



OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

1 Peter's Message and Relevance

David Anguish

These are people [Peter's readers] whose commitment to the lordship of Jesus Christ have led to transformed attitudes and behaviors that place them on the margins of respectable society. They have become victims of social ostracism, their allegiance to Christ having won for them slander, animosity, reproach, scorn, vilification, and contempt.... Previously, they had participated in the mainstream of Greco-Roman society, but now their lack of acculturation to prevailing social values marked them as social misfits to be held in contempt. 1 Peter was written to address Christians in such general circumstances as these—not so much to resolve the enigma of the suffering of God's people as to articulate how best to relate to a society set against those allegiances, attitudes, and actions that are consistent with God's agenda (Achtmeier, Green, and Thompson 2001, 518–519).

πάσχω (*paschō*, to suffer) — 12 times: 1 Peter 2.19–21, 23; 3.14, 17–18; 4.1, 15, 19; 5.10

πάθημα (*pathēma*, suffering) — 4 times: 1 Peter 1.11; 4.13; 5.1, 9

Peter responds to his readers' circumstances with a message that incorporates the themes of salvation, the people of God, and the Christian life into an exhortation to endure suffering, a term used more in this letter than anywhere else in the New Testament. His use of thirty-five imperative verbs (in 1.13, 15, 17, 22; 2.2, 13, 17; 3.3, 10–11, 15; 4.1, 7, 12–13, 15–16, 19; 5.2, 5–6, 8–9, 12, 14) adds urgency to his exhortation. The outlook he urges on his readers understands that their “steadfastness may lead to suffering, but a genuine understanding of persecution permits them to face it head-on and go forward faithfully” (McKnight 1996, 29). Following McKnight's helpful discussion, we'll survey three major themes of the letter and then make some brief comments on the letter's relevance (McKnight 1996, 30–33).

Survey of Major Themes

Salvation

Four times within the letter's first twenty-seven verses, Peter refers to his readers' *salvation* (σωτηρία, *sōtēria*; 1 Pet 1.5, 9–10; 2.2). In two other verses in the midst of specific comments on suffering, he uses the verb, *to save* (σώζω, *sōzō*; 1 Pet 3.21; 4.18). But those statements are not all he says about their status. Using the imagery of temple worship, he reminds them that they had been “sprinkled with the blood of Jesus Christ” (1.2); redeemed (1.18–19); purified (1.22); permitted to “taste that the Lord is good” (2.3; cf. Ps 34.8); healed by Christ's wounds (2.24; cf. Isa 53.5); and brought to God (3.18).

Peter employs new-life imagery to illustrate the nature of their salvation. He references their “new birth,” directly (1.3, 23), and uses the synonymous ideas of newborn infants (2.2), a new life for righteousness (2.24), coheirs of grace (3.7), and the fact of having been “made alive” (3.18). He assures them of their inheritance (1.4–5) and blessing (3.9), and repeatedly refers to their receipt of God's grace (1.10, 13; 3.7; 4.10; 5.5, 10, 12). His reminders provide a foundation for ethical living in the face of ostracism and persecution, evidenced by how the themes of salvation and ethics are woven together in 1.3–12; 2.18–25; 3.18–22; and 5.10.

The People of God

1 Peter is one of nine New Testament books that never use the word ἐκκλησία (*ekklēsia*). Instead, he refers to the church with the phrase, *people of God* (λαὸς θεοῦ, *laos theou*) (2.10), and stresses that the Christians constitute spiritual Israel, “a people for [God's] possession” (2.9). Utilizing Old Testament ideas, he defines them as the elect (1.1), living stones (2.5), a royal priesthood, a chosen race, and a holy nation (2.9) who have received God's mercy (2.10).

In family imagery that overlaps with his salvation emphasis, he also identifies them as a spiritual house (2.5) and God's household (4.17). He gives direction to groups of people who are arranged around a family structure (2.11–3.12), and stresses that God is their Father (1.2–3, 17) who gives birth (1.3) to new children of God (1.4, 2.2). Those children constitute a brotherhood (2.17; 5.9) that practices brotherly love (1.22; 3.8).

Christian Life

Peter applies these theological descriptions to daily Christian life. He stresses that their salvation should lead—note the word *therefore* in 1.13—to ongoing hope (1.3), holiness (1.14–16), respect for God (1.17–21), love (1.22–24), and growth beyond spiritual infancy (2.1–8). They are “strangers and exiles” (2.11) who have found a home in God's family. Thus, they can draw on the strength that comes from the Father and Son, as well as other family members, in their efforts to endure suffering. In living this way, they will be imitators and examples for Jesus who also experienced suffering en route to glory (1.6; 2.18–25; 3.13–17; 4.1–6, 12–19; 5.8–10).

They are also to understand that they are living for the salvation that is to come, knowing that God will judge justly (1.7, 9, 17; 2.12, 23; 3.12; 4.5, 17–19) to reward those who faithfully endure suffering for his sake (1.7, 13; 4.13–14).

As temporary residents in dire circumstances (1.1), they should pursue faith (1.5, 8–9, 21; 2.6–7; 5.9), hope (1.3, 13, 21; 3.5, 15), and joy (1.6, 8; 4.13), secure in the assurance of God's protection (1.5). They are called to live as a brotherhood that loves each other (1.22; 2.17; 3.8–12; 4.8–9; 5.14). In humility (3.4, 15; 5.6), they are to submit to each other (3.1–7; 5.1–5), serve each other (4.10–11), and demonstrate sensitivity in their communication with each other (2.1; 4.7–11).

These practices should in turn contribute to their commitment to be pure and obedient to God (1.2, 13, 22), imitating his holiness (1.14–16, 18, 22; 2.1–2, 5, 9, 11–12, 15, 20; 3.6, 15, 17; 4.1–6) and living righteous lives (2.24; 3.13; 4.18). Doing these things will enable them to be a leavening influence on people outside the faith (2.11–25; 3.1–6).

1 Peter's Relevance

The matter of positively influencing a skeptical and at times hostile society serves as a bridge to the question of 1 Peter's relevance for 21st century Western Christians. That we live at a time when our society has “served notice that it [will] no longer be a prop for the church” (Hauerwas and Willimon 2014, 15–16) is increasingly evident. This change should not be viewed as “a death to lament,” however, but as “an opportunity to celebrate.” It “means that we American Christians are at last free to be faithful in a way that makes being a Christian today an exciting adventure” (Hauerwas and Willimon 2014, 18).

Since we've been accustomed to a cultural support structure, this change can be unnerving. How shall we live in a society that is no longer supportive of the faith, or even neutral? More importantly, where do we turn to be informed about the course we should pursue? Let's begin with 1 Peter. As Luke Johnson has written, in that short letter—a mere 1,679 words in the UBS5 Greek text—“Christians are told ... to avoid conflict by maintaining exemplary behavior (2.12). The presupposition is that such a tactic will be effective” (Johnson 2010, 427).

But effective for what? And, more importantly, for whom? While Peter indicates that an exemplary Christ-imitating response to cultural resistance will in some cases be a mitigating force (cf. 2.18–25; 3.8–9, 13–17; 4.12–19), he does not advance the unrealistic expectation that it will forestall all hostility. He does, however, assure sufferers that embracing and being true to our identity as saved believers will see God ultimately bless us.

So we should persevere, living holy and love-exhibiting lives, drawing strength from other people of God who share our lot, and learning from the lessons he teaches about how to deal with the suffering we continue to endure.

May his final words, therefore, be our touchstone: “I have written to you briefly in order to encourage you and to testify that this is the true grace of God. *Stand firm in it!*” (1 Pet 5.12).

Works Cited

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An Additional Thought

“Divine fatherhood is the controlling concept of God in 1 Peter. God has become the Father of Christians by virtue of the new birth generated by his imperishable seed, which is his living and enduring word (1:3; 1:23). God’s nature is introduced as merciful (1:3), his redemptive work to create a redeemed people flowing from his mercy (2:10). The existence of the Christian church is, therefore, the evidence of the effectiveness of God’s mercy.”

~ Karen H. Jobes. 2022. *1 Peter*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. 2nd edition. Baker Academic, 49

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