

# 1 Peter — Introduction to the Letter

This introduction draws on Edmund Clowney's introduction to his commentary on 1 Peter in the *Bible Speaks Today* series.

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## A pastoral letter for people under pressure

First Peter is often described as one of the most compact summaries in the New Testament of what Christians believe and how that belief shapes the way we live. Above all it is a pastoral letter: Peter writes to encourage and steady believers as the first hard seasons of persecution begin to fall on the churches of Asia Minor.

That situation is not as distant as it might seem. Christians in various parts of the world still pay a real cost for following Jesus, and no believer is finally exempt from some measure of suffering for Christ's sake. Peter speaks to all of us when he holds together two things that run through the whole letter: suffering now, and glory to come. He does not offer shallow comfort but grounds our hope in what God has actually done, and will yet do, for us in Jesus Christ.

## Who received the letter?

Peter addresses believers scattered across five regions of what is now largely modern Turkey — Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. These were remarkably diverse territories, with a great mix of peoples, languages, customs, and religious backgrounds. Yet what stands out is the unity the gospel creates among them. However different their origins, they have become one new people of God — a chosen people living as “exiles” and “resident aliens” in the world.

The way Peter describes their old life (idolatry and a “worthless” way of life inherited from their ancestors) suggests his readers were mostly Gentile converts. Peter draws deeply on the Old Testament throughout, which reflects his own Jewish upbringing rather than requiring the same background from his readers. Importantly, the letter's language is inclusive: Peter writes to the whole church, not to one narrow group within it.

## Who wrote it?

The letter presents itself as the work of the apostle Peter, and there are good reasons to take that claim seriously. It is quoted and referred to early and widely in the writings of the church. Some have raised objections — that the Greek is too refined for a Galilean fisherman, that the persecutions seem too late, that it sounds too much like Paul, or that it reads like shared early-church teaching. Each of these has a reasonable answer. The letter reflects a time of local, sporadic harassment rather than a full-scale official campaign; the overlap with Paul simply reflects a common apostolic message; and Peter, like any apostle, was passing on the church's settled teaching.

Most compelling is the letter's own character. It carries the mark of an eyewitness. Peter marvels at those who love a Christ they have never seen (1:8); his emphasis on hope reflects a man who moved from despair at the cross to joy in the risen Lord; and his call to humility carries real weight from one who had boasted and then fallen. Silas may well have assisted Peter in writing or delivering the letter (5:12).

## **What kind of letter, and when?**

First Peter is rich and varied, woven through with quotations and echoes of the Old Testament (Psalm 34 in particular) and reflections of Jesus' own teaching. Some have suggested it is really a baptismal sermon or liturgy, but the letter's own summary describes it best: Peter has written briefly to encourage his readers and to bear witness that this is the true grace of God, calling them to stand firm in it (5:12).

The greetings from "Babylon" (5:13) are almost certainly a symbolic reference to Rome — fitting, since Peter thinks of God's people as exiles living in a foreign empire. The letter was most likely written from Rome around AD 63, after Paul had left the city and before the fierce persecution under Nero.

## **The heart of the message**

Facing threats to the young churches, Peter points relentlessly to the grace of God — to the reality of what God has accomplished in Jesus Christ, who bore our sins and rose again. Because that hope is living and secure, Christians can not only endure suffering but even rejoice in it, for in their suffering they are joined to the Christ who suffered for them. As he suffered and then entered his glory, so will they.

So believers can live holy, humble lives without needing to grasp for their rights or avenge themselves, entrusting themselves to God's judgment. They are strangers in "Babylon," yet full members of God's own household. Redeemed at the price of Christ's blood, united in love, equipped with God's gifts, and watched over by Jesus the great Shepherd, they can cast all their cares on the God who cares for them. The joy that already fills them will be brought to its fullness when Christ appears and they finally see the Lord they love.

## Rejoice in our Living Hope | 1 Peter 1:1–12

*<sup>1</sup>Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,*

*To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia,<sup>2</sup> according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: May grace and peace be multiplied to you.*

*<sup>3</sup>Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, <sup>4</sup>to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, <sup>5</sup>who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. <sup>6</sup>In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, <sup>7</sup>so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. <sup>8</sup>Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, <sup>9</sup>obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*

*<sup>10</sup>Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, <sup>11</sup>inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. <sup>12</sup>It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look."*

(1 Peter 1:1–12)

### Discuss [adapt the questions as needed]:

1. Peter addresses the readers of his letter as *"elect exiles of the Dispersion"*, communicating the idea that they were sojourners, *"just passing through"* Asia Minor. Why does he describe them this way?  
Describe a time when you felt out of place or struggled to fit in, simply because you were a Christian. How did you respond?

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2. The sermon drew a distinction between hope anchored in an event (*"I hope it doesn't rain"*) and hope anchored in a living person. In verse 3, Peter says that Christians have been born to a *living hope* because of the resurrection of Christ. What practical difference does this make in our lives, especially on days we do not feel hopeful?

3. Peter gives his readers (and us) a double assurance: the inheritance is kept for you, and you are kept for it, both *"by God's power through faith"* (1:4–5). What difference does it make to know that it is God's power holding us, and not the strength of our own faith? In what areas of life are you most tempted to rely on your own strength instead?

4. Peter says we rejoice even while *"grieved by various trials"* (1:6)—joy *in the midst of* grief, not instead of it. Verses 6–9 describe how trials and challenges can purify the Christians' faith, rather than destroy it. How have you seen this happen, in your own life or someone else's?

### Reflection and application:

5. The passage ends with Peter reminding Christians of our privileged position as recipients of this living hope. It is something prophets searched for and angels long to see. How might remembering your privileged position in Christ help you in the things you might face in this coming week? Share and pray for one another.