

1 Peter



REFORMED
EXPOSITORY
COMMENTARY

DANIEL M. DORIANI

1 Peter

REFORMED EXPOSITORY COMMENTARY

A Series

Series Editors

Richard D. Phillips
Philip Graham Ryken

Testament Editors

Iain M. Duguid, Old Testament
Daniel M. Doriani, New Testament

1 Peter

DANIEL M. DORIANI



P U B L I S H I N G

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I dedicate this book to my friends at Central Presbyterian Church, especially its elders and deacons. I thank them for granting me a study leave to complete the work, for their friendship, and for their desire to exemplify the godly shepherd of 1 Peter 5.

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SERIES INTRODUCTION

In every generation there is a fresh need for the faithful exposition of God's Word in the church. At the same time, the church must constantly do the work of theology: reflecting on the teaching of Scripture, confessing its doctrines of the Christian faith, and applying them to contemporary culture. We believe that these two tasks—the expositional and the theological—are interdependent. Our doctrine must derive from the biblical text, and our understanding of any particular passage of Scripture must arise from the doctrine taught in Scripture as a whole.

We further believe that these interdependent tasks of biblical exposition and theological reflection are best undertaken in the church, and most specifically in the pulpits of the church. This is all the more true since the study of Scripture properly results in doxology and praxis—that is, in praise to God and practical application in the lives of believers. In pursuit of these ends, we are pleased to present the Reformed Expository Commentary as a fresh exposition of Scripture for our generation in the church. We hope and pray that pastors, teachers, Bible study leaders, and many others will find this series to be a faithful, inspiring, and useful resource for the study of God's infallible, inerrant Word.

The Reformed Expository Commentary has four fundamental commitments. First, these commentaries aim to be *biblical*, presenting a comprehensive exposition characterized by careful attention to the details of the text. They are not exegetical commentaries—commenting word by word or even verse by verse—but integrated expositions of whole passages of Scripture. Each commentary will thus present a sequential, systematic treatment of an entire book of the Bible, passage by passage. Second, these commentaries are unashamedly *doctrinal*. We are committed to the Westminster Confession

Series Introduction

of Faith and Catechisms as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Each volume will teach, promote, and defend the doctrines of the Reformed faith as they are found in the Bible. Third, these commentaries are *redemptive-historical* in their orientation. We believe in the unity of the Bible and its central message of salvation in Christ. We are thus committed to a Christ-centered view of the Old Testament, in which its characters, events, regulations, and institutions are properly understood as pointing us to Christ and his gospel, as well as giving us examples to follow in living by faith. Fourth, these commentaries are *practical*, applying the text of Scripture to contemporary challenges of life—both public and private—with appropriate illustrations.

The contributors to the Reformed Expository Commentary are all pastors-scholars. As pastor, each author will first present his expositions in the pulpit ministry of his church. This means that these commentaries are rooted in the teaching of Scripture to real people in the church. While aiming to be scholarly, these expositions are not academic. Our intent is to be faithful, clear, and helpful to Christians who possess various levels of biblical and theological training—as should be true in any effective pulpit ministry. Inevitably this means that some issues of academic interest will not be covered. Nevertheless, we aim to achieve a responsible level of scholarship, seeking to promote and model this for pastors and other teachers in the church. Significant exegetical and theological difficulties, along with such historical and cultural background as is relevant to the text, will be treated with care.

We strive for a high standard of enduring excellence. This begins with the selection of the authors, all of whom have proved to be outstanding communicators of God's Word. But this pursuit of excellence is also reflected in a disciplined editorial process. Each volume is edited by both a series editor and a testament editor. The testament editors, Iain Duguid for the Old Testament and Daniel Doriani for the New Testament, are accomplished pastors and respected scholars who have taught at the seminary level. Their job is to ensure that each volume is sufficiently conversant with up-to-date scholarship and is faithful and accurate in its exposition of the text. As series editors, we oversee each volume to ensure its overall quality—including excellence of writing, soundness of teaching, and usefulness in application. Working together as an editorial team, along with the publisher, we are devoted to ensuring that these are the best commentaries that our gifted authors can

provide, so that the church will be served with trustworthy and exemplary expositions of God's Word.

It is our goal and prayer that the Reformed Expository Commentary will serve the church by renewing confidence in the clarity and power of Scripture and by upholding the great doctrinal heritage of the Reformed faith. We hope that pastors who read these commentaries will be encouraged in their own expository preaching ministry, which we believe to be the best and most biblical pattern for teaching God's Word in the church. We hope that lay teachers will find these commentaries among the most useful resources they rely on for understanding and presenting the text of the Bible. And we hope that the devotional quality of these studies of Scripture will instruct and inspire each Christian who reads them in joyful, obedient discipleship to Jesus Christ.

May the Lord bless all who read the Reformed Expository Commentary. We commit these volumes to the Lord Jesus Christ, praying that the Holy Spirit will use them for the instruction and edification of the church, with thanksgiving to God the Father for his unceasing faithfulness in building his church through the ministry of his Word.

Richard D. Phillips
Philip Graham Ryken
Series Editors

PREFACE

This book is the product of a long relationship with 1 Peter. When I first read Peter's epistle as a new Christian, it seemed like a distillation of the whole of Christian theology and much of the Christian life. His epistle presents Jesus as both Redeemer and Exemplar of the holy life. It offers the broadest principles for Christian living, grounds them in the work of Christ past, present, and future, and then presents norms for life in the family, at work, and in society at large. Peter's guidance is perfect for Christians who hope to engage their culture in uncertain times. It holds out hope that a beautiful life will be noticed, that no one will harm those who do good, and that we can do good because Jesus has given us life and gifts that we can use to serve others. On the other hand, Peter banishes triumphalism. We are aliens here, he warns, and must expect to attract unwarranted hostility, as Jesus did.

As a seminary professor, I surveyed Peter fourteen times, but never had the occasion to probe its depths. I finally had the opportunity to explore 1 Peter in a series of sermons for Central Presbyterian Church, where I was senior pastor until my recent return to Covenant Seminary. As always, the blessed members of the church and my many good friends there listened well, thanked me, and asked questions that made me study more thoroughly. I thank them for the kingdom-mindedness that led them to grant me the study leave that let me conclude the work.

≈ *1 Peter*

GRACE-DRIVEN DISCIPLESHIP
IN A DIFFICULT AGE

1

STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND

1 Peter 1:1–2

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance. (1 Peter 1:1–2)

THE AUTHOR: THE APOSTLE PETER

The unanimous tradition of the early church declares that the apostle Peter wrote his first epistle while living in Rome, late in his life, around A.D. 65.¹ If that is correct, then Peter wrote from a lifetime of wisdom and conviction. He experienced everything, not least the trials and suffering that he describes in his letter. He also walked with Jesus every day for roughly three years. Yet Peter drew on more than experience when he wrote his epistles. He was an apostle, God's ambassador, chosen by Jesus to see his

1. Peter writes from "Babylon," which is code for "Rome" (1 Peter 5:13); church tradition places Peter in Rome, where he died in the mid-60s.

Strangers in a Strange Land

deeds, hear his words, and declare what it all means. Peter was at ease with this authority. He did not trumpet his credentials. Rather, he assumed that he had the right to describe God's salvation and explain its significance.

Peter addressed his epistle to people and churches that he calls "God's elect." They lived in regions east of Rome, in "Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia" (1 Peter 1:1).

Since Peter identifies himself as "an apostle of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:1), he invites us to read his letter through the lens of his experience as disciple and apostle. The Gospels name Peter as one of "the Twelve" (Mark 10:32; 14:10) and as a member of the inner three, "Peter, James and John" (5:37; 9:2; 14:33). Peter was, at a minimum, the most outspoken among the twelve disciples. At most, he was their spokesman, and in some sense their leader. He articulated their best thoughts, thoughts given by God himself. He confessed Jesus: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16). But Peter also blurted out the disciples' worst errors. He even dared to rebuke Jesus—on the very day that he confessed Jesus' deity—for saying that he must go to the cross (16:21–22). He asked pointed questions (19:23–27), made rash vows ("I will never disown you," Mark 14:31), and failed to keep them, above all by denying Jesus three times (John 18:15–27).

After the resurrection, Jesus commissioned the apostles to make disciples of the nations (Matt. 28:18–20). Despite Peter's failures, Jesus reinstated him as an apostle and commanded Peter to feed his sheep (John 21:15–17). At Pentecost, Peter proclaimed Jesus' resurrection, and three thousand repented, believed, and were baptized. That marked the birth of the church as we know it (Acts 2:22–41). When Peter preached again, the church exploded with additional disciples (4:4; 5:14). Peter performed signs, testified to Christ, solved problems, and rebuked sin within the infant Jerusalem church. Before Paul took the lead, Peter inaugurated the mission to the Gentiles (Acts 10).

Peter did betray Jesus, but even his failures fascinate us and illumine both the man and the message. It is fitting that Peter, who betrayed the Lord and received the grace of forgiveness, both opens and closes his epistle by offering his churches the grace of God. His letter begins, "Grace and peace be yours in abundance" (1 Peter 1:2). And he closes, "I have written to you briefly, encouraging you and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it" (5:12). Knowing Peter's history, we understand that his talk of grace is no mere formula. Peter denied Jesus three times,

insisting, with oaths, that he did not even know Jesus. He did this despite warnings, despite vows to the contrary, and at the hour of Jesus' greatest need. Yet Peter repented, in tears, and received forgiveness and reinstatement as an apostle (Luke 22:62; John 21:15-17). Because he knew the depth of his need and because he understood the perfection of Jesus' offer, Peter loved the grace of God.

Peter's need of grace was most acute when he denied Jesus during the trial. It is moving, therefore, that Peter wrote his letter to help God's elect as they "suffer grief in all kinds of trials" (1 Peter 1:6). Yet trials bring more than misery and temptation. When we endure trials, when we remain loyal in hardship, according to Peter, it proves our faith genuine (1:6-7), and that brings us glory when Christ is revealed. So suffering can create confidence. If we are willing to suffer for Jesus, it shows that we truly belong to him (4:1) and stand fast with him (5:12). We stand fast when we remain holy in a corrupt age (1:14-16; 4:1-4) and when we remain loyal to Jesus through persecution (4:12-16).

THE AUDIENCE: BELIEVERS WHO ARE STRANGERS IN THEIR OWN LAND

Peter wrote for everyone, but especially for believers, God's elect. He explicitly addressed a group of churches scattered through a wide swath in the northeast of the Roman Empire: "To God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia" (1 Peter 1:1-2). These named areas represent millions of people across an area of roughly the size of Turkey or America's Southwest from Texas to California (about 750,000 square miles). In short, this is a universal letter, not a local letter.

Peter reminded his people of their status, privileges, and responsibilities. The church is God's elect, "who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood" (1 Peter 1:2). The elect are redeemed by the triune God. The Father chose them according to his foreknowledge. The Spirit sanctifies them for obedience to the Son, who sprinkled them with his blood and so atoned for their sins. In God's name, Peter blesses his readers: "Grace and peace be yours in abundance" (1:2).

Strangers in a Strange Land

So Peter opens with his great themes: the work of the triune God who elects, gives grace, commands and empowers holiness, and leads us to a mission. The first hint of that mission arrives in the salutation. Peter identifies us as “God’s elect, strangers in the world” (1 Peter 1:1). More literally, we are “elect exiles of the dispersion” (1:1 esv). The church is privileged by God; we are his chosen ones. Yet at the same time, and for the same reason, the church is disadvantaged in society. Because believers are God’s chosen people, we are “strangers” or “exiles” in our own world. The word *stranger* or *exile* (*parepidemos*) denotes a temporary resident, a traveler whose stay is measured in weeks or a few months.² The term *alien* (*paroikos*), used in 1 Peter 2:11, is similar but suggests a long-term resident. It could describe an immigrant from a distant place who has lived in another land for several years, started a career, and found a home.³ Both terms signify that the person originally belonged elsewhere.

Peter wants believers to realize that we never fully belong in this world. Strangers have no permanent residence. Aliens cannot hold positions of power and rarely enjoy full privileges. This is essential to a Christian’s identity. People in Reformed and Calvinist churches have committed to engage the culture rather than fleeing from it, and rightly so. Yet we must remember that we are exiles and therefore will never be completely at home in this world.

Most commentators believe Peter’s audience consists primarily of Gentiles, not Jews. Peter’s people “were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down . . . from your forefathers” (1 Peter 1:18). For years, they did “what pagans choose to do” (4:3). Their neighbors thought it “strange” when they abandoned their former life of dissipation (4:4). Their lifestyle was manifestly different from the conduct of others in the empire. So most of Peter’s people did not grow up in the covenant. God’s election, salvation, and subsequent sanctification estranged them from their native culture.

The life of John Adams is illustrative. Adams was a Massachusetts farmer and lawyer. The Constitutional Congress named Adams as its ambassador to France. He was not successful. He was too fiery, too much the unyield-

2. Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 95.

3. J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary 49 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1988), 6–9; Johannes Louw and Eugene Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1998–99), 1:133.

ing crusader, to suit the cool and venial French court. Adams was a great American, but in France he was a stranger in a strange land.⁴ Travelers often experience the same sense of estrangement. Whether we know the language or not, we feel out of place when we first visit a new land. The food, the conception of time, and sundry unwritten rules of conduct conspire to surprise and unsettle us. Similarly, the first visit to any established group, whether social, spiritual, professional, or intellectual, can easily leave the newcomer feeling out of place.

These are the experiences of strangers and aliens. Peter understood that life. He knew Greek, he had once had a good income as a fisherman, and he had traveled widely in the Roman Empire before settling in Rome itself. But he was a Jew from Galilee, a backwater of the empire. When he first traveled to Jerusalem, he marveled at its sights (Mark 13:1). We can imagine how Rome impressed him. Since Galilee had been Hellenized to a degree, he was familiar with elements of Greco-Roman culture. Still, a wholly Gentile world had to seem strange at times to an observant Jew (Acts 10:14).

In fact, because Peter had followed Jesus from the beginning, he had become an outsider even within Israel. After he became a disciple, he left his business and family to wander through Galilee and Judea with Jesus (Luke 5:1–11). When the authorities began to question Jesus, Peter and the other disciples were implicated (e.g., Matt. 12:1ff.; John 18:1–27). After Jesus' ascension, Peter became even more controversial. He performed miracles like the miracles of Jesus and did so in his name (Acts 4:2, 13). As the church grew, the authorities threatened, beat, and jailed Peter (Acts 4, 5, 12). Peter fit neither in Rome nor in Israel, and he tells the believers in the church that his lot will be theirs. They, too, will be outsiders and aliens.

But we must not think Peter resented his status. He knew his identity and savored his call. He knew that every disciple of Jesus will, in part at least, be an outsider, stranger, and exile in the wider world.

Peter wrote his epistle to Christians scattered through five provinces of the eastern empire, provinces that encompassed many peoples and languages. But Peter ignored race, ethnicity, and language and defined the churches by their status as God's elect. He said that Jesus had sprinkled us with his blood and so atoned for our sin. We are sanctified by the Spirit, that we

4. David McCollough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001).

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may believe the gospel, obey Jesus, and experience God's grace and peace (1 Peter 1:1–2).

Exiles live between two worlds. When a couple has a baby, they remain in their old world, with the same marriage, skills, friends, and interests. Yet their baby places them in a new world, with a new schedule and a powerful new interest in the eating, sleeping, crawling, and babbling of their child. They meet other parents, who become new friends and advisers. The new world of parenting will partially alienate them from their former world, since they have less in common with their childless friends, whether single or married. But the change from pagan polytheist to Christian is greater than the changes wrought by parenthood. As strangers and exiles, we will never perfectly fit in with, never fully belong to, pagan society. We *feel* like aliens in our own world because we are—at least partially so.

We need to grasp the right lessons from this. Peter says that we are aliens, but he never tells us to alienate ourselves from this world by abandoning it or cursing it. God did not abandon his creation; he sent his Son to redeem and restore it and fully renew it one day. Since God's ways are our model, we should remain engaged with this world. Historically, the Reformed or Calvinistic branch of Christendom has engaged the culture. We hope to form, reform, and transform it, not abandon it. We admire Calvin not only for his theology but also for his social action. For example, an infectious plague swept through Italy and Switzerland during Calvin's day, in the sixteenth century. Showing admirable courage, Cardinal Borromeo of Milan stayed in his city to feed and pray for those who were dying. Yet we may admire Calvin more, not because he was braver, but because he was wiser. "Calvin acted better and more wisely, for he not only cared incessantly for the spiritual needs of the sick, but at the same time introduced hitherto unsurpassed hygienic measures whereby the ravages of the plague were arrested."⁵

Nor was Calvin's cultural engagement limited to the traditional sphere of works of mercy. In sixteenth-century Europe, the growth of market economies led to a sharp increase in the cost of living and a simultaneous drop in

5. Abraham Kuyper, *Calvinism: Six Stone Foundation Lectures* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1943), 120. See also Cornelius Plantinga, *Engaging God's World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); Lee Hardy, *The Fabric of This World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990); Gene Edward Veith, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002).

the value of labor. Calvin spoke prophetically against a rising aristocracy that exploited the poor by depriving them of fair wages.⁶ We are prone to admire Calvin for his cultural engagement, but is this the way that God expects his exiles to act?

Scripture holds two ideas in tension. We are, simultaneously, exiles in this world and agents of change within it. Because we are exiles, we resist conformity to the patterns of this age. God told his people, living in the shadow of Babylon, that great city of wealth and decadent pleasures, “Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues.” Clearly, we must flee the corrupt world, for judgment will fall upon it (Rev. 18:4). Yet we are reformers, constantly ready to engage society. Jesus notes that his disciples are “in the world” but that “they are not *of* the world any more than I am of the world.” He continues, “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one” (John 17:11–15). As we so often notice, Jesus called his disciples “the salt of the earth”—retarding its decay—and “the light of the world” (Matt. 5:13–14).

So, then, we are engaged exiles. A few years ago, I shared a long meal with the brilliant, crusading atheist Christopher Hitchens. His book title, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, reveals his conviction.⁷ Hitchens’s tone was occasionally brutish but generally cordial (it helped that my agnostic dissertation adviser had been a friend of his). Through our long conversation, I came to understand atheism better and, as he listened to me and another theologian at the table, he came to understand Christianity better. Since his main ideas about Christianity came from European Catholicism, liberal Protestantism, and the atheist’s list of “repulsive things we found in the Bible,” we were able to blunt many of his objections to biblical Christianity. We cleared up serious misconceptions and introduced him to essential tenets of the faith. At times it seemed that we were making progress. Yet Hitchens remained a devoted atheist. A radical individualist and libertarian, he despised the very concept of a sovereign, all-powerful

6. Calvin had a view of “fair wages”—one formed both by an older cultural consensus and by theological convictions. See William P. Brown, “Calvin and Qoheleth Meet after a Hard Day’s Night,” in *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity II*, ed. Wallace Alston and Michael Welker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 75–76.

7. Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Warner Books, 2007).

God who calls humans to worship him and render an account for their lives. He hated biblical notions of grace and called the atonement barbaric. He raged at the idea that hell awaits those who deny God, but found heaven offensive, too. He had no desire to spend eternity “groveling” before a deity. Therefore, no matter how cordial and instructive our discussion was, there was no ultimate rapprochement, for he believed the God of the Bible to be a cosmic despot. We would always be exiles if Hitchens hosted a table, unless the Spirit renewed him.

In a similar sense, Peter’s people were aliens in the empire. Their beliefs and practices were, and inevitably remained, radically at odds with their culture. In certain lands, Christianity is now so widespread that it obtains general tolerance, possibly even respect. But Christians are “aliens” and will never perfectly fit into secular society. We will never be able to laugh at every joke or enjoy every entertainment and pastime.

No one likes to be excluded. Everyone cringes or bristles when things we hold dear are mocked or dismissed, even if the manner is polite. But exclusion is not necessarily an evil. If we detest cigar smoke, we should not mind if we are banned from a cigar club, with its pointless discussion of the virtues of Cuba’s soil and climate, and its constant pollution of lips, lungs, and clothes. So, too, there are groups, however attractive they initially seem, to which a wise disciple will not want to belong. There are jokes that make people laugh, even though they are more cruel than funny, so that a noble person should not be amused. There are entertainments that are novel and exciting at first, but degrading and enslaving in the end. It is a gain, not a loss, to stand outside such groups, with their humorless jokes and wearisome entertainments.

The first Christians knew they were outsiders, for their beliefs and practices stood in radical conflict with their culture. Today, wherever Christianity is most widespread, it gets tolerance, if not respect. But we must neither attempt nor expect to fit perfectly into secular society. The life of the exile is not necessarily onerous, since we join God’s exiled community. Peter promises that although the redeemed are aliens now, we will have a better home and “an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading” (1 Peter 1:3–4 *ESV*). That initiates the theme of the next passage. But before we consider that, we need an overview of the main message of 1 Peter and of its structure, that is, the way its message unfolds.

THE THEMES AND GOALS OF 1 PETER

The twelve apostles wrote just eight of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament;⁸ long tradition says that Peter stood behind a ninth, Mark's gospel. Among these nine books, we see a tendency to state the purpose of the book at the beginning (Mark 1:1) or the end (Matt. 28:18–20; John 20:31; 1 John 5:13). Indeed, we can see theme statements at both the beginning and the end of 1 Peter.

Grace

As Peter begins, he tells his people that they have been chosen by the Father, sanctified by the Spirit, and sprinkled by the blood of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:1–2). He gives us grace; we owe him obedience (1:2). We praise him for his great mercy, for our new birth, and for the hope of an eternal inheritance, shared with Christ (1:3–4, 7).

As Peter closes, he appeals to his readers, “exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it” (1 Peter 5:12 ESV). The word *this* in the phrase “this is the true grace of God” is crucial. Since it comes at the end of the epistle, “this . . . grace” seems to refer to the whole letter, with its message of hope and salvation in the gospel. Throughout this epistle, Peter is a good steward “of God’s varied grace” (4:10 ESV). That grace begins with Jesus’ atonement (1:2, 18–21) and continues with assurance that Jesus is our Shepherd and Overseer, even in suffering (2:25). Further, while Satan prowls and brothers through the world suffer, “the God of all grace” pledges to restore, strengthen, and establish his people (5:8–11). “This . . . grace” then begins with Jesus’ substitutionary atonement for sins (1:17–21; 2:24; 3:18–22), includes God’s promise of protection in suffering in the present, and promises glory with Christ in the future (1:6–9).

Therefore, although suffering is never far from Peter’s mind, it is not the focus of Peter’s attention. Rather, Jesus “suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God” (3:18 ESV). Jesus suffered for “the salvation of your souls,” shedding his blood as a “lamb without blemish” (1:9, 19). By this sacrifice, the true members of Peter’s churches “were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers” (1:18 ESV).

8. The eight books are Matthew, John, 1–2 Peter, 1–3 John, and Revelation.

Strangers in a Strange Land

The suffering of the churches is an inevitable result of their new life, but not the core of that life. Rather, because Peter's people are now the new people of God (1 Peter 1:1; 2:4–10), they must break with the pagan ways they inherited from their fathers (1:14, 18). Because of this break, they will seem strange, perhaps even evil, to their former friends (2:12; 4:1–4). A willingness to suffer the consequences of their faith shows that they are united to Christ and brings the promise of eternal life with him (1:3–9; 4:13; 5:1, 4, 10). In the day that I write this, anyone who declares that God wants marriage to unite one man and one woman will be called a bigot and a hater. Other ages have other flash points. Disciples need to be willing to clash with their culture in order to align with Christ.

Faithfulness in Suffering

That said, suffering is prominent in 1 Peter. In the apostolic era, neither the empire nor the Jewish establishment settled on a policy of systematic persecution of the church. Nonetheless, persecution was always a possibility, since believers refused to worship the emperor. Christians followed a crucified Jew (hence a condemned man) who claimed, in a way that could sound threatening to established powers, to be Lord of Israel. This helps to explain why trials and suffering are a topic in every chapter of 1 Peter (1:6–9; 2:18–25; 3:13–18; 4:12–19; 5:9), and the strength of the warnings seems to grow sharper as the epistle progresses. Compare the warnings of chapters 3 and 4:

Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. . . . Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. (1 Peter 3:13–15)

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ. (4:12–13)

In the first passage, persecution is possible. In the second, it seems certain. Clearly, Peter wants to tell his readers that trouble is coming, but he eases them into it. Chapter 3 states, “It could happen. Be ready in case it does.”

Chapter 4 warns, “It will happen, so don’t be surprised when it does, and see it in light of your union with Christ.” Peter therefore aims to teach believers how to live as faithfully as possible in an often-hostile world.

The path of faithfulness is clear. We remain holy in a sinful age (1 Peter 1:18; 2:9; 4:3-4). We follow the norms of behavior that make life work in every society (2:20; 3:8-12). And we are always ready to endure persecution and so to follow Jesus’ example (2:21-23; 3:13-18; 4:12-16).

NOTE ON THE STRUCTURE OF 1 PETER

It is good also to observe the structure of Peter’s epistle. After his opening greeting (1 Peter 1:1-2), Peter praises God for granting believers new birth into a living hope (1:3-9), described in Scripture (1:10-12). God calls his people to a life of holiness that is grounded in the redemptive work of Christ. Because God is holy, we are holy. Because Jesus ransomed us and we tasted his goodness, we put away sin (1:13-2:3). Because we are God’s chosen, a holy nation, we abstain from sin and live honorably, even if slandered (2:4-12).

Holiness manifests itself socially, in submission to governors and masters (1 Peter 2:13-25). While wives still submit to husbands, husbands honor their wives, that they may live together in grace (3:1-7). We can ordinarily expect to live well, experiencing God’s favor, if we are loving and honest and seek peace (3:8-13). Nonetheless, it is possible to suffer for doing good (3:13-17). Jesus did so when he suffered for us and liberated us from death (3:18-22).

Jesus’ example arms us for opposition from the Gentiles (1 Peter 4:1-6). Nonetheless, the disciple is not combative. He is self-controlled, loving, hospitable, and eager to use God’s gifts to administer God’s grace (4:7-11). This is necessary if we hope to face the trials that will come to those who share in Christ, to whom we entrust ourselves (4:12-19). While individual believers seek to endure and do good, the elders of the church lead by setting an example and by watching over all (5:1-5). While Peter is glad to advise people in their specific callings, the great principles of life are the same for all: we humble ourselves before God, cast our cares on him, resist Satan, and stand firm in God’s grace (5:6-14).

So, then, let us plunge into the riches of the work of Peter, eyewitness and apostle of Christ, and servant of God’s elect.

“Among the many expositions of 1 Peter, this REC volume stands out. It is exemplary in its careful handling of the text, theological robustness, and fresh writing. Unsurprisingly from the author of *Putting the Truth to Work*, which is the best treatment available on application, this exposition of 1 Peter is loaded with the best kind of application: faithful to the text, reflective, never forced, often telling.”

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