

Blessed . . . even in times of trial!

THE FIRST LETTER OF ST PETER.

STUDY NOTES – NIGHT I

Disputed Authorship – Who wrote the letter?

The letter has traditionally been attributed to the Apostle Peter because it bears his name and identifies him as its author [1:1]. Those who support this view suggest that many of the allusions in the letter echo sayings and experiences of Jesus that we find in the gospels. For example, they note the similarities between Matthew 5:10 and 1 Peter 3:14.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake: theirs is the kingdom of heaven. [Matt 5:10]

But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. [1Peter3:14]

The majority of modern commentators however tend to suggest that the letter was not written by the apostle Peter but rather was written later from within the Petrine tradition. They argue that:

- Nothing in the letter reflects or reveals a personal relationship with Jesus or a direct experience of the Risen Christ in the way that Paul, for example, speaks of his own conversion and experience on the road to Damascus.
- The quality of the Greek used in the letter is hardly likely to be that of a Galilean fisherman. Those who propose the Apostle Peter as the author counter-argue using what is called the 'secretary hypothesis' wherein the linguistic and stylistic quality are attributed to Silvanus who writes the letter expressing Peter's ideas and vision.
Through Silvanus, whom I consider a faithful brother, I have written this short letter to encourage you and to testify that this is the true grace of God. [5:12]
- The reference to 'Babylon' in 5:13 as a subversive code-name for Rome arose only after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE, whereas traditionally Peter is understood to have been martyred in Rome in 64 CE.
- The realities being experienced by the communities addressed in the letter suggest a period in the 80s or early 90s, when the early Christian communities were viewed with suspicion and often ostracised within society as indeed does the existence of Christian communities in Pontus, Bithynia and Cappadocia.

"It is this best to interpret 1 Peter as not written by Simon Peter but written in his name as an expression of the apostolic authority of its message and the continuation of Roman Petrine tradition."

M. Eugene Boring: An Introduction to the New Testament 2012

To whom is the letter addressed?

The letter is addressed to Christian communities described as *"the exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia"* [1:1], provinces in Asia Minor [modern day Turkey]. The order in which the provinces are listed likely reflects the route to be taken by the bearer of the letter.



The reference to 'exiles of the dispersion' [1:1] and 'the time of your exile' [1:17] are best understood not as communities that have been forcibly displaced but rather as part of a 'diaspora' because they have been called into a new identity by God that sets them apart from the world. They are 'exiles' in the sense that they no longer belong to the world but to God and therefore are temporarily residing outside their true homeland which is in heaven. 'Diaspora' speaks to Christians scattered throughout the world, in the midst of unbelievers, exiled from their true home with God. They are suffering as rejected outsiders in their own communities, no longer belonging to a world in which they were once at home.

These communities appear to be made up of both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. There are distinctive Jewish elements, in particular multiple allusions to and references from the Hebrew Scriptures which presume a familiarity with the Hebrew Scriptures [1:24, 2:6-10, 3:10-12]. Many verses however seem to speak specifically to Gentile converts, for example *'the futile ways inherited from your fathers'* [1:17], *'once you were no people'* [2:10], *'among the Gentiles'* [2:12] and the list of Gentile vices in 4:3,4.

'A people suffering various trials.'

The letter is addressed to communities suffering hostility and persecution. 1Peter1:6 refers to '*suffering various trials*' but how are we to understand this?

The exhortation to live blameless lives [2:1, 3:9, 13, 16] suggest that the communities addressed in the letter are being accused of immoral behaviour and its exhortations to civil obedience [2:13-17] implies perhaps that they were being accused of disloyalty to the civil authorities.

Much of the language used in the letter suggests that the persecution was more social in nature. They are variously described as '*maligned*' [2:12, 3:16] or '*reviled for the name of Christ*' [4:14]. The letter refers to '*those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ*' [3:16] and '*are surprised that you no longer join them in the same excesses of dissipation*' [4:4]. The reference in 5:9 '*For you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering*' suggests an experience that is common to many Christian communities and yet the first imperial persecution of Christians by Rome did not begin until the reign of the Emperor Decius around 250 CE.

The reference to '*fiery ordeal*' [4:12] has led some commentators to speculate that the trials referred to are some form of official persecution but this reference is probably better understood figuratively as an extension of the image of gold being purified by fire that is repeated throughout the letter. The fact that the letter explicitly urges the communities to respect authority [2:13] and even to show honour to the Emperor [2:17] suggests that it is highly unlikely that the communities were suffering official Roman persecution.

The Message of the First Letter of Peter

The letter is first and foremost about the transformative joy of faith in Jesus Christ and how the hope and identity conferred by faith and baptism help us to live faithfully even in the face of opposition and trials and suffering, imitating Christ himself who endured suffering to save us. Christians are called to a living hope, rooted in their sharing in the resurrection of Christ through baptism. Peter emphasises this 'living hope' to encourage the believers in their trials and exhorts them to join their sufferings with the suffering of Christ, so as to witness to the hope within them and to one day share in the glory of Christ in heaven.

The Structure of the Letter

The First Letter of Peter has a clear structure that moves from the traditional greeting to thanksgiving for the imperishable gift of Christian identity and the living hope it bestows; to exhortation on how believers are to behave in a hostile world; to encouragement to those suffering because of their faith in Christ Jesus; before offering final words of advice to the leaders of the community and the community in general and the traditional blessing at the conclusion.

Overview of the First Letter of Peter

Verses:	Focus	Key verses
1:1-2	Greeting	'To the exiles of the dispersion who have been chosen by God the Father' [1:1-2]
1:3-12 Teaching	Identity The dignity of their Christian identity and calling	³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, [1:3-4]
1:13 –2:12 Teaching	The Call to Holiness	¹⁵ Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; ¹⁶ for it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."
2:13-3:12 Exhorting	The Christian in a Hostile World <i>Civil Authorities</i> 2:12-17 <i>Household Codes</i> 2:18-3:7 -Slaves and masters -Husbands & Wives <i>General advice to community</i>	¹⁵ For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. [2:15] ²¹ For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. [2:21]
3:13 – 4:19 Encouraging	Christian attitude to suffering	¹⁴ But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, ¹⁵ but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; ¹⁶ yet do it with gentleness and reverence. [3:14-16]
5:1-11 Guiding	General advice Leaders 5:1-4 Community 5:5-11	¹⁰ And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. ¹¹ To him be the power forever and ever. Amen. [5:10-11]
5:12-14	Conclusion	I have written this short letter to encourage you and to testify that this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it.

1 Peter 1:3-12

Called into Hope and Holiness in Christ: The gift of Christian Identity.

This opening section of the letter sets the tone for the entire letter and offers one of the richest and most profound expositions of Christian identity in all of the sacred scriptures focusing on our identity in Christ. This section, the theological heart of the letter, explores our identity in Christ through five themes that run right across the letter.

1. Exiles of the dispersion.

The community to whom 1Peter is addressed are described as 'exiles' in the sense that they no longer belong to the world but to God. Through faith and baptism they have been called into a new identity that sets them apart from the world. They belong now to God in Christ Jesus and therefore are temporarily residing outside their true homeland which is in heaven. 'Diaspora' in this sense means Christians scattered throughout the world, in the midst of unbelievers, exiled from their true home with God.

2. A new birth into a Living Hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead

The promise of a 'a new birth' in 1:3 leads to a new identity, and therefore a new citizenship that bestows greater benefits than anything Rome or anyone doing its bidding can offer. Christians are called to 'a living hope' that is founded on the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. 1:13 calls on Christians to 'set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed.' 3:15 will call on Christians to 'always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting of the hope that is within you.' Hope in Christ is not the same as mere optimism. Christian hope is rooted in and inextricably bound to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. 1:21 insists that our Christian trust in God flows from and is a fruit of God raising Jesus from the dead. *'Through him [Jesus] you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God.'* The writer will later draw on the power of Christ's resurrection to strengthen the resolve of believers in the face of trial and adversity.

3. A call to rejoice even in the face of various trials.

Difficult though it may sound, 1Peter calls on Christians to rejoice in the midst of suffering and trials [1:6] to know Christ's joy in the midst of affliction. With the focus on Christ, those who are encountering suffering and adversity are assured of the work of God to bring new life. Such transformative joy in the face of suffering is a measure of *'the genuineness of your faith'* [1:7] which is described as more precious than gold. Genuine and sincere trust in God will result *'in praise and glory and honour'* [1:7] and lead them to *'rejoice with an indescribable joy'* [1:8].

4. Called to holiness

Those who bear the name 'Christian' are called to holiness. God is holy and so we too as Christians are called to be holy [1:15-16]. But 1 Peter understands holiness in a very different

way to that of much of the Hebrew Scriptures wherein holiness was often seen as separating oneself from all that was profane. 1 Peter develops a much more positive and dynamic theology of holiness. From the outset holiness is connected to a person's conduct: 'Be holy yourselves in all your conduct' [1:15]. Living a life that is holy is not simply abstention from what is bad or evil but rather refers to the entire witness of one's life. Holiness comes from following Christ and imitating Christ, even in his willingness to suffer. Despite being 'exiles' and 'aliens' in the world, 1 Peter assures Christians of their inalienable dignity. They are '*a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people*' and are called to '*proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.*' [2:9]

5. The promise of a rich inheritance.

The opening verses assures Christians that they are called into '*an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time*' [1:4-5]. While hope, holiness and being chosen as God's people are all gifts from God, the ultimate gift of God in 1Peter is that of salvation. 1:9 describes this salvation, the work of God, as both the source of Christian joy and the outcome of Christian faith. The closing verses of the letter will reinforce this rich inheritance, this promise of salvation, by assuring the listeners that they are called by God to share in '*his eternal glory in Christ*' [5:10] when God will '*restore, support, strengthen and establish*' them [5:10].

This promised inheritance and salvation, which are described as being infinitely better than gold or silver [1:8] and which will never perish, spoil or fade [1:4] are not something the believer can earn or control. They are an invitation and a gift from God who is sovereign in all his actions. However, 1Peter also speaks of '*growing into salvation*' [2:2]. While the promise of salvation in 1:9 is immediately connected by 1Peter to the salvation history of all God's people beginning with the prophets who had witnessed in advance to this promise of salvation and '*prophesied about the grace that was to be yours*' [1:10] he goes on to link this promise of salvation in the letter to essential elements of faith, namely joy, love and believing.