

# **A LOOK AT A BOOK: 1 Peter**

## **October 21, 2012**

### **Peter's World**

Those for whom Peter intended this letter were “scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia” (1:1), regions that comprised the Roman provinces of northwestern Asia Minor (modern Turkey). It has been suggested that the order of the provinces reflects the order in which the letter would have traveled and been read (beginning in the northern region, traveling southerly to Galatia and Cappadocia, and then returning back to Bithynia through the province of Asia).

Though they came from a Gentile background, Peter addresses his readers as if they were Israel. That is, they have in some sense taken the place of Israel as the people of God and are now the new and true Israel. From the beginning of the letter to the end Peter describes the church with terms that have been used in defining Israel. They are the “elect” and “scattered” ones (1:1) and a “holy priesthood” (2:5). Most prominent here is 2:9-10: “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God....Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” This is the language of fulfillment and replacement. In general, we can safely conclude that the audience of Peter was comprised of Gentile converts to Christianity who had probably been proselytes to Judaism or at least God-fearers.

### **Authorship and Date**

Writing sometime in the early 60s, Peter, through his letter-carrier (or fellow author) Silas, encourages a series of small churches throughout northwestern Asia Minor by asserting their particular Christian identity (the family of God), by exhorting them to love one another, and by explaining to them the apparent inevitable tension that being a Christian will generate in a society that does not look tolerably on religious innovations.

### **Peter's Message**

The essential message of Peter can be categorized into three separate features: (1) salvation, (2) church, and (3) the Christian life.

*Salvation.* Peter uses a host of words to describe what has happened to those who enter the family of God. They have been sprinkled with blood (1:2); they have been ransomed (1:18-19), they have been purified (1:22), they have tasted God (2:3), they have been healed (2:24), and they have been presented before God (3:18). He draws

on family imagery when he speaks of their new birth (1:3, 23; 2:2, 24; 3:7, 18), their inheritance (1:4-5), and their blessing (3:9). The two terms used most frequently are “salvation” (1:5, 9, 10; 2:2; 3:20-21; 4:18) and “grace” (1:10, 13; 3:7; 5:5, 10, 12).

*Church.* As mentioned, the church (a term Peter does not use) displaces/replaces Israel in the favor of God as the new, true people of God. Peter sees the church as a family of God. God is the Father (1:2, 3, 17), who gives birth (1:3) to the new children of God (1:14; 2:2), who in turn form a brotherhood (2:17; 5:9) that practices brotherly love (1:22; 3:8).

*Christian Life.* Grounded in the salvation that the believers find in Christ through their new birth (1:3), the Christian life is an inevitable manifestation of that salvation. The exhortations in 1 Peter are rooted in this experience. Thus, after detailing salvation and its privileges (1:3-12), Peter exhorts his readers to practice hope (1:13), holiness (1:14-16), fear before God (1:17-21), love (1:22-24), and growth (2:1-8). The key word at 1:13 is “therefore”: because of salvation, *therefore* pursue these Christian virtues. For Peter, ethics apart from a grounding in salvation is of no concern because a moral life forms the reverse side of salvation. In the words of Wolfgang Schrage, “Without new birth, there is no new obedience. Without hope, there is no basis for Christian life.”

### **1 Peter 1:1-2**

Peter’s salutation is one of the richest greetings to open a letter in the New Testament. It contains pastoral warmth and theological sweep. While Paul’s greetings are frequently tinged with a necessity to defend himself, Peter’s apostolic status is not under question, leaving his title a simple, humble claim to authority (cf. 1 Peter 1:1; 5:1).

Peter expands the addressees to include a threefold breakdown: the believers in Asia Minor who are who they are (1) “according to the foreknowledge of God the Father,” (2) “through the sanctifying work of the Spirit,” (3) “for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood.” Each is connected to a different member of the Trinity.

*The sender: Peter.* We do know that he was a fisherman on the northern shore of Galilee, he was called by Jesus to follow him (cf. Luke 5:1-11; John 1:35-42), he became the leader of the apostolic band (Matthew 10:2), he was the first to perceive Jesus as the Messiah (Matthew 16:17-19; Mark 8:27-33), he tried to walk on water (Matthew 14:28-31), he denied Jesus (Luke 22:21-23, 31-34, 54-71), he was restored (John 21:15-19), he was a primary leader of the new church formed at Pentecost (Acts 2-5), he received a magnificent vision about the unity of God’s people (Acts 10-11), he was miraculously released from prison (Acts 12:1-17), and he continued to

have a ministry as far as Rome (cf. Acts 12:18-19; 15; Galatians 2:7-8; 1 Corinthians 1:12; 9:5; 1 Peter; 2 Peter). We know that Peter's ministry in Rome was so extensive that Roman Catholics see the foundation of their church in his ministry there.

Perhaps more important for the interpretation of our letter, we can discern in Peter an "about-face" over the question of Jesus' death: from outright rejection (Matthew 16:22) and denial (Luke 22:54-71), to restoration (John 21), to preaching the death and vindication of Jesus (Acts 2), to finding in the death of Jesus the ultimate paradigm of Christian existence (1 Peter 2:18-25). His original name was "Simon" and only through a special calling by Jesus was it changed to "Cephas" (or "Peter"). His name change included Jesus' prediction of his role in the development of the early church: Simon would be a "foundation," a "rock" (*petros*), upon which the church would be built. In light of this, Peter developed the metaphor of Christians as "living stones" (2:4-8).

*The addressees.* To be "elect" means to receive God's grace; this benefit is the result of God's initiative, not ours.

*The meaning of "aliens and strangers."* This term "strangers" can refer either metaphorically to their temporary residence on earth as they await final salvation (NIV) – the so-called pilgrimage theme – or literally to the social location in their communities.

Peter exhorts his readers in six areas, each of which is grounded in a reflection about salvation. (1) He exhorts them to hope (1:13). (2) He exhorts them to holiness (1:14-16). (3) He exhorts them to fear God (1:17-21). (4) He exhorts them to love one another (1:22-25). (5) He exhorts them to desire the word (2:1-3). And, (6) he exhorts them to build a spiritual house (2:4-5)

### **First exhortation: hope (1:13)**

Living for the future is fundamental for Peter. Even if believers have begun to share in the salvation of God (1:9), that salvation is presented as only complete in the future (1:5). There will be a penetrating evaluation by God (1:7, 9, 17; 2:12, 23; 3:12; 4:5-6, 17-19) when Jesus is fully revealed (1:7, 13; 4:13). After the judgment, the faithful followers of Jesus will share his glory (5:1, 4) and receive the full compensation of grace (1:17; 4:13, 14). If they think fellowship in the family of God and tasting of Jesus are good now (2:3), they need to think even more about the future when better things await them.

### **Second exhortation: holiness (1:14-16)**

The exhortation to holiness begins with a negative statement (“do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance”) that is subordinate to a positive one that follows (“just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do.”) God, who is different and unlike anything the Israelites had ever seen or would see, is altogether holy (Exodus 3:5; 15:11; Leviticus 20:26; Psalm 99; Hosea 11:9; cf. Luke 4:34; John 6:69; Revelation 1:16-17). Because he had drawn Israel into a special relationship with himself, he expected his people to reflect his nature, including his holiness (Exodus 19:6; Colossians 1:2).

### **Third exhortation: fear of God (1:17-21)**

Peter says that if believers call as Father the one who judges indiscriminately, penetratingly, and absolutely honestly, then they had better live in fear of this God, for he is altogether holy and will judge justly. The God of the Bible is the Judge of all (cf. Genesis 18:25; Psalm 75:7; Acts 5:1-10; Hebrews 12:23; Revelation), and, as Peter says, he is “ready to judge the living and the dead” (1 Peter 4:5) with a judgment that begins “with the family of God” (4:17). This judgment is according to their works, because these works are the logical result of one’s relationship to God (Matthew 16:27; 25:31-46; Romans 2:6-11; 14:9-12; 1 Corinthians 3:10-15; 2 Corinthians 5:10).

The former life of Peter’s addressees was an “empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers.” What had been considered venerable tradition was now considered “empty” (cf. Jeremiah 10:15; Acts 14:15; Romans 1:21; 8:20; 1 Corinthians 3:20; Ephesians 4:17); thus, a new tradition, one rooted in Jesus and the apostolic testimony, was needed. From this former life believers have been redeemed, that is, purchased with a price – the blood of Jesus Christ. The plight of humans is moral offense (Romans 1:18-3:20; Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1;14), sinfulness, and bondage to that vicious condition (Romans 7:1-6; Galatians 3:13; 4:5; Titus 2:14; 1 Peter 1:18); the price paid is the atoning death of God’s Son (Mark 10:45; Romans 3:21-26; 5:1-11; Galatians 3:13; 4:4-5; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Titus 2:14).

### **Fourth exhortation: love one another (1:22-25)**

Peter’s fourth exhortation is again rooted in the “before and after” of conversion: Since you have been purified, love one another, because you have been born again. Almost redundantly, Peter exhorts his addressees to “love one another deeply, from the heart” (1:22). The word “deeply” (found also at 4:8) speaks of the effort required for that love, the depth of it for one another, and the duration of it (until the end). The word is frequently associated with characteristics of prayer: fervency, constancy, and effort (cf. Luke 22:44; Acts 12:5). Peter expects his churches to be filled with people who love one another in that way, who try to understand one another, who give the other person the benefit of the doubt, and who reach out to others in the same love.

**Fifth exhortation: desire the word (2:1-3)**

“Therefore,” Peter says – that is, because his readers have been born again through the word of the living God (1:23) – they must “crave pure spiritual milk” (2:2). When a church yearns for spiritual nourishment, that church will not be involved in bitter disputes with hypocritical showings or deceitful communications.

**Sixth exhortation: build a spiritual house (2:4-5)**

The churches in Asia Minor must see themselves as “living stones,” connected to the “living Stone” (2:4), and they must unify themselves (1:22-2:3) so that they may become a spiritual house. Peter states that the church is a “spiritual house,” that is, the temple of God. Presumably, he sees this temple as the replacement of the old temple as the dwelling place of God.

**Aliens Both Transient and Resident (2:11-12)**

Unless the Christians move into a lonely desert or a high-walled compound, life has to continue for them at the same address. This means matters of employment, entertainment, education of children, dress, food, recreation, and political responsibility must be addressed. Basic to all that follows, says the writer, is your status as “aliens and exiles.” The two words have appeared earlier, in 1:1 and 1:17. The place to begin, says verse 11, is with one’s own integrity.

**1 Peter 3:13-22**

Peter begins the first section with an exhortation to be good, based on the pragmatic concern that such behavior will be less likely to bring persecution (3:13). This, in turn, leads into a discussion on the possible problem: suffering in spite of doing good (3:14).

*The Possible Problem (3:14).* As Jesus taught, those who suffer because of doing what is right will be blessed by God (Matthew 5:10). Peter’s exhortation to his readers, when they do have to endure suffering, is not to fear the oppressors.

*The Need for Preparation (3:15-16).* Christians are expected to be prepared to speak at any moment about God’s salvation of his people through Jesus Christ and how that salvation will manifest itself at the end of history.

*The Perfect Way (3:17).* If God wills that they are to suffer, it is better that such takes place when the Christians are doing good rather than evil.

*A Digression on the Example of Jesus (3:18-22).* Between the statement of Jesus' suffering and his vindication Peter brings up some kind of preaching of Jesus to spirits (3:19). These spirits are then subjected to further scrutiny as Peter identifies them with the spirits who were alive at the time of Noah, which in turn gives rise to a Petrine comparison of the delivery of God's people during the Flood (through the ark) with the delivery of contemporary Christians through baptism (3:20-21). All of this is tied off with a conclusion about the vindication of Jesus. Even though Jesus suffered (3:18), he was ultimately vindicated by God (3:22). The discussion becomes highly complex and controversial. It has led to three main views: (1) the descent-into-hell view, (2) the preexistent Christ view, and (3) the triumphal proclamation over the spirit-world view.

### **1 Peter 4:12-19**

Peter begins by exhorting his churches not to be surprised at the sufferings they are experiencing (4:12); instead, he contends in a counterproposal, they are to rejoice in their sufferings because it is participation in both the sufferings and glory of Christ (4:13).

*Counterproposal (4:13).* Instead of being shocked by these events and turning inward to wonder and doubt, Peter's readers are to "rejoice." Their lives will be tied into the patterns of Jesus' life (2:18-25; 3:15, 16; 4:1; cf. Mark 8:34-38). Though they may now be somewhat surprised at the intensity of the heat they have stirred up by following Jesus, that very heat is an opportunity to "participate in the sufferings of Christ." As Paul taught his own sufferings completed the sufferings of Jesus (Colossians 1:24), so Peter sees the sufferings of ordinary believers as a special bond with their Lord.

*Condition (4:14-16).* Having lifted his readers' spirits, Peter now reminds them of one important condition for enjoying that final, inexhaustible glory: They must remain faithful in doing good and not incur suffering because they deserve it.

*Foundation (4:17-19).* The Christians of Asia Minor are to rejoice because they are participating in the sufferings of Jesus; they are also to make sure that, if they do suffer, it is because they are doing good. Peter now gives the foundation for both exhortations: They will someday have to answer to God for their behavior. He begins with the statement: "For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God" (4:17a). Judgment is an important motif in 1 Peter and, as observed at 4:7, serves as the foundation for motivating early Christians to live faithfully before God (cf. 1:17; 2:23; 4:5). A similar threat of a judgment of all is found throughout the New Testament (cf. Matthew 25:31-46; 1 Corinthians 11:28; 2 Corinthians 5:10),

and it is clear that the early church saw persecution as the first stage of the coming judgment (cf. Philippians 2:28-30; 1 Thessalonians 3:3-4; 2 Thessalonians 1:4; Revelation). The persecution these Christians are experiencing is the act of God whereby he purges his people to prepare them for his final display of salvation, insofar as he makes them fit for that judgment through suffering. Peter then asks rhetorically: “If it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?” (4:17b).

(1) Christians ought not to be surprised if they suffer shame and loss of status because of their faith (4:12). Instead, they ought to know that in the history of Israel and of the church, God’s people have always been opposed by the Prince of Darkness, by the flesh, and by people who refuse to submit to God’s will.

(2) Suffering shame for Jesus should be understood as a test to prepare us for God’s final judgment (4:12).

(3) Christians ought to welcome the opportunity to share in the sufferings of Christ (4:13). When we realize that losing status puts us right into the company of Jesus, we should be able to cope much more easily with suffering.

(4) Christians ought to be able to transcend their present pain by reflecting on the transcendent glory that awaits God’s people (4:13; cf. 1:3-9).

## **A SUMMARY OUTLINE OF 1 PETER**

Theme: the salvation and conduct of suffering Christians

Introduction: greeting (1:1, 2)

- I. Praise for the heavenly inheritance of persecuted Christians (1:3-12)
- II. Exhortation to personal holiness (1:31-21)
- III. Exhortation to mutual love (1:22-25)
- IV. Exhortation to advancement within salvation (2:1-10)
- V. Exhortation to Christian conduct in non-Christian society (2:11-4:19)
  - A. Good deeds (2:11, 12)
  - B. Good citizenship (2:13-17)
  - C. Submission of slaves, with the example of Christ (2:18-25)
  - D. Submission of wives (3:1-6)
  - E. Consideration of husbands (3:7)
  - F. Sympathetic and loving unity (3:8-12)
  - G. Innocent suffering, with the example of Christ and His vindication in hell (3:13-4:6)

H. Joyful suffering (4:12-19)

VI. Exhortation to humility within the church and resistance to persecution  
(5:1-11)

Conclusion: Silvanus's function as amanuensis or carrier or both; greetings; and  
benediction (5:12-14)