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# On Being Special

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# On Being Special

Rich Little

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**B**ut you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession. That you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness and into his wonderful light" (1 Pet 2.9). Around the time I was baptized there were a lot of labels that were used for Christians. Most didn't resemble the labels we just heard in this text. Around that same time Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker were quite popular so soon after I was baptized some of my friends said, "Oh, you're one of those 'born agains'!" I didn't exactly know what that meant, but it was not said in the nicest of ways. And then someone else said, "You're one of those Bible bangers!"

I was quickly labeled and judged for my decision, being that I was raised in a country where 2 to 3 percent of the nation can be found in church on any given Sunday. Australia has one of the poorest church attendance rates of any Western country—even England has higher church attendance than Australia! So as an adolescent I was used to hearing labels such as these placed upon Christians. In some sense, I could identify with the audience of First Peter. They also saw themselves as outliers. They were marginal people. They were on the fringe. They were strange. In fact, they were targets. As we've talked about in this series, these people that Peter was writing to didn't see themselves as being part of the mainstream culture. They weren't central to the culture at all. They were an odd group of people. They'd go to the marketplace and they wouldn't get the same deal as the non-Christians. They were ostracized. They were verbally abused. They really did see themselves as outliers, as marginal. They were this fringe set, targets of abuse.

And then Peter comes along and uses a different set of labels for them. The first two words we find are similar to the exiling language of the ancient Hebrews. He says, "Yeah, you're aliens in exile, church. Don't be surprised that you are aliens in exile. But you are more than aliens in exile. In your alienation and your exile you find your chosen-ness, your priestly-ness, your identity as a holy nation and a special possession in the eyes of God."

And I've got to tell you if I'm a marginalized person, if I'm being a target of attacks, if I'm not getting the same deals in the market that everyone else is, and the apostle of God tells me that I am chosen and special, *that* is honey to my soul. That is music to my ears, because I now have an identity. I have something to claim that now makes me special. I might not feel special in the culture that surrounds me but I am special in the eyes of God.

## **Our Status Has Changed**

Today, however, nothing could be further from the truth for the people of God. See our picture doesn't look like their picture. The American church is not marginalized: we're not the outcasts, we're not the outliers, we're not the target zones. We're really not targets, are we? In America today the church is powerful; it's influential. We're the people who get presidents elected. We have control. We're prominent, we're dominant, we're central, and we're the largest and richest religion in America. And in America this Sunday morning some 30 to 35 percent of our nation will be found in churches. Our world could not be more different than the world of the church of First Peter.

Are we aliens in exile? Oh, no. Today we're quite comfortable, thank you very much. So even though we hear this alien language and this foreign language, we really don't feel like we're aliens and foreigners. We don't *not* want to be in America. So when we hear words like *chosen* and *royal priests* and *holy nation*, it doesn't have the same impact today that it did for them because we don't have the same circumstances they had. And in that sense those words can lose their power.

The church in America has fought hard not to feel like aliens, but to feel like owners of the country. Not to feel like strangers, but to feel like the most influential group in the land. We want to control the nation, control the government, control the land. The church in America is powerful, influential, rich, and central. We can elect presidents. We're the largest religion and have the highest church attendance in any Western country. America is generally friendly toward the church. God's on our coins and in our national anthem. We think that court decisions and business practices are examples of persecution on the church. Please. The reason we think this is because we've thought about our greatness not in spiritual ways but in earthly ways; we see our power not in spiritual terms but in worldly terms. Peter says, "Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God." And we swell our chests and look around at our country and the power we have amassed and the presidents we have helped elect and the wealth and power of the church in American and we say yes, we are the people of God. Look at us. And then we must defend and protect all of it, as though our identity as the people of God comes from the pride we take in the influence of the church in America and the visibility of the church's power and influence over the country.

### **Words of National Power?**

We read Peter's words as words of national power: "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession" (1 Pet 2.9). And because this has happened, Peter's beautiful words to the church—words intended to shape the identity of a people who don't feel at home in the world—fall on deaf ears . . . because we do feel at home in the world, very much at home. The notion of a chosen people sounds good when you don't have status in the land. But if the church spends its time fighting for status in the country and thinks it's special because the country supports the church, then we will suffer a demise unmatched by the church in any other time in our history.

The more special the church feels in a country, the less it will feel special in Christ. But the irony is that Christianity is declining in America today. Why? One of the reasons is because we've spent so much more time trying for America to be a holy nation than being the people of God. We've wanted chosen status in the land, but cared little about what it means to be chosen by God. We've seen ourselves as the priests of America and not priests of the kingdom. We've wanted to feel like a special possession in the land and cared little about what it means to be God's special possession in our relationship with him. And we've thought it was our purpose to spread a "wonderful light" throughout our country, in our courts, in our congress, in our schools, and in our cities—but we've ignored the wonderful light of the kingdom, more powerful than any light could ever reflect in this world. We've fought so hard not to be aliens and strangers that we've missed God's purposes for us found in being aliens and strangers.

### **A Major Problem**

We have a major problem. Because we don't feel like aliens and strangers, because we have a protected—even elevated—status, we have found ourselves with the time, freedom, and luxury of debating silly doctrines that have split the church into thousands of fractured bodies, further testifying to the dysfunction of our relationship with the nation. This seldom happens when we see ourselves as aliens and foreigners with the singular purpose of representing God's love and grace to the world. We are God's special possession, not the nations'; we are priests in the kingdom, not the courts; *we* are a holy nation, America isn't; and we are to be cherished and loved as vessels of God's grace for one another and for the people in our land. When we love and serve as chosen chalices, priests, and special possessions of God's, then we don't live reactively to what the land does as if we own it. We live proactively as God's people for love and grace in a world that thinks the nation and the country are all there is.

## Really Chosen

*You are a chosen people.* As a child I had an awful experience on being unchosen. It was rugby season at my school. Two boys designated as team leaders were invited to stand up and select from the rest of the boys to build up their teams. At the end, it got down to one young man still sitting on the grass. Me. And both of the leaders looked at each other and said, “Who’s going to take him?” Thankfully my friend (the one whose choice it was) chose to pick me to be on his team instead of forcing me on the other team. Yes, I know—as you may not—just what it’s like to truly be chosen.

And Peter says to this alien people and he says to a people who are very comfortable in the land: “You are a chosen people.” You’re the first choice, not the last choice. You are not an afterthought or an after-choice. You are a chosen people. And this isn’t a new novel thought for Peter; it is an ancient thought that comes from Deuteronomy 7.6 where the people are being prepared to go into the land. “For you are a people, holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be His people, His treasured possessions. The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were the most popular people in the land.” Sound familiar? “For you are the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you” (Deut 7.6).

We are chosen by virtue of God’s love. The church is being chosen by God to receive his love and grace. It is in the church that we find the perfect expression of love and grace. Being chosen here has little to do with salvation and everything to do with being able to receive perfectly the love and grace of God that cannot be found apart from Christ. It is not being loved by the world; it is not being a movement that is loved by America or central to whom we are. It is not clamoring for recognition or attention or power in the country. We are not chosen so we can control nations. We are not chosen so we can rule countries with our power and influence. It is resting perfectly and completely in knowing we are the true beloved of God in the world. And if we find our security and full identity in that, then we find our “chosen-ness” that satisfies our soul and gives us our purpose. We are chosen not just to receive the love and grace of God but we are chosen for the same purpose: to share that love and grace of God with the world. *That* is our identity and our purpose.

See, we really have no idea how much we are loved by God. If we did, we would worry less about being loved by a nation. Peter continues, “You are a royal priesthood.” This sounds nice if the priesthood isn’t the most central order in the land. I went to a Catholic school as you know and I was raised around priests. The priests taught me religious instruction. I went to RI everyday. I learned the catechism. I learned the difference between Vatican I and Vatican II. I prayed the Rosary, the Our Father, and the Glory Be.

And when the priests were not looking, my mates and I would go into the vestry and we’d put on the priest’s vestments for an hour so we could feel what it was like to be a priest—eleven-year-old boys tripping over the bottom of those vestments, with the crucifix and clerical collars around their necks, hoping not to be busted by the priests. And we loved it because it gave us a sense an identity; it gave us a sense of purpose. Our identity as priests gives us access to God as mediators and ministers on God’s behalf.

See, God has charged us with the role of priests in the kingdom, not national priests controlling a nation. We are people through whom others can find God. People are never expected to find God through a country. But when we find our identity first as priests for a nation, or when we think we are special because of our prominence in America, than we abdicate our priesthood. Our true priesthood is found in the kingdom of God. And priests are ministers on God’s behalf. This is an active component. It is not just a visible representation of God’s love. Not nation-building work or legal maneuvering or cultural wars or political efforts. The church is being sidelined by these efforts. Our work is to see a different calling. Quite simply to be vessels of God’s grace and love as priests inside the church and outside the church. That will serve our nation and the world in the way God intended. That will help us realize that we really are aliens and exiles in this land because of the purpose to which God has called us.

And then Peter goes on. He does not take his foot off the gas; he pushes it down further. Oh, you are not just a chosen people, a royal priesthood, but you are a “holy nation.” Now when I often think about the words *holy nation*, this image comes to my mind: the Bible and flag—which by the way was never, ever intended to go together.

One of the reasons why I love Churches of Christ is that you will never see a flag in our auditoriums. Just the opposite; our church identity is attached to Christ, not a country. That sounds good to a nationless group of wanderers in the first century. That sounds threatening and unpatriotic to a group of Christians who have taken their identity from the land. Patriotism has become a stronger force than our allegiance to Jesus. Our sense of fellowship across the kingdom, across borders and cultures, should be far stronger than our feelings of patriotism. When our patriotism evokes stronger emotions than our fellowship with believers, there is a massive problem. Again we have not understood how much we are loved. We have wanted to be loved and regarded by the land and not by God. When the church really understands how chosen she is, how special she is, and the role that she has as priests, we will relinquish our patriotism to country for patriotism to a greater nation, an eternal nation, a home that is far superior to the one we currently occupy—because we are a *hagios* nation, a holy, set-apart, separate nation.

### God's Special Possession

And then Peter concludes this great verse by saying “you are God's special possession.” “Superior to anything else God possesses” is another way of saying that. What does God possess? Everything! And you are the superior possession of God, **the** special possession. You are special in his care and his regard. And if the church in America is ever to have an influence in this land, it will not be through the courts or through our power or through our control. It will be in the embracing of our specialness in the heart of God because this nation, and the people that occupy it, want nothing more than to feel special. It's the greatest human longing. The greatest deficit most people in this nation feel, the greatest deficit you and I feel if we're being honest, is a lack of human connection, a lack of human longing. And our nation clamors for it in all the wrong ways. What if, as royal priests, we remind the people of this land and the people of this church of just how special they are in their relationship with the creator of the universe? If we stress less about power control and focus a whole lot more on love and grace and service?

I kept my very first Bible in the cardboard box it came in. I walked around with it in its box. I went to youth group one day and the youth group made fun of me because I kept my NASV, which was the only acceptable version in my church, in that cardboard box. You know, the box with the little plastic cover that made a suction sound when you pulled the top of the box off. The Bible had gold leaf around the outside and came with a special pencil I could use that could be erased afterwards. See, that Bible was my special possession until I was made fun of and then I tossed the box away—but that's when I started to really use the Bible. We are God's special possession. And our specialness doesn't just come in the label we wear or in the box we find ourselves. Our specialness is found in our use by God. We are special people.

### Conclusion

Church, I'm convinced today that the church in America may think it's living in the wonderful light when it's actually walking in darkness, because we've defined the light by prominence, power, control, wealth, and notoriety. It's just not the way God defines light. Until this church, until our church and the American church reclaim our role as being God's special possession, his chosen people, his royal priesthood, his holy nation, we'll never be satisfied because that satisfaction will never come from our control of power in the land—but only by the grace and the glory that we find in being God's special possession. So it's appropriate that in the celebration of Peter's great thought that we sing aloud about God's grace and the God of glory who has called us to be a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession—not for power and prominence, but for service and love in the world in which we live.

Let's stand and sing “God of Grace and God of Glory” together.

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