



THE PURPOSE OF 1 PETER

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BY MARK R. DUNN

PETER'S FIRST EPISTLE PRESENTS AN outstanding message of pastoral encouragement. Over the years, various Christian believers have expressed their desire that Peter would have recorded his memories of Jesus' earthly ministry. Instead, in 1 Peter, the Christian community has received an unequalled message of grace and hope, which inspires believers to pursue living by faith despite experiencing profound adversity.

Throughout his lengthy apostolic career, Peter had countless interactions with numerous Christian congregations. Their experiences and struggles moved him with compassion. Many congregations faced difficult and demoralizing opposition. How should followers of Christ live in a hostile world? How should they maintain their commitment of faith in the face of dire circumstances? Peter confidently spoke to these issues. First Peter delivers a powerful and inspiring answer for struggling believers.

Intended Readers

Addressing a readership in five major Anatolian provinces from distant Rome,¹ Peter heartily affirmed their enduring commitments to Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 1:1-2).² He highlighted the bright message in God's activities (v. 3). Then, beginning in verse 4, Peter offered the uplifting encouragement of God's revealed Word to believers choosing daily to follow Christ despite suffering for their faith.

Upper right: A 4th–5th century lamp; in the central disc is a toga-clad man with a half-length beard, likely Peter; a ring of chevrons frames the image; from Tunisia in North Africa.

Right: Ruins of what has been dubbed "the fish-

erman's house" at Bethsaida. This was originally a one-story home with a large central courtyard and rooms on three sides. Excavations uncovered lead weights that would have been used in fishing nets and tools for making or repairing fishnets.

Peter's Purpose Statement

Peter explained his intention in writing this epistle (5:12). He wrote in order to encourage his readers and to testify of the truth of God's grace. He urged them to live out their faith despite the chief issue facing all believers: suffering. Remaining encouraged in spite of adversity is possible because of God's marvelous grace, which produces powerful inspiration and astounding reassurance for His committed people. Tracing these topics in Peter's message helps readers appreciate the purpose of his letter.

Grace—The word "grace" appears eight times in the epistle,³ emphasizing God's attention to and provision for the lives of believers. God's careful devotion to His committed ones derives from His life-giving character. His grace is the ultimate life support. Everything believers receive from God stems from His program of grace in which He freely fulfills their needs.

Peter's greatest "grace statement" comes in 5:10 and resounds across the Christian ages to encourage believers in times of need. Here, Peter testified that God has called believers to share in His eternal glory, referring to God's personal presence and exalted position. His calling is extended through Christ Jesus, in whom believers have committed their faith. To fulfill His objective, God will accomplish four powerful things for His people. He will restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish them—all in a context that



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may include suffering. God attentively observes the sufferings of believers. He uses their suffering to draw them to Himself, not to push them away. In this way, the riches of God's grace are highlighted in their lives.

Hope—The discovery of God's grace in the midst of suffering generates hope. This is the hope to which Peter points. "Hope" occurs five times in 1 Peter.⁴ Hope is the epistle's lead-off topic, occurring in 1:3, the first verse of the body of the letter. Peter declared that God has caused us to be born again to a living hope through Jesus' resurrection. Accordingly, a believer's hope must be cultivated by carefully trusting in God's grace (1:13) and not focusing on one's earthly situation.

Suffering—Hope and grace are important topics in 1 Peter, but they serve to support Peter's handling of the letter's central issue, the problem of suffering. Peter's classic power message transforms this unpleasant topic into reassurance and inspiration.

First Peter affirms that, although believers are pressed by suffering, God's power nonetheless protects them. Suffering, while unpleasant, serves God's kingdom as a trial of faith. Peter knew that his readers endured evil, insults, denunciations of their faith, slander, and ridicule. He referred to these troubles as the "fiery ordeal" and "test" (4:12, CSB). Having personally witnessed the Lord's sufferings, Peter reminded his readers six times that Jesus suffered (1:11; 2:21,23; 3:18; 4:1,13). In addition, Peter explained that God observes His people suffering for righteousness and blesses them (3:14). This means that Christians must be resolved to suffer like Christ, renouncing their association with sin, and thereby be pleasing God (2:20-23). Believers must never be surprised or ashamed about suffering for

their faith (4:16). Furthermore, Peter stated, believers elsewhere also suffer for the cause of Christ. Believers must understand, therefore, that God's plan includes suffering.⁵

Known Persecutions

Much discussion in scholarly circles has focused on the persecution Peter's readers faced.⁶ State-sponsored persecutions of Christians were known in the eras of Nero (AD 64), Domitian (AD 95), and Trajan (AD 112). Peter

Right: The early church fathers, including Cyril of Jerusalem, a respected theologian who lived 315-386, believed the transfiguration took place on Mount Tabor. Franciscans built the Church of the Transfiguration atop Mount Tabor in 1924 to mark the spot where, according to tradition, Jesus appeared in His glory before three of His disciples: Peter, James, and John.

Below: Ruins of an eight-sided church built at Capernaum marking the traditional site of Peter's house.



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Left: Altar inside the Basilica of Saint Peter at the Vatican in Rome. Tradition holds that the altar is located above the tomb of Simon Peter.

Top: Padlock, Roman era. Herod Agrippa had Peter arrested and put in prison. During the night an angel,

though, broke open Peter's chains and led him out of the cell and out of the city gates (Acts 12:3-19). A dominant theme in 1 Peter is believers suffering because of their faith.

Above: At ancient Cappadocia, volcanic eruptions and later erosion

resulted in this unique landscape. Digging in the sandstone, dwellers established houses, churches, catacombs, and even entire underground cities. The Book of 1 Peter was written to believers living in cities of Asia Minor, including Cappadocia.

possibly was present in Rome during Nero's terror, perhaps suffering execution as a result. Nevertheless, none of the state-sponsored persecutions align with the details 1 Peter provides.⁷ Instead, Peter described the hostile reactions of the local populace, which was provoked by a people serving a strange God.⁸ This squares with Peter's characterization of the suffering his readers faced and also with his instruction to obey governmental authorities.⁹

Grace, Hope, and Suffering

Returning to the epistle's first paragraph, we find the letter's three main topics in action. The paragraph serves as an overture to the letter, showcasing its themes and summarizing its message. It is also a doxology, soliciting praise from believers who see God strengthening their hope by showing them grace in the midst of their sufferings (1:3). The paragraph refers to the living hope into which God has birthed believers. They had struggled in their faith, being refined by fire, but were now more valuable to God than gold (v. 6). Such struggles in Christian life are worth the effort because God delivers the goal of faith: the salvation of the soul (v. 9).

By reading 5:12, then 5:10, and finally 1:3-9, Peter's purpose stands out. First Peter 5:12 speaks of encouragement

and then grace. Verse 10 delivers the great grace statement, building in the four encouraging elements of God's work which, despite suffering, establish God's people for life in eternity (1:3-9). Peter's first paragraph proceeds from the encouragement of hope to God's grace, which ultimately answers the objective of faith: salvation that delivers the believer through the oppression of suffering. 🔥

1. First Peter 5:13 implies that Peter was writing from Rome. Apparently late in the apostolic era, believers commonly referred to Rome as "Babylon." (Revelation has 8 such references). Peter was in Rome, finishing out his ministry, and possibly already contending with the trouble that extra-biblical Christian tradition says culminated with Peter's execution.

2. Peter referred to "Jesus Christ" 9 times in this epistle. The cluster of 4 occurrences in the first 3 verses rings out Peter's enthusiasm for the encouraging Christian message he was laying before his readers.

3. Grace: 1:2,10,13; 3:7; 4:10; 5:5,10,12.

4. Hope: 1:3,13,21; 3:5,15.

5. Protection: 1:5; Trials: 1:6; Slander: 2:12; 4:4; Evil and insults: 3:9; Denunciations of their obedience to Christ: 3:16; Ridicule: 4:14; Fiery ordeals and tests: 4:12; Messianic suffering: 1:11; 2:21,23; 3:18; 4:1,13; Peter witnessed: 5:1; Blessing in suffering: 3:14; Christian resolve to suffer: 4:1-2; Do not be surprised: 4:12; Do not be ashamed: 4:16; Other believers: 5:9; God's plan: 5:10.

6. Recall that Peter had suffered persecution himself, having been imprisoned by Herod (Acts 12:1-17).

7. Ernest Best, *1 Peter*, New Century Bible (London: Oliphants, 1971), 36-42; Charles Bigg, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902), 24-33.

8. J.N.D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and of Jude*, Black's New Testament Commentaries (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1969), 10.

9. Submit to human authorities: 2:13-17.

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