

God's Foreign Ministers

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[0 : 0 0] a sandwich. It's like you hold two passports. We have British passports, but in our case, in Cyprus, when we started out there in our Middle East time, we had the passport, but that wasn't enough, even though we were then all in the European Union together. We had to go and get a pink slip. It took two years to get. It turned out to be yellow in color. And then we went to the immigration office, and we were issued with the alien book. That's the brown book with the awful mugshot that you can see, I hope. I've treasured that alien book ever since, because that's the normal Christian life that Peter describes. We are aliens in our world, and yet we are special to God, called and commissioned and placed in this world to be his witnesses, to be obedient to Jesus Christ.

We belong to God. We are the Spirit's work in progress, but we live in a mixed-up world, the wrong side of heaven. No wonder we need the grace and peace that Peter prays for his friends at the beginning. Twelve years ago, when we moved from Cyprus to Egypt, where I served on the staff as the English-speaking pastor in the Anglican Cathedral in Cairo, a few years after we arrived, we studied 1 Peter in the autumn months. I'm glad we did. In the Bible study, we saw in every chapter the focus on the reality of Christian life, the glorious vision of who Jesus is, who is leading us in this life. And then came the uprising in 2011. January 25th, the anniversary, is coming up.

All those hopes, all that campaigning, all those young people longing for change in what was called then the Arab Spring. Then came the tanks. Eventually, there was some kind of a deal between the protesters and the authorities. But since then, in some ways, not a lot has changed.

They often say that about revolutions. You start with a dictator. You seek to overthrow them. And two were overthrown in the revolution, the uprising. But actually, by the time you get to the end, you often end up not far from when you started, from where you started. All those hopes, then the brutal reality. So our challenge in 2011 for the next couple of years was leading congregations through uprising and protest and violent repression sometimes. What will your challenge, our challenge be this year?

Well, none of us knows. The Lord does. But none of us knows the detail. What we do know is that he has made us his special people. He has called and placed us in a world like this. And the way his salvation gets out into the world's consciousness, starting to transform people as he intended all along, is through God's foreign ministers. I'm picking up on what Peter says as you'll hear in a few minutes about us being foreigners. Remember the alien book. It's like we've all got one. Let's listen to Michael as he brings our first few verses from verse 13 to 16.

[4 : 1 2] After each reading, I'm going to say, this is the word of the Lord. And if you wish, you can respond, thanks be to God. So the first reading is taken from the first letter of Peter in the first chapter, beginning at the 13th verse. And you'll find on page 1217, 1-2-1-7, 1 Peter 1-13.

Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do. For it is written, be holy because I am holy. This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God. Thank you very much, Michael. Ben, let's see those verses, can we, from verse 13 to 16.

Here's the first thing. God's foreign ministers reflect God.

This section is the centerpiece of this first chapter. Peter moves now to a call to action, to discipline, to hope, to hope, and to holiness. Whenever you see in the text, therefore, you know what they say, look and see what it's there for. He's been explaining and revealing and speaking about Christ up to now. And now he's showing you how this will work.

[6 : 15] Wake up, he says. Get ready. Get your minds in gear. Notice, by the way, he's talking plural here. This isn't something that each of us has to do on our own, only ourselves. Not just us battling through individually. We are in this together. He says, I want you to keep clear. I want you to be sober.

We think of alcohol as a stimulant, at least our culture does. It's actually chemically a depressant. It works by reducing healthy inhibitors. Hence, the link sometimes between alcohol and bad behavior, or sometimes dangerous behavior and damage to self and others. But we're not just talking dry January here. We're talking about all aspects of what it means to be alert, to be watchful, to be aware, to keep clear. And Peter says, replace alcohol, if that's the thing, or whatever else that's getting in the way of your clear vision. Replace it by setting your hope unreservedly on the grace which is being conveyed to you. That's something of the literal sense of these words. Set your hope unreservedly on the grace which is being conveyed to you. And with that aim clearly before us, we're free to live as God desires. As God works in us, building into us his passion, his priorities.

We are living here and now in between the time of Jesus on earth, living, dying, being raised, as we will remember when we share bread and wine together, ascended now, praying for us, and one day returning to call us to himself and finally to judge the world. We'll come to that in a minute. But we live in between. In between his resurrection and ascension and his return.

Here we are called to trust and serve before he comes back. Peter says, I want you therefore to be like obedient children. Don't conform to the pressures that are going on around you and that are closing in on you. If you like, this is the negative side of being holy. Most of the caricatures in Burns' poetry, for example, holy willy, or the caricatures of holiness, they stick at this end. It's all about what you don't do. It is about what you don't do, but there's more. The caricatures are solemn and dismal. You know, if you're in business, they often say it, and forgive me if you're one of these, in the business where I started work anyway, down south. The accountants were often described as the people who would say, the answer's no. What's the question?

It's not fair, is it? Christians are such negative people, we sometimes hear, don't we? Your God always seems to be saying no. He does say no for our own benefit, for our own good. He calls us to pull away from the things in the world that might damage us. For sure, that's a real dimension of holiness. But verse 15 points us to another one with that great big word, but there's another side, and it's the positive quality of holiness, the attractive quality alongside that comes from God, who made all, who identifies with his people, who longs to be known. And how? Lives of separation and devotion on the one hand, absolutely. But a spirit of perseverance and resilience and affirmation on the other. Be holy because I am. Peter is quoting from way back in the Old Testament,

[11 : 17] Leviticus, Leviticus 11, Leviticus 19, Leviticus 20. This time, looking at it again, it struck me how remarkable that is. It's the surprise, if you like, in these few verses.

Where do we look to see how to be holy? We look into Leviticus. It's a stretching read. Don't be afraid of it, though. With all its rules and regulations and behaviors, it shows you what being holy means because it shows you how you learn to worship with every dimension of your life. The whole of our lives is worship in the eyes of Leviticus. And how to reflect God in the way that you live. I suppose here's the surprise. If you read around in chapter 11 and 19, holiness means watching what and how you eat.

respecting family, colleagues, employees, authorities. It's a surprise. Holiness is as ordinary as that.

Reflect God. In short, live God's way and take responsibility for one another. We are holy together.

Here's how to approach God. Here's how to reflect His character. Here's how to be His distinctive, attractive people in the world where He's called and placed us. We need that, don't we?

[13 : 08] Thanks be to God for it. And Peter is picking up on it and sharing it with his friends. Christians under pressure all over the Middle East region at that time and now as well. As well as our brothers and sisters all over the world who are up against it in different ways. The New Testament picks this up.

Romans 12 has Paul saying, your spiritual sacrifices, your true worship is how you should respond to God. Not to be conformed to God. Not to be conformed to the world on the one hand, to be different.

And to have your minds renewed and led into new behaviors as the rest of that chapter shows you. Or the writer of Hebrews at the very end in chapter 13 urges us to join Jesus outside the town, outside the camp, to offer what the writer calls the sacrifice of praise. What's the sacrifice of praise?

It's lips that openly profess His name. Own up to being believers in Christ. In the public sphere, not just private believers as our culture wishes us to be. And people who not only use their mouths to profess His name, but who then do good and share with others. How remarkable. How simple. And yet, how challenging. Holiness is about what we say and what we share. About what we do with our mouths.

And if you like, what we do with our money. For you, special price, huh? Where do you spend? How do you invest?

[15 : 05] In the good things. That's holiness, as Peter understands it. God's foreign ministers reflect and in some ways reveal God by our behavior, by our character in these areas.

But there's a second dimension. God's foreign ministers are called to live in reverent fear. Michael, come back and give us the remainder of our reading, would you?

The second part of our reading is starting at verse 17 of chapter 1 of 1 Peter. Since you call on a father who judges each person's work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear. For you know that it was not with perishable things, such as silver or gold, that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.

This is the word of God. God's foreign ministers live in reverent fear.

Let me stay with the foreigners just for a moment, can I? It was Jason Leach that pointed out after the pandemic and his key role actually in helping us in Scotland respond to it and deal with it, that the Covid vaccine that many of us have had, the Pfizer one, was actually designed by two Turkish background doctors, Ugur Sahin and Uzmlem Tureci.

[17 : 27] My big Christmas book was Andrew Marr's book about the Elizabethans, reflecting on all those years that Queen Elizabeth was our monarch.

Reflecting, yes, on our influence internationally, but now on the influence of others on us.

What caught my eye was the Iraqis that he mentions towards the end. Architect Zaha Hadid, who did her extraordinary curvy buildings in China and Azerbaijan as elsewhere.

Or the advertisers Charles and Maurice Sachi, who changed the advertising promotional game, though they fell out in recent years. Broadcaster Alan Yentob, a key figure in the BBC.

Mother care creator Salim Zilka. These, to us, foreigners. Yet they came and they made their lives here.

[18 : 34] They rode the waves of suspicion and they impacted us and they changed our world commercially. It's not an easy life, Peter knows, as you live out your time as foreigners here.

And often you face pressure, go back to where you came from. In Egypt they always used to ask, who are you? Why are you here? Who are you connected with?

And who's paying for you? Those were the questions you always had to be ready to answer. The surprise is that Peter calls us to fear.

Proper respect, if you like. We might call it awe. Jesus called God Father.

It's the Christian name for God. And when we call on the Father, that's what describes us. People who recognize where true power and true love lie.

[19 : 41] But the Father, having called us, has now scattered us. Placed us in the front line so we can showcase his character and draw people to him.

We know where we stand. And that's precisely why we're called to be respectful, to awe, to fear.

Handle these things with care. Think of your day job. Some of you are in power generation. Some of you may be electricians. You respect the elements that you're dealing with, don't you?

Because you know that your life and ours depends on how well you respect them and manage them. Because if they go out of control, they do us massive damage.

And if you're an electrician and you get the wiring wrong, they'll do you damage too. Or in the building trade, God's concern for safety caught the eye of one engineer I heard about.

[20 : 50] Who was so fascinated by Deuteronomy 22 verse 8, where God says, When you build a house with a flat roof, make sure to put a wall on it so nobody falls off it.

That's a loose translation. He was so astonished that God, the great God of the universe, should be bothered about people falling off flat roofs, that he started his journey, which eventually led him to become a follower of Christ.

Extraordinary. God's concern for safety. Those of you in the medical world, you know about powerful drugs that can do immense good when used properly, but are so dangerous and damaging when they are not treated with respect.

If you're involved in local politics or national politics, you do well to fear the mood of the electors. The wind blows and the mood changes quickly.

You have awe and respect for those who put you there. Here Peter says, Respect God, who is the Father who judges impartially.

[21 : 59] We saw this so much in the Middle East. And we still do when we visit. Justice, judgment, is such good news.

Good news. In parts of the world and cultures, where the only way to get it is to pay for it, or not to get it at all, because you haven't got links to people of influence to get through the system.

This is good news of a God who knows the whole story, the hidden motives, the deepest desires, who can be trusted to judge justly.

That's gospel good news. So Abraham, back in Genesis, bargained with God over Sodom. Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?

Indeed. Can we trust him? Absolutely. And we therefore call on him. It's challenging to be foreigners.

[23 : 01] You know that as well as I. They say culture is the way we do things around here. Peter talks about things being handed down to us in verse 18.

Seems an odd phrase, but it is the way we inherit culture, isn't it? Here's how to live if you want to be one of us, says our culture. Now, Peter says, here's how to live if you want to be one of God's people.

God's foreign ministers in reverence and awe. Awe for the immense value that God has placed on us in Christ. Again, when we share bread and wine, bread broken, wine poured out, that's the value that God places on us.

And he calls us wherever we come to, wherever we find ourselves, with this foundation of his precious blood shed for us like a lamb to the slaughter, as he silently and willingly embraced what should have come to us.

We realize he was chosen before creation, revealed for our sake. So now, our faith and hope are in this God.

[24 : 17] The Lord, through Peter, calls us to model another kind of culture, separate, special, yet fully engaged with the world that we've grown up in and are called to live and work in.

This is what we get called to be involved in, what God's foreign ministers get to do. Think as we finish, where will you be tomorrow?

School? University? Bank? Office? Hospital? Medical center? Driving? Visiting? Administering?

Screen watching? Supporting? Listening? Our allegiance to Jesus does put us out of step with our culture. But remember, this is us.

We're in this together. So wherever you each go tomorrow, remember tonight. All these people are with you. All these people, I trust, are remembering you tomorrow.

[25 : 27] Upholding you. Seeking God's blessing and God's presence upon you. He gives us opportunities to ask questions about our society's choices and direction.

Is this a good way to live? How does this benefit people? And while our cultures think the Christian way is upside down and somehow all wrong, Peter shows us that we're the ones who see things the right way around.

And he's called us to showcase another way to live. A solid identity. A new community. A new purpose.

May God richly bless us as we embrace these things. As we become God's foreign ministers. Called to be holy.

Called to have reverent fear. called and chosen to be his witnesses in this world as we find it.

[26 : 37] Father, thank you for your word. Thank you for Peter's enthusiasm for his people. Thank you for his love for his people. Thank you that down the centuries we have joined in with those people.

and thank you for your calling to be holy and to be engaged. To be special to you and special to our world as we reveal who you are by how we live.

We pray for your strength and the equipping of your spirit. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.