

Script: Pastor Frank R. Johnson
First Peter: Truth and Hope for Sojourners
“The Formation of Identity”
1 Peter 1:1-2

Take a first look.

I. Welcome, temporary citizens of earth! I offer us truth and hope from God today.

II. During the 2021 Olympic Games in Tokyo, Japan, the commentator of Women’s Beach Volleyball said something interesting about the women who were competing. The camera zoomed up to a close-up of a pendant around the neck of one of the women. He said that all the women from the United States competing in beach volleyball wore one exactly the same. It was a circular pendant that said, “I am enough.” The saying was adapted from the statement in Philippians 4:13, “I have strength for all things through the One Who gives me strength.” With a bit of wonder in his voice, the commentator said that they were all Christians who prayed together regularly. Though they were identified in the Olympic Games as some of the top volleyball players in the world, their central identity was as followers of Jesus, whose hearts belonged to Him, Who had made them enough for what they were called to do.

III. Where are our hearts today? The way we answer that question will determine much of our attitude. It will govern the direction of our actions. It will determine our *self-image*.

I—Consider the contrast between building a house and parking a camp-trailer on a rented site. In your mind, picture the two of them side by side.

Now, what is our attitude toward this present world? Is it more like building a house, or is it more like parking a camp-trailer on a rented site? The difference could not be clearer. The house-builder considers this his permanent home. The trailer-camper is “just passing through” on his way toward his ultimate destiny. The first is a resident, the second a sojourner, a *traveler*.

III. I suggest to you that the Christian perspective is the latter. We have not arrived at our final resting place yet. The writer of Ecclesiastes observes that God “has set eternity in the hearts of men” (Ecclesiastes 3:11). I understand that the Hebrew text of this passage can be understood a little differently. But, either way, this truth is still the same. We have a longing for something that nothing in this life can satisfy. That is why no job, no new house, no human relationship, no award or recognition in this life, no degree or diploma, no Olympic gold medal, no Super Bowl ring satisfies the inner longing for the permanent.

I have been doing a regular one-minute devotional on my blog at smileymudd.wordpress.com, and on Facebook and Instagram since March of 2020. For nearly a year, I did this every day (I missed two days out of the first 365). I call it “**Got a Minute?**” You might be surprised to learn that I can present a coherent (-ish) devotional in about a minute. 😊 My introductory greeting is always the same, “Hi, friends in exile. Frank here. Got a minute?” One member of my extended family quibbled with me some time ago about this greeting. “How long will we be in exile?” She asked. I answered, in effect, “Until we die or until Jesus comes again.” I referred her to the letter before us that identifies all followers of Jesus as citizens of an eternal kingdom and as *temporary residents* or *sojourners* in this present world.

IV. Peter wrote this short letter to Christians all over a corner of the ancient world that could in many ways be written to Christians in the world today. He shows sojourners on earth *how to live in light of eternity*. The first need he addresses is the need to solve the identity crisis. Sit at Peter’s feet, my fellow temporary citizens, resident aliens of earth, sojourners, travelers to a distant land, and let’s

learn who we really are, or can be, in Jesus Christ. As usual, the Scriptures are able to pack a lot into a couple of sentences.

Take a closer look at 1 Peter 1:1-2.

Translation (FJV¹):

Salutation

¹ Peter, apostle of Jesus Christ, to chosen sojourners of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, ² according to the foreknowledge of God the Father in sanctification by the Spirit toward obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ—may grace and peace be multiplied to you^p.²

I. THE IDENTITY OF SOJOURNERS IS DRAWN FROM THE AUTHORITY OF GOD. v. 1

1. *Peter was not speaking on his own, but as a representative of Jesus Christ.* At the very least, this is what it meant to be an *apostle*. Peter was not just a fisherman with a big mouth and a forceful personality, though that may have described him well enough when Jesus first found him. But his time with Jesus changed him from impulsive fisherman to courageous apostle.

2. *As an apostle, he was sent out by Jesus Himself.* That is the meaning of ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*), “one sent out with a message.” He carried in his words the weight of the words of the Lord Himself. This is a perspective not to be taken lightly.

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| A—Are we willing to take God’s perspective toward our identity as the one that really counts? |
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I—When we consider our mortality, what really counts about who we are? Such things as job, physique, intelligence, beauty—all are frail and temporary. Margie Haack wrote a column in the “Soul Food” section of *World* magazine some years ago (January 31, 1998). She entitled the article “How Soon We Forget,” and commented about how easy it is to forget what God is doing in our lives because of pain and suffering. Peter addresses such matters in this letter. It is too easy to forget God’s perspective on our lives, as well, and to begin to hear only a worldly description of who and what we are.

She begins her article by recounting the story in a Minnesota newspaper about a fellow who jumped from an airplane skydiving. The problem was this: his chute didn’t open properly. It took more than a minute to fall 3,000 feet to the ground. Margie writes, “That’s enough time for a lot of life to flash before your eyes. What do you suppose he thought during that descent? Did he cry out to God? Did he make promises to keep if he lived?” Then she relates, “Somehow, he survived. Can you hear him telling his children about this?”

Surely at a moment of such extreme mortality, the relative importance of different points of view would come into dramatic relief. Attitudes about our lives and worth given by parents, peers, teachers, bosses—all would pale in comparison with the ultimate question: “If God is there, what does He think about my life?” Life can offer such freefalls. Thank God they are not always literally from a plane with a faulty parachute! We don’t have to wait for some freefall to confirm the source of our best self-image. That comes from God.

II. THE IDENTITY OF SOJOURNERS RESULTS FROM KNOWING WHERE THEY COME FROM. v. 2

¹ Frank Johnson Version. 😊

² The superscript “p” indicates that the pronoun is plural.

1. *God Himself has chosen His people, based on His foreknowledge.* “To God’s elect” is not a noun in the original, it is an adjective. The word translated “elect” modifies “strangers,” or better, “sojourners,” which comes next. Where do sojourners come from? They come from God. If we have put our trust in Jesus Christ, God has known us with loving Fatherly purposes from before the foundation of the world (see Ephesians 1, for Paul’s take on this).

A—Have we come to terms with God’s original purposes for our lives, which have been in place since before we were even a remote possibility, humanly speaking?

I—Before every one of us is a door with two titles: As we anticipate coming to faith in Christ, we stand before a door that says in large letters, 14 “Whoever will, let him/her come and drink freely from the water of life.” When we have walked through that door by faith, we look back and see written in equally large letters, “**Chosen in Christ** before the foundation of the world.” It is an awesome reality to bring both truths together in a Christian understanding of God’s work in our lives.

2. *The identity of God’s people is not derived from this present world.* “Strangers in the world” describes an essential perspective that Peter brings up several times in this letter (see 1:17, 2:11). This emphasizes that we are resident aliens, here on a work visa for the President of a heavenly country, sojourners in a land not our own.

A—The question returns: On what is our vision of self, God, others, and the world focused?

I—Is our vision of self and the world corrected by our new identity in Christ, or is it limited to our old life or our old ways of seeing ourselves and others?

A neurologist named Oliver Sacks has written a book entitled *An Anthropologist on Mars*, in which he describes the experience of a man named Virgil. Virgil had been blind from early childhood, but at the age of 50 he underwent surgery and was given the gift of sight. But as he and Dr. Sacks found out, having the physical capacity for sight is not the same as seeing.

Virgil’s first experiences with sight were confusing. He was able to make out colors and movements but arranging them into a coherent picture was more difficult. Over time he learned to identify various objects, but his habits—his behaviors—were still those of a blind man.

Dr. Sacks asserts, “One must die as a blind person to be born again as a seeing person. It is the interim, the limbo ... that is so terrible.”³

Is our vision captive to our former self-description, or is it transformed by the new light and life that Jesus Christ has brought? Jesus called us, in the paraphrase of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, to “come and die”—die to a self-centered life, die to using others for our pleasure or gain, die to striving to make a name for ourselves only in this life, die to seeing ourselves and the world through natural eyes alone, and to be born anew into a life and a way of seeing ourselves and the world that is eternal.⁴

3. *Though God’s people might be “scattered” all over the earth, we have a common identity as His chosen ones.* Those Christians all through what is now called Asia Minor, modern Turkey, perhaps felt isolated, distinct, even odd in their settings. When God saw them, they were His special treasures. They were not known primarily by their ethnic heritage, nor their self-chosen allegiances. They were known by their relationship with God—and not just “God as we describe Him,” but the God Who created the world and everything in it, and Who entered it as a Man in the person of Jesus Christ.

³ Oliver Sacks, *An Anthropologist on Mars* (Vintage, 1996), cited in PreachingToday.com.

⁴ See his book, *The Cost of Discipleship* (second edition, Macmillan, 1959, translated from the German *Nachfolge*, first published, Chr. Kaiser Verlag Munchen, 1937).

A—Have we allowed God to unite our hearts with Christians from other churches and other parts of the world?

I—I was eating lunch with a former member and deacon of CSBC, Duke Senter, on a Saturday some years ago, and we talked about the International Mission Board's daily prayer request e-mail connection at that time. He was amazed by the sheer number of the requests that were made for urgent needs around the world each day, perhaps 30 or 40 of them. But we shared the sense of being part of something much larger than ourselves, than our families, than our church, than our region. God's people *are* scattered abroad all over the earth, but "our citizenship is in heaven," as Paul puts it in Philippians 3:20. We share a common link with all who call upon Jesus as Lord from pure hearts. Even in the churches that make up the Northwest Baptist Convention—from Washington, Oregon, northern Idaho and a church or two from northern California—we have around 25 languages spoken on any given Sunday. In our own region, we are people from all over the world, just in our own convention of churches!

III. THE IDENTITY OF SOJOURNERS RESULTS FROM KNOWING WHERE THEY ARE GOING. v. 2

1. *The destiny of God's people is to follow Jesus.* "Toward obedience" describes the ultimate vision of the Christian life, to follow Jesus faithfully. This is why we have been chosen; this is the ultimate aim of the Christian vision. This is where the Holy Spirit will lead us.

A—Whatever our gifts or talents, the goal remains the same: *following Jesus* and living for the glory of God.

I—I reminded you recently that Allyson Felix has won more medals than any other woman in track and field competition in the Olympics. She won a Bronze medal in the 400 meters and shared in the Gold medal in the women's 4x400 meter relay at the Tokyo Olympics held in 2021. That brought her medal count to 11, the most of any person in track and field history in the Olympics (man or woman), spanning a total of 5 Olympic Games beginning in 2004. I watched an interview with her after her final victory in the Tokyo Olympics. This 35-year-old mother was the picture of grace, gratitude, and class. Here is what she told a reporter in 2012: "For me, my faith is the reason I run. I definitely feel I have this amazing gift that God has blessed me with, and it's all about using it to the best of my ability."⁵ But she also recognized a child as an even greater gift. She was pressured by the Nike Corporation not to get pregnant, since that would limit her running ability during and after her pregnancy. Then, when she did get pregnant, she was pressured by the company to get an abortion. Thankfully, as a child of God, she valued the gift of children over sponsorship money! [And it rather inclines me to wear a different brand of shorts gear!]

What limits us if Jesus is leading our lives? When He is our destiny, we are capable of what *He can do through us*. That is a much different picture, isn't it, than a picture of us striving to do something for Him on our own?

2. *The destiny of God's people is to be cleansed and forgiven.* "Sprinkling by his blood" reminds us of the ceremony of cleansing that was described in Leviticus 14:6-7. Whenever a person who had been considered "unclean" was pronounced cleansed, sacrificial blood was sprinkled over him/her and s/he was then considered clean and could return to society. Just so with the blood of Jesus Christ. He died so we might live. His death was the final and complete offering for our sin. John wrote an expanded version of this idea (1 John 1:7): "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and *the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin*" (NIV, my emphasis).

⁵ USA Today in 2012. <https://www.movieguide.org/news-articles/5-christian-athletes-to-watch-at-the-tokyo-olympics.html>.

A—Are we finding our constant cleansing from the power of Jesus' death for us?

I—According to an ancient Asian tradition, whenever a debt was settled, either by payment or forgiveness, the creditor would take the canceled bond and nail it over the door of the one who owed it. Anyone passing by could then see that it had been fully paid. This is the ongoing power of Jesus' forgiveness. "Paid in full!" is stamped on our hearts and hung over our doors.⁶ In fact, what Jesus cried out from the cross means just this: "*Tetelestai!*" "It is finished!" "Paid in full!" (See John 19:30, Greek New Testament).

IV. THE IDENTITY OF SOJOURNERS RESULTS FROM KNOWING HOW GOD WILL GET US THERE.

1. *God's Spirit makes spiritual life possible for us.* We are cleansed through the "sanctifying work of the Spirit." It is He Who works in our hearts to give us new sight; it is He Who gives us new birth; it is He Who makes Jesus real in our lives.

A—We can be sure that this life God has begun in us will carry forward into eternity (Peter will make that point shortly).

I—Brant Parker and Johnny Hart drew the cartoon *The Wizard of Id*. Parker died in 1997, and Hart passed in 2007. Mason Mastroianni then began to illustrate the daily cartoon. In one particular strip done by Johnny Hart, one of the characters was questioning an obituary that ended, "To be continued" What could that mean at a point that we usually think of as "the end" of a person's life? Just this: the life that we have by the Holy Spirit when we put our faith in Jesus Christ is a life that goes on. This present world is not our final home; heaven calls for us; the resurrection awaits us. This life ends, however briefly, with "TO BE CONTINUED ..." in large letters written by God.

2. *He intends to make us holy.* His work is a "sanctifying" work. That means that the primary goal of the *Holy Spirit* of God is to make *us* holy.

A—Are we earnestly cooperating with the work of God's Spirit to make us holy unto the Lord?

I—Don't be discouraged with the time it takes to have a heart and hands that are truly holy unto the Lord. God is determined to bring this work to completion in our lives. It is a steady step by step process. He believes in what we can become, because He is the One making it happen.

From the editors of PreachingToday.com:

In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, C. S. Lewis tells of how a young boy named Eustace becomes a dragon—a very unhappy dragon at that. Eustace steals a gold armband and puts it on, only to find that his greed turns him into a dragon. And the armband is excruciatingly tight on his dragon foot.

One night, in the midst of his pain and frustration, Eustace encounters a huge lion who tells the boy to follow it to a high mountain well. Eustace longs to bathe his aching foot in the cool water, but the lion tells him he must undress first. It seems silly to Eustace because dragons don't wear clothes, but then he remembers that dragons, like snakes, cast their skins.

So Eustace scratches his skin, and the scales begin falling off—and soon his whole skin peels away. But when he puts his foot in the water, he sees that it is just as rough and scaly as before. He continues scratching at the second dragon skin and realizes there is yet another

⁶ Drawn from *Bible Illustrator*.

underneath.

Finally the lion says, "You will have to let me undress you."

Eustace is afraid of the lion's claws but desperate to get in the water. The first tear is painfully deep as the lion begins to peel away the skin. Surely death will follow, Eustace believes. With the gnarled mess of dragon skin now cut away, the lion holds Eustace and throws him into the water.

Initially, the water stings, but soon it is perfectly delicious. Eustace swims without pain, for he's a boy again.⁷

We struggle with persistent faults and attitudes, but His Spirit has begun the work in our hearts. The Spirit of God does not call us to some sort of "do-it-yourself holiness." He says, "You will have to let *Me* do it." It is the "sanctifying work *of the Spirit*" that fulfills the Father's will to empower us to follow the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. All the persons of the Trinity are involved in our identity. We must never go back to an inadequate view of ourselves if all of God is at work to show us who we really are in Christ and to make us that in reality.

Take it home (applications).

I. WHAT IS OUR TRUE IDENTITY TODAY?

1. Are we just known by human descriptions of sex, race, educational level, income, title?
2. Or are we known by the status of heaven: holy children of a holy God?

II. WHAT IS KEEPING THIS FROM BEING TRUE OF US?

1. We must admit our need of forgiveness.
2. We must believe in the offering of Jesus Christ.
3. We must commit our lives to Him in faith and earnestly cooperate with the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

⁷ Summarized by the editors of PreachingToday.com, <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2003/february/14212.html>.