

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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1 Peter

First Peter has the single focus of encouraging Christians to exhibit faithfulness under the pressure arising from persecution. The believers to whom Peter wrote were in the midst of such “fiery trials.” The culture in which they lived scorned their faith, criticized their morality, and mocked their hope. Peter calls on readers to respond to this pressure with a renewed commitment to live out the grace of God, both to please God and to bear witness to him.

Setting

Many people in the ancient world regarded Christians as strange, superstitious, and disloyal to Roman society. Christians gathered in secret, practiced strange rituals (such as the Lord's Supper, widely misunderstood as involving bloody sacrifice), and exhibited a countercultural lifestyle. They often refused to serve in the Roman army because they would not swear an oath to the emperor. Because of their refusal to go along with the prevailing culture, Christians were often discriminated against, accused of misbehavior, and brought into court on trumped-up charges.

This is the situation that 1 Peter addresses. Believers were undergoing very difficult trials ([1:6](#); [4:12](#)), and other groups were saying evil things about them ([4:4](#); see [3:16](#)). The followers of Christ were tempted to retaliate in kind and repay harsh words with harsh words. They were also tempted to compromise their godly lifestyle because of the grief it caused them.

Peter was well aware of these temptations, so his letter encourages believers to view the accusations and unfair treatment as an opportunity to bear witness to Jesus Christ. By following the example of their own Lord, who lived an exemplary life before all and refused to revile those who reviled him, Christians can practice a lifestyle of true evangelism.

Summary

After a typical opening for a letter ([1:1-2](#)), Peter exhorts his readers in the first section ([1:3-2:12](#)) to regard their present, temporary suffering as a strengthening of their faith and as preparation for them to receive salvation ([1:3-9](#)). This salvation is so great that prophets predicted it and angels investigate it ([1:10-12](#)). This gift of salvation should result in a life of holiness that recognizes the cost at which God purchased our salvation ([1:13-21](#)). The first section concludes with a call for love and patience toward fellow Christians ([1:22-2:3](#)) and a reminder of our status as the new covenant people of God ([2:4-12](#)).

The second part of the letter ([2:13-3:12](#)) exhorts Christians to live under the recognized authorities as a witness to a hostile world. Christians are to accept the authority of government ([2:13-17](#)), Christian slaves are to accept the authority of their masters ([2:18-25](#)), and Christian wives are to accept the authority of their husbands ([3:1-6](#)). Husbands, meanwhile, are to honor their wives ([3:7](#)). This section ends with general exhortations to behavior that God rewards ([3:8-12](#)).

The third section ([3:13-4:11](#)) begins with a challenge to respond to social pressures with honorable and respectful behavior, even when it results in abuse ([3:13-17](#)). Peter reminds his readers that the hope of redemption is secure because of Christ's life, death, resurrection, and ascension ([3:18-22](#)). Peter renews his call to abandon the ways and values of the world ([4:1-6](#)) and concludes with various exhortations ([4:7-11](#)).

The fourth section of the letter ([4:12-5:11](#)) opens with a final call to stand firm in the midst of suffering ([4:12-19](#)). Peter then concludes with a charge to elders ([5:1-4](#)), younger men ([5:5](#)), and the church at large ([5:5-11](#)). The letter ends with customary greetings ([5:12-14](#)).

Author and Recipients

The opening verse of the letter identifies the author as the apostle Peter and the recipients as “God’s chosen people” living in “the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.” These Roman provinces occupied the northern portion of Asia Minor, the peninsula that today forms most of Turkey. We have no record of Peter’s visiting this area, nor does the letter indicate such a visit. In fact, we have little information about Peter’s movements and activities after his initial days of ministry in Jerusalem and Judea ([Acts 1:1–12:25](#)). Luke tells us that after being miraculously rescued from prison, Peter “went to another place” ([Acts 12:17](#)). Speculations abound, but we simply don’t know where he went. Peter was back for the council in Jerusalem ([Acts 15:1–41](#); AD 49~50) and apparently spent some time ministering in Corinth (see [1 Cor 1:12; 9:5](#)). He was also in Antioch at some point ([Gal 2:11–16](#)). Christian tradition places Peter in Rome at the end of his life, where he suffered a martyr’s death at the hands of the emperor Nero (probably AD 64 or 65).

Place and Date of Writing

The apostle was evidently in Rome when he wrote this letter. "Your sister church here in Babylon" ([5:13](#)) is almost certainly a reference to the church in Rome. The ancient city of Babylon, well-known from later Old Testament books, was small and insignificant in Peter's day (the first century AD), and it would be surprising if Peter had ever traveled so far east. But because the ancient city of Babylon had been so dominant in the 600s–500s BC, the name came to symbolize the center of world power and cultural influence. The book of Revelation thus uses Babylon as a code word for Rome (see [Rev 17:5](#)), and Peter was probably doing the same. If Peter wrote this letter from Rome, then it was probably written toward the end of his life. This supposition is confirmed by the presence of Mark with Peter (see [1 Pet 5:13](#)). Christian tradition places Mark in Rome with Peter in the late 50s and early 60s AD. We can surmise, then, that Peter wrote this letter from Rome in the early 60s AD.

Occasion of Writing

Peter's letter was motivated by the severe trials that the Christians in northern Asia Minor were experiencing. Attempts have sometimes been made to identify the situation and date of 1 Peter by connecting the letter to a known official persecution. The letter, however, does not suggest that the Christians were being subjected to an official, state-sponsored program of persecution. Most often, pressures came from the general populace, sometimes aided and abetted by local officials.

Meaning and Message

First Peter encourages Christians to maintain a life of holiness in the midst of the pressures created by the non-Christian, and often anti-Christian, atmosphere in which they live. Peter pursues three key ideas. First, believers must understand that we have experienced the salvation that God promised through his prophets and which the angels are “eagerly watching” ([1:12](#); see [1:5](#)–[10](#)). We are God’s own children ([1:14](#)), born again through God’s powerful word ([1:23](#)). We are the stones that God is using to construct a new, spiritual temple ([2:5](#)) and a chosen people called out of darkness into light ([2:9](#)–[10](#)). Because we enjoy all these privileges, we have become foreigners and aliens in this world ([1:1](#), [17](#); [2:12](#)). Christians live in the world but do not belong to the world.

The second key idea is that Christians, who are God’s people, need to pursue a lifestyle that embodies the values of heaven, not the values of this world. As God’s children, Christians need to imitate their Father and become holy, as he is holy ([1:15](#)–[16](#)). We need to love each other ([1:22](#)) and have respect for authorities. Peter sums all this up in his call to “do good,” even and especially to those who abuse and cause difficulty ([3:16](#)–[17](#); [4:19](#)).

The third key idea is that believers have become a holy people because of Christ. Jesus’ death and resurrection provide the foundation for our new identity ([1:18](#)–[19](#); [3:18](#)), and his victory over evil powers gives us hope and confidence ([1:3](#)–[9](#); [3:19](#)–[22](#)). Christ provided for our salvation and our holiness and has also given us an example to imitate. Christ did not retaliate when he was criticized, persecuted, and even executed ([2:21](#)–[25](#)). We are to follow in his footsteps, refuse to retaliate, and use our trials as an occasion to testify about the grace and power of God.