of Jerusalem, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai (70-85 C.E.), Rabban Gamaliel (85-115 C.E.), and other Jewish rabbis gathered in the town of Yavneh (Jamnia) and instituted dramatic changes to Judaism, spawning what is now called rabbinic Judaism.
2. Any thought about the temple being destroyed was very disturbing to both Jews and Christians (Mark 13:1-8; 14:57; John 2:19-22; {191} 11:48; Acts 6:13). It is conceivable that Christians, especially Jewish Christians, participated in temple activities until the temple was destroyed. For example, Paul was a follower of the Way (Acts 24:14), yet he participated in temple rituals (e.g., Acts 24:18) and brought Gentile Christians to the temple (Acts 21:28).
3. 1 Pet. 1:2b, 18-19.
4. 1 Pet. 1:22; 2:9-10.
5. 1 Pet. 1:23-25; 2:4-10.
6. 1 Pet. 1:1; 2:11 (cf. 1:17). Unless noted otherwise, the translations are those of the author.
7. Scott McKnight, *1 Peter*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 25.
8. See 1 Pet. 1:6-7; 2:12, 15, 18-20; 3:9, 14, 16-17; 4:1, 4, 12-14, 16, 19; 5:1, 8-10.
9. The only evidence that might suggest Roman persecution of Christians (but ultimately fails) comes from a letter written to Emperor Trajan by Pliny the Younger, the governor of Bithynia-Pontus (ca. 112 C.E.). In the letter, Pliny asks Trajan's advice about what to do with Christians, who were denounced by local residents for worshipping Christ, shameful acts, and refusing to practice emperor worship. The fact that persecution was not happening officially is confirmed by Trajan's reply that Christians should *not* be hunted down and *not* punished for unproved charges. See Elliott, *1 Peter*, 792-94.
10. Elliott, *1 Peter*, 100, 793.
11. Elliott, *ibid.*, 94-103.
12. The terms are overlapping synonyms. See "*Blasphemō and Its Semantic Relations*," chapter 4 in Jerry Truex, *The Problem of Blasphemy: Early Jewish Understandings and the Fourth Gospel* (Ph.D. diss., Durham University, England, 2002).
13. Author's translation. The phrase *en onomati Christou* can be understood as causal, following J. N. D. Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and Jude* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969); Erland Waltner and J. Daryl Charles, *1-2 Peter, Jude*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1999); Elliott, and other recent commentators.
14. Elliott (*1 Peter*, 789) states that *Christianos* uses "a borrowed Latin ending (*-ianos* [Gk.] from *-ianus* [Lat.]) or an underlying Latin formation in its entirety." When the suffix *-ianus* is attached to a proper name (e.g., Christ), it indicates an associate or partisan of the one named.
15. This is supported by the Roman historian Tacitus (*Annals* 15.44.3), who wrote: "Christus, from whom the name [*Christiani*] had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again

broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and hateful from every part of the world find their center and become popular.”

16. “Coming” (*proserchomenoi*) is a present participle with imperatival force, “keeping coming.”
17. *Lithos* is often used for large, prepared stones for building (Matt. 24:2), sealing graves (Matt. 27:60), millstones (Rev. 18:21), and inscriptions (2 Cor. 3:7).
18. This position is argued by Elliot (*1 Peter*, 414-18); see also Waltner and Charles, 75.
19. Quoting Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 2:193. {193}
20. McKnight, 23; also see Scott McKnight, *A Light Among the Gentiles: Jewish Missionary Activity in the Second Temple Period* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1991).
21. The readers are familiar with *Jewish concepts* like election (1:1; 2:4-10), purity (1:2, 14-16, 33; 2:5, 9; 3:5), redemption (1:18-19), and Zion (2:6); with *Jewish scripture*, such as Exod. 19:5-6 (1 Pet. 2:4-9) and Hos. 1:9; 2:23 (1 Pet. 2:10); and with *Jewish traditions* about Abraham and Sarah (3:6), Noah (3:19-21), and Passover (lamb, 1:19).
22. McKnight, *1 Peter*, 24.