

THE BOOK OF 1 PETER

ORIENTING DATA FOR 1 PETER

- **Content:** a letter of encouragement to Christians undergoing suffering, instructing them how to respond Christianly to their persecutors and urging them to live lives worthy of their calling
- **Author:** the apostle Peter; written by Silas (5:12), the sometime companion of Paul
- **Date:** ca. A.D. 64–65 from Rome (5:13, Babylon was used by both Jews and Christians to refer to Rome as a place of exile)
- **Recipients:** mostly Gentile believers (1:14, 18; 2:9–10; 4:3–4) in the five provinces in the northwest quadrant of Asia Minor (modern Turkey), referred to—with a play on the Jewish Diaspora—as strangers (= exiles) in the world
- **Occasion:** probably concern over an outbreak of local persecution that some newer believers (2:2–3) were experiencing as a direct result of their faith in Christ
- **Emphases:** suffering for the sake of righteousness should not surprise us; believers should submit to unjust suffering the way Christ did; Christ suffered on our behalf to free us from sin; God’s people should live righteously at all times, but especially in the face of hostility; our hope for the future is based on the certainty of Christ’s resurrection

OVERVIEW OF 1 PETER

Peter’s primary concern is for truly Christian living in the context of hostility and suffering. The letter moves forward in a kind of elliptical way, embracing first one and then the other of these concerns, returning to them over and over again along the way. At the same time these concerns are placed within the context of Christ’s suffering and resurrection, his suffering offering a pattern for believers as well as saving them, his resurrection giving them hope in the midst of present suffering.

The opening thanksgiving (1:3–12) sets forth the themes: salvation, hope for the future, suffering, genuine faith (= faithful living). The rest of the letter falls into three parts (1:13–2:10; 2:11–4:11; 4:12–5:11), signaled by the address “dear friends” in 2:11 and 4:12 (and the doxology in 4:11). Part 1 is a call to holy living, with emphasis on their life together as the people of God. Using all kinds of images from the Old Testament, Peter reassures them that they are God’s people by election, whose lives together are to give evidence that they are God’s children and thus declare God’s praises.

ca. *circa*, about, approximately

Part 2 focuses primarily on their being God's people for the sake of the pagan world (2:12)—those responsible for their suffering. He begins (2:11–3:7) by urging Christlike submission in specific institutional settings (pagan government [2:13–17]; pagan masters [2:18–25]; pagan husbands [3:1–6]) in which believers may expect to suffer. He then generalizes this appeal to all believers (3:8–4:6), specifically when facing suffering for doing good; again, Christ's death and resurrection serve as the basis for holiness and hope. He concludes by speaking once more to their life together as God's people (4:7–11).

In part 3 he puts their suffering into a theological context, while urging the elders to lead the others in properly Christian responses to undeserved suffering, as well as in their relationships to one another.

SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING 1 PETER

The special vocabulary of 1 Peter tells much of the story and should be watched for as you read. These words are especially important: suffering (11x); *anastrophē* ("way of life, behavior" 6x [1:15, 18; 2:12; 3:1, 2, 16]); God (39x); Christ (22x); Spirit/spiritual (8x); God's will (4x); election/calling (10x); save/salvation (6x); and hope (5x)—along with a number of other words that point to the future (inheritance, glory, etc.), plus a large vocabulary reminding them that they are God's people, living as "foreigners" or "strangers" or those in exile in the present world.

What propels the letter from beginning to end is their suffering. Peter's concern is that they understand their suffering in the larger context of God's saving purposes. Thus the strong emphasis on the work of the Triune God. God, the author of salvation, has both chosen and called them to be his people in the world. Suffering may therefore be understood as in keeping with God's higher purposes (his will); yet Christ's death and resurrection have made their final salvation altogether certain so that they live in hope. Note that Peter—significantly—always refers to Christ's redeeming work in terms of his suffering (rather than "dying") for us, which at the same time also serves as the example to be followed (2:21–24; 3:15–18)—all of which is enabled by the Spirit (1:2; 2:5; 4:14). All of this is said over and over again, with obvious interest in encouraging and reassuring them.

At the same time Peter is greatly concerned about the way they live, both their conduct as a people together and the way they respond to suffering. First, he repeatedly reminds them that they are a pilgrim people—strangers and foreigners here, whose inheritance is in heaven—and that they should live the life of heaven in their sojourn on earth. Second, by living in this way they will serve as God's priestly people for the sake of the pagans who are hostile to them so that they "may be won over" (3:1). Thus his readers are to fulfill their calling where Israel failed—to be a blessing to the nations. In the end there is not a thing in this letter that does not have these ends in mind. Be looking for them as you read.

You also need to have a sense of the first-century household in order to appreciate what is urged in 2:18–3:7. In ways that are hardly understandable to Western cultures over the past several centuries, in the first-century Greco-Roman household the male head of the house was the absolute "lord and master." In most such households, if he cared at all for things religious (and religion was a part of their way of life, whether taken seriously or not), then it was customary for the entire household (wife, children, household slaves) to adopt the religion of

the householder. Peter is speaking into this context, where some household slaves and wives have gotten out of line on this matter by becoming followers of Christ, whereas when he speaks in a secondary way to the husband in 3:7 he assumes that he and his household have all followed Christ.¹

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 402–404.