

I Peter 1:1-2

A gentleman was in front of a preacher coming out of the church one day. The preacher grabbed him by the hand, pulled him aside and said to him, "You need to join the Army of the Lord!" The man replied, "I' m already in the Army of the Lord, Pastor." The Pastor questioned, "How come I don' t see you except at Christmas and Easter?" He whispered back, "I' m in the secret service. "

As I meditated on our passages, it reminded me of a training session in the Army. The instructor of the Army would order us to "spread out" and "come together!" "Spreading out" meant that we were to scatter ourselves all over the field, and then suddenly before we got done, he would shout "Come together!" "Coming together" meant we had to return to the very same place we started from, right by the instructor. These commands were repeated often during our training discipline. So even during the times we were spread out, we thought that we would soon be called to come together again. These two commands were totally different and led to opposite actions, but yet because we heard them so often, we had to keep alert. It was hard and difficult during this repetition of these commands. But in this training session with these commands, even though we were all scattered out, we had to stay alert and be ready to next command, "Come together" . In our minds, we were a unit and came together in the Army, even when we were on scattered areas or vacation. Today, we are acknowledging our veterans in our midst. Thank you for your work and effort for our country. There are pictures of those who have served in the armed services on display. I hope you enjoy looking at it. Thanks you, Sue for this work.

In today' s passage the Apostle Peter gives us some important spiritual word to wake up all early Christians who were living all over the world and were scattered away from each other. They were struggling with persecution at that time. Two words here are very important: strangers (pilgrims) and scattered. Peter was greeting the Christians who were strangers in the world and who were scattered all over the areas at that time. These two words challenged them not to forget their identity as children of God even though they lived and were scattered all over the world. As I read these two verses I recognized Peter' s voice as a commander in the Army. His message included the meaning that even though we live scattered away from each other in strange areas; we cannot forget that we are Christians, and children of God.

Because of persecutions and hardships, the early Christians were temporarily scattered all over. How could they live in this scattered situation? In this passage, the Apostle Peter urged them to remember that they were pilgrims as God's people. He focused on their identity. We recognize easily that we are Christians and children of God when we come together to worship and praise God in our Bible studies and fellowship. Today we know each other and recognize ourselves as Christians because we are together in worship. When we pray and hear the Word of God and worship, we do not forget that we are God's beloved children.

We are able to encourage one another as Christians. And we call others, "brothers and sisters" in Christ, using one's name. We all know that in this time of coming together that we are one, and brothers and sisters in Christ. This is very important in our faith life to realize who we are in this time of coming together. If we fail to meet together with other Christians, maybe after a few months we lose our faith, our Christian identity and could wander away in our faith journey. Gathering and coming together to worship, praise God and fellowship in Christ are very important in knowing who we are in our faith journey. This is very important for our spiritual balance in our faith life. "Gathered and scattered" must stay in balance.

Apostle Peter like a spiritual commander awoke the people who lived in the scattered areas and reminded their real Christian identity as pilgrims or sojourners. The life of scattering away without coming together makes us a hard time practicing our Christianity. Living as a vital Christian while "scattered" without losing this Christian identity is an important theme in this chapter.

We must be portable temples to the world around us. Many non-believers are looking at us as portable temples, because church is not a building but you and me. A new believer, especially a young person, looks at a mature Christian as an example or role model in the way they behave in the workplace or home, or wherever we are scattered away from the church. Maybe I'm OK when I'm wearing my gown and speak the holy Word of God. But how do I act when I'm away at home or in other places. Maybe my wife and kids will see my actions when I'm "scattered", and will see the "real me". There should be no gaps between when we are together or scattered. A good healthy heart and body are well balanced between the heart's pumping blood out and pumping blood in.

We are not perfect, but we must narrow the gap between our gathering times and scattering times.

So we accept this one verse from the Apostle Peter, as one command in both situations. Keep your faith and focus on the Lord Jesus Christ especially in the scattered places.

Therefore Apostle Peter urged them to remember who they were. So another message is in the word “stranger” or “sojourner”. There are many expressions, such as “alien”, “pilgrim”. The meaning of spiritual journey is to move towards our permanent home. What was the main reason the early Christians were strong in the face of persecutions and hardships in the scattered areas. They had a sense of being strangers in this world. Their identity was not deep rooted in this world. In Rome, early Christians lived in the catacombs. When they worshipped there, they saw corpses of other Christians who had been there before them in that secret place.

Catacombs were the place where they worshipped. Can you imagine that? They were worshipping underground in cemeteries.

As they witnessed their surroundings, their hope for eternal life was strengthened, and they received courage to witness Jesus Christ as their only hope. In this historical setting, Peter called them “sojourners” and aliens-strangers. This land is not the permanent place for our journey. We are strangers and pilgrims; we have to return back our permanent home. As they worshiped God at catacomb underground in cemeteries, they naturally learned the important Christian identity who they were as a strangers and pilgrims and where their permanent home was. Can we accept this unique Christian identity without hesitation?

An amazing example in nature is the salmon. After years living in the vast oceans, they find their original home, and leap over waterfalls and face dangers just to get back to where they started.

It is their journey to their original place. They are going with drive and energy to a goal, not just wandering. The Danish theologian, Kierkard had a favorite story. He wanted to implant the sense of all Christians to be “sojourners”, as the geese who fly south. He saw them begin in northern areas of Scandinavia and fly south to the Mediterranean on their long journey. They would stop briefly just for resting only at certain places. But some geese would eat too much and rest too much and when the flock took off on their journey, they couldn't fly with them, because they had already become used to living in that temporary place.

Apostle Peter is saying that we, as Christians, have our journey to a distant place.

We must not find our roots in this world, but remain “strangers” and “sojourners” . In this Christian life, we must connect with eternal being God, while we live in this world.

We had better equip ourselves well for living as a child of God at the time of our gathering, coming together, as well as at the time of our scattering at any place as a portable temple with a strong identity as a pilgrim, sojourners and strangers.

We have to continue to remind that our roots are connected with the eternal God and with clear Christian identity as strangers in the world as we come together in worship and scattered in the world. This is the powerful energy and resources to transform the world. The early Christian transformed Roman Empire. I listen to the voice of apostle Peter again

“ Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the father, by the sanctifying work of the spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure.”

Amen