



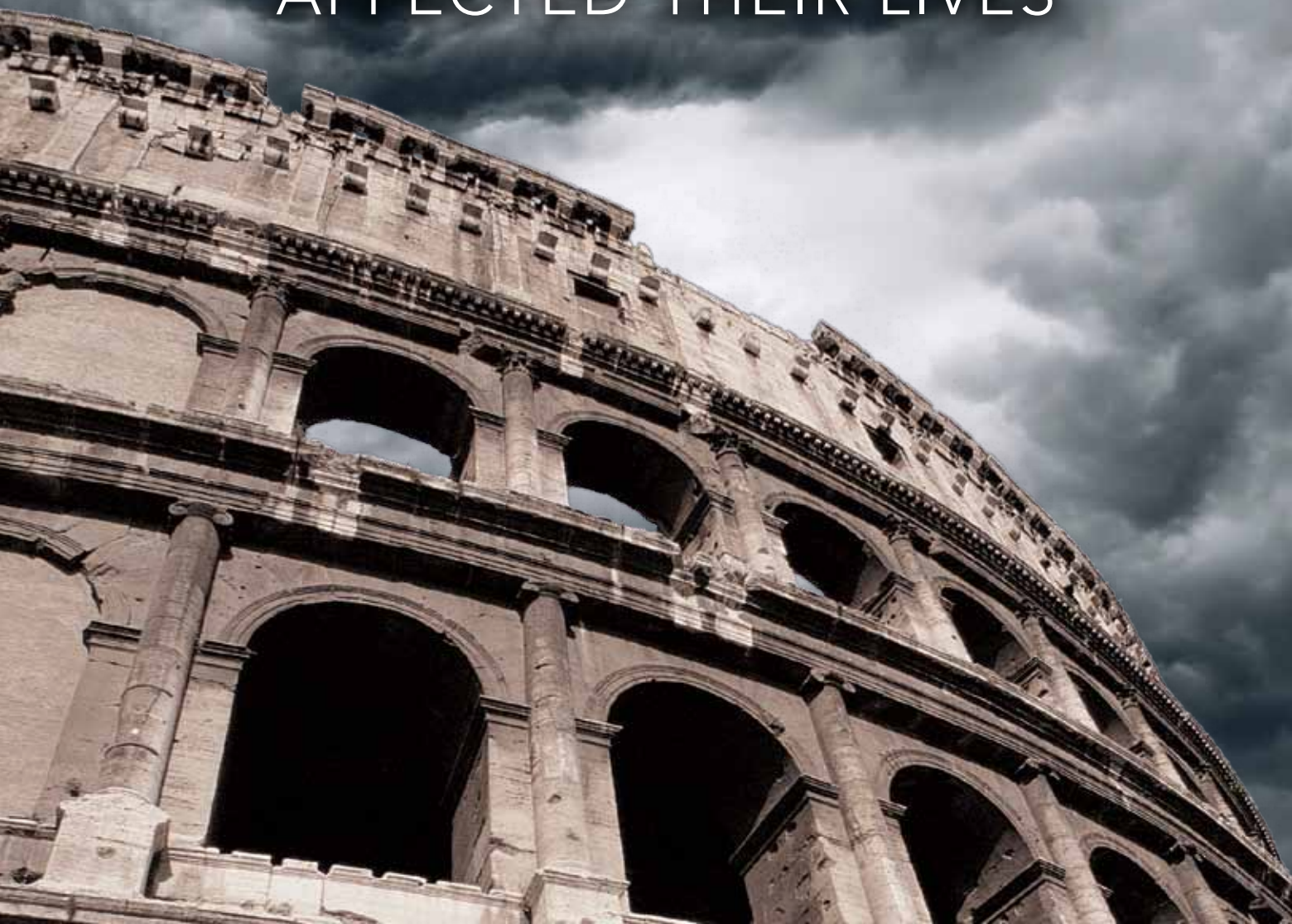
BSFL: 1 Peter 1:1-12

GENTILE BELIEVERS

HOW

CONVERSION

AFFECTED THEIR LIVES



BY MARK R. DUNN

THE ALMIGHTY GOD accepts Gentile believers.” This astounding message swept through villages, towns, cities, and metropolises like wild fire as the gospel radiated outward from Jerusalem. The Book of Acts repeatedly claims that Gentiles were attracted en masse to the Christian message and flocked into the first churches. Although the Jewish Christian “old guard” had centuries of religious customs, traditions, and beliefs, and although they had only been in “the Way”¹ a handful of years, they still glorified God when they saw Gentiles coming to Jesus. Hearing Peter’s report of such, they exclaimed, “So God has granted repentance resulting in life to even the Gentiles!” (Acts 11:18)²

A Light to the Gentiles

That Gentiles could come to faith was an astounding realization for these spiritually-seasoned Jewish believers who were familiar with God’s ways. They understood the signs of God’s movement. They saw God campaigning for Gentile hearts—just as He had campaigned for Jewish hearts. Now the light dawned that their holy God was powerfully guiding Gentile hearts to repentance.

An onlooker might assume the Christian message was but the latest fad among the religiously ignorant and over-saturated Gentiles. This, though, was far from being a fad. When the

Left: The Roman Colosseum (also known as the Flavian Amphitheater).

Right: This outcropping of rock at the foot of the Acropolis is Mars Hill where Paul addressed the men of Athens, telling them the

message of Christ.

Upper right: Sestertius; obverse; Nero facing left (ruled A.D. 54-68); minted in Rome. After the great fire in Rome in A.D. 64, Nero placed blame on Christians and began persecuting them.

Gentile Christians suffered for their faith by enduring insults, abuse, rejection, economic distress, the loss of personal property, and the ability to practice their trades.

true God offered the Gentiles spiritual nourishment, they realized they were famished.

Paul’s speech in Athens provides an example of the message the Gentiles received: “Having overlooked the times of ignorance, God now commands all people everywhere to repent, because He has set a day when He is going to judge the world in righteousness by the Man He has appointed. He has provided proof of this to everyone by raising Him from the dead” (Acts 17:30-31). This was not a “dumbed-down” gospel for the bottom-dwellers of civilization. In one breath, Paul delivered the message with all the elements the Jews had received: repentance, grace, divine confrontation, judgment, righteousness, the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,

and resurrection.

For their part, the Gentiles did not hear a message of inescapable judgment, but one of grace from the compassionate God of the universe who called all people to know Him and experience eternity with Him. One author has observed, “The people initially impacted by that message generally concluded that they would be fools to disregard it.”³ The Gentiles’ enthusiastic response to God’s offer to establish personal relations with them was so welcome that Gentile Christians gladly practiced Christ’s teachings. In fact, Gentile enthusiasm for Christ earned believers the name “Christian.”⁴

God’s pursuit of Gentile hearts



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still astounds. They were distant from God, living lives that repulsed Him, often happily uninterested in spiritual truth, and barely tolerant of the minimal religious requirements society pressed upon them. Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit worked in the Gentiles as they heard spiritual truths. God's light shined in the most spiritually remote and hostile locales of humanity, and myriads of Gentiles gladly exchanged their old lives for new lives in Christ. So the question arises: how did Christian conversion affect their lives? Simon Peter, in his first epistle, which went to regions predominantly populated by Gentiles (1 Peter 1:1), offered valuable insight into the effects Christian conversion had on Gentiles in the first century.

A Transformative Conversion

Without doubt, the greatest impact of Christian conversion on Gentiles was their transformed lives. These Gentile believers once participated in a "flood of wild living" when they pursued their evil desires (4:4). When the

gospel illuminated their lives, however, they willingly reached for God and consciously chose to live by the high standards of His kingdom. Peter urged his readers not to be conformed to the wicked lifestyles of their former ignorance but to live holy lives. From all indications, Gentile believers were generally successful in living out their commitments to obedience and holiness.⁵ Their astonishing reversal of lifestyles profoundly impressed Jewish believers, made the case for God's tremendous transforming grace, and demonstrated His astounding power to change human hearts.

If a Gentile convert of Peter's day was asked how Christian conversion had impacted his life, he might have pointed to his radically new life. Former behaviors and lifestyles had become foreign and repulsive. God's divine power had transformed persons' lives—lives now characterized by genuine faith, living hope, and an imperishable inheritance (1:3-7,22). Soon these new believers began to realize God's protective cultivation of

their faith for the day of salvation.

The Gentiles' conversion to Christ had an even greater payoff. They witnessed God's work within them. Once, their inner lives had been scenes of warring and destructive sinful urges. Now, they joyously sensed a living hope welling up inside. Surprisingly, obedience to the Lord's two great commands spontaneously generated in their lives: love for their Lord and love for their Christian brothers and sisters. Seeing Gentiles repent was remarkable. Their repentance blossomed into the genuine practice of Christian love. Furthermore, their faith in Christ was growing. They rejoiced in their Lord because, although they could not see Him, they could see His marvelous work in their lives.⁶

Choosing to follow Jesus constantly impacted their lifestyles. Their repentance progressed through life transformation until they could see God's positive work inside and the world's negative response outside. With the Holy Spirit's prompting, Simon Peter also could see the dynamic impact of the gospel in his readers' lives.

An Anticipated Persecution

Peter had personally endured suffering for his faith. Encouragements to endure suffering for the sake of righteousness thus abound in this letter.

Questions arise, though, regarding the type of suffering to which Peter was referring. Many look for connections to known persecutions in history. The common New Testament Greek word for persecution (*thlipsis*) is not in 1 Peter. Nevertheless, Simon Peter anticipated sufferings and trials for his readers. These sufferings could possibly include persecution, but the book is vague regarding official resistance the readers of Peter's first epistle would have faced. Some point to Nero's persecution of Christians in A.D. 64, during which church tradition places Peter's mar-



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Above: The Basilica of Saint Peter at the Vatican in Rome. Tradition holds that the church marks the burial place of Simon Peter. The four-columned dark canopy, which stands over the papal altar, is about 90 feet tall. The canopy, called a "baldacchino," was constructed in the 1600s, using over 900 tons of dark bronze.

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tyrdom. This persecution, though, occurred in Rome and was not empire wide. During the years A.D. 109-111, Roman governor Pliny persecuted Christians in the province of Bithynia, one of the provinces mentioned in 1 Peter 1:1, but the date is beyond Peter's era.⁷ Therefore, connecting the suffering discussed in 1 Peter to specific known historical events seems unadvisable.

Peter's discussion of suffering was necessary, however, due to the progress of his readers' faith. Having responded to the gospel and witnessed the transformation of their lives, inside and out, these Christians experienced the Lord's presence in their daily lives. Due to the non-believing world's reaction to their conversion, Christians had to "struggle in various trials" (1:6). Gentile Christians were so different from how they had formerly

Below: Hippodrome, which overlooks the sea at Caesarea Maritima, was one of Herod the Great's most famous building projects. According to Acts 10, Simon Peter came to the home of Cornelius at Caesarea and shared the gospel with him. Upon entering

Cornelius's home, Simon Peter explained that he was there—in spite of the Jewish law that prohibited Jews from associating with Gentiles (v. 28). As Peter proclaimed the gospel, the Holy Spirit fell on the Gentiles, much to the astonishment of the Jews who were there.



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Below: Mikvah (Jewish ritual bath) from the time of Herod's temple, found at the foot of the of the southern steps. Archaeologists have uncovered 48 mikvot in this region of the Temple Mount. Some have surmised that Peter preached his Pentecost sermon to persons gathered at the southern steps.

lived that they no longer participated when their neighbors plunged into the sinful behaviors that reflected their non-believing lifestyles (4:1-4).

From a believer's viewpoint, Peter's readers had stopped practicing sins harmful to their relationships with God and people. Nonbelievers, however, regarded these Christians as unpatriotic because they refused to worship the gods of the region or empire. Further, they considered the believers disloyal because they no longer participated in local and trade ceremonies that acknowledged and honored certain gods. Some viewed Christians as family haters because they refrained from joining family gatherings in pagan worship centers.⁸ The reversal in moral behavior enraged neighbors who saw Christians as judgmental toward behaviors they once practiced. As a result, Christians suffered for their faith by enduring insults, abuse, rejection, economic distress, the loss of personal property, and the ability to practice their trades.⁹ Peter knew these responses to the radical Christian lifestyle were common and would increase as more men and women responded to the gospel.

The story of early Gentile Christians astounds, from the surprising extension of God's grace to Gentiles to their widespread acceptance of God's offer. Their conversion to a walk with Jesus Christ resulted in a transformation of living

Above: Overlooking Syrian Antioch. At Antioch, believers were first called "Christians." From Antioch, Paul and Barnabas left for their first missionary journey. After the Jerusalem council had convened and discussed Gentile Christians, they sent a letter to Antioch saying: "From the apostles and the elders, your brothers, to the brothers among the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings" (Acts 15:23, HCSB).

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/LOUISE KOHL SMITH (3/23/09)



and an indwelling of God's presence so compelling that they were willing to endure external sufferings attracted by their newly found faith. Though they suffered, sometimes severely, Gentile Christians generally remained steadfast in their adopted faith, considering the gains of their faith to far outweigh the sufferings they endured. What was true for Gentile Christians in the ancient world remains true for all Christians today: the extension of God's grace, dynamic lives filled with hope and God's personal presence, and yet the ever-present threat of suffering await those who dare to respond to God's magnanimous offer of salvation. **B**

1. "The Way" seems to be the first term used for Christianity; see Acts 9:2; 19:9,23; 24:14,22.
2. All Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).
3. Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), xiv.
4. "The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch" (Acts 11:26).
5. Participating in a flood of wild living: 1 Pet. 4:4. Living by evil desires: 1 Pet. 1:14. Exhorting to holy living: 1 Pet. 1:15. Living in obedience and holiness: 1 Pet. 1:22.
6. Rejoicing: 1 Pet. 1:6,8. The two greatest commands are to love God and to love one's neighbor—Matt. 22:36-40.
7. Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Epistles of Peter and of the Epistle of Jude* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), 18.
8. Peter Davids, "1 Peter" in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: New Testament*, gen. ed. Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 4:122.
9. Davids, 4:123.

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