

BRANDON D. CROWE

*The*  
MESSAGE *of the*  
GENERAL EPISTLES  
*in the* HISTORY  
*of* REDEMPTION

WISDOM FROM JAMES, PETER,  
JOHN, AND JUDE





“The General Epistles continue to be relatively ignored, to the church’s detriment. This book seeks to remedy that neglect and does so in a winsome and very helpful fashion. Written for a broader audience, it evidences the sound and careful scholarship from which any interested reader will benefit. This volume will make an excellent resource for personal and group Bible study. I commend it most highly.”

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“These essays are an excellent way to begin the study of the seven Catholic Epistles. They orient the reader to the most important themes and aspects of the books and resolve many of the difficult questions that Christians often have about them. Crowe has a way of gently disentangling thorny interpretative issues and exposing the spiritual fruit for believers to harvest. This is what ‘practical theology’ ought to be. Readers will learn not only the distinctive teachings of each of these New Testament epistles but also how each one clarifies and personalizes the indicatives and imperatives of our faith. Each chapter ends with a set of questions to guide readers and groups to deeper reflection on the saving message of each biblical book.”

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—**Robert W. Yarbrough**, Professor of New Testament, Covenant Theological Seminary

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P U B L I S H I N G

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To my parents,  
for their unwavering love and support



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## FOREWORD

AS I READ THROUGH this book by my colleague, I was struck by how relevant the General Epistles are to our own day. In these New Testament letters, warnings abound against heresies and against enticements to immorality. In the first century, people rose up and claimed to be Christian but furnished various excuses for why it was all right to descend into immoralities. Excuses are still being manufactured today.

We need a book such as this one to remind us of principles of godliness. We need it all the more because some of the messages in the General Epistles are not only relevant but unpopular, given the atmosphere in the mainstream of modern Western cultures.

The modern atmosphere will tell us that love and tolerance unite us, while doctrine divides us. Attention to doctrine allegedly makes us “dogmatic.” Rejection of someone else’s views makes us “intolerant.” In contrast to this modern antipathy to truth, the General Epistles combat and denounce false doctrine in no uncertain terms. They tell us that sound doctrine is not optional but necessary, and that it is our duty as followers of Christ to reject the soul-destroying doctrines of heretics. They call us to commend true doctrine out of love for Christ and love for our fellow human beings, whose souls are in danger from heresy.

The modern atmosphere will also tell us that obeying biblical instructions for ethical behavior is “inhibiting” and “puritanical” and “oppressive.” Modern thinking alleges that

when we teach biblical moral standards, we show ourselves not only to be behind the times, but to be destroyers of human flourishing—haters of the human race. We also hear voices and see practices *within* the Christian community that tell us not to teach or enforce certain moral standards—especially, it seems, in sexual ethics—because we will allegedly destroy bridges to pagans and opportunities to proclaim the gospel, and we ourselves will become legalists rather than proclaimers of free grace. By contrast, the General Epistles warn us vigorously against all kinds of libertinism and against all kinds of excuses for falling into the ways of the world.

Of course, as usual, there is a grain of truth to be found in accusations from the modern atmosphere. It is indeed possible to substitute legalism for the true gospel. It is likewise possible to quarrel continually about minor points in doctrine, and to conduct disputes in a spirit of pride and anger rather than love. We have all the more need for hearing and studying biblical instruction concerning true doctrine and false, and concerning true morality and false.

An author writing about the General Epistles confronts challenges. For one thing, these books of the New Testament form quite a diverse collection. They have a number of different human authors; they address a number of quite distinct situations; and their contents vary widely in topic. So digesting and applying them requires care. In addition, we face the fact that, along with the similarities between then and now, there are also dissimilarities. The situations differ. The heresies and temptations that confronted God's people in the first century are not always identical with those today. Yet they are *relevant* to today.

My colleague Brandon Crowe is well qualified to lead readers through the ins and outs. God has gifted him as a teacher. He knows how to prioritize what is important. He explains the main

FOREWORD

themes of these letters simply and clearly. At the same time, he explains the contents of these letters in a way that draws our attention to their importance for our own day. I take pleasure in recommending this book to the public.

Vern S. Poythress  
Professor of New Testament Interpretation,  
Editor of the *Westminster Theological Journal*,  
Westminster Theological Seminary





## PREFACE

THIS BOOK IS WRITTEN FOR the nonspecialist, and is an invitation to consider the theological richness and practical relevance of the books of James, 1–2 Peter, 1–3 John, and Jude. I hope that it will be a book that can be used in a variety of settings, from church groups to the classroom. Extensive footnotes, foreign languages, and technical jargon have been kept to a minimum, though I do hope to introduce some aspects from these biblical texts that may be less familiar.

Much of this book grows out of a course on the General Epistles taught at Westminster Theological Seminary, and I am grateful to the students for their many insightful questions and comments that have helped my own understanding of these texts. I continue to benefit greatly from the knowledge of my colleagues at Westminster Seminary, especially New Testament colleagues Dr. Vern Poythress, who provided valuable feedback on an earlier draft of the manuscript, and Dr. Greg Beale. I received informal feedback on the topics discussed in this volume from many along the way, though any shortcomings remain my own. I would also like to acknowledge my indebtedness to Dr. Charles E. Hill, who first introduced me to the academic study of these New Testament documents some years ago, and whose teaching has been formative for my own understanding of these texts. I am grateful to the board and administration of Westminster Seminary, who generously provide the resources and support necessary to undertake projects such as this one. Special thanks goes to the staff of the Montgomery Library for going the extra mile

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on various occasions. I would also like to thank everyone at P&R Publishing who has so capably assisted in the production of this volume, including John J. Hughes, Amanda Martin, and Karalee Reinke.

Last, but by no means least, I would like to thank my family. Our children, Charlie, Simeon, and Ethan, have provided many joyful interruptions from writing, and they are tremendous blessings in the quiver. Singular thanks are due to my wife, Cheryl—my best friend and coheir of the grace of life (1 Peter 3:7). I dedicate this volume to my parents, Doug and Rhonda Crowe, for their indefatigable love, support, and encouragement as far back as I can remember. I owe them an incalculably great debt, and thank God for them.

# INTRODUCTION

## Why This Book?

In our study of the Bible, it can be easy to focus on certain portions and neglect others. This imbalance is normally not for any lack of good intention, but life is busy and there is plenty to keep us occupied in the longer and more familiar books of the Bible. Unfortunately, this can mean that we often miss some important insights into the nature of salvation and how Christians should live in today's world in light of the work of Christ. One portion of the Bible that is often overlooked is the New Testament collection often called the *General Epistles*,<sup>1</sup> or what one might call “the rest of the New Testament”: James, 1–2 Peter, 1–3 John, and Jude. These seven letters are all brief (three of them are only one chapter long), and they are tucked away at the end of the New Testament between the longer books Hebrews and Revelation.

Additionally, it is not surprising that many of these letters are neglected since their teaching can be difficult to understand. Why does James say that we are justified by works and not by faith alone (James 2:24)? How does this relate to what the apostle Paul says, when he states emphatically that we are justified by faith in Jesus Christ and not by works of the law (Gal. 2:16)? Who are the spirits that Christ preached to in prison, and how

1. This term simply refers to letters written for more general purposes when compared, for example, to Paul's letters that are addressed to specific churches. Sometimes these are called *Catholic Epistles*, which simply means “universal epistles,” and is not a reference to the Roman Catholic Church.

does this relate to Noah (1 Peter 3:19–20)? Why does Peter mention angels kept in chains in gloomy darkness (2 Peter 2:4), and how is this supposed to impact us today? What is Jude’s point in recounting the archangel Michael’s contending with the devil about the body of Moses (Jude 9)? Why does John say that if we are really followers of Christ, we do not sin (1 John 3:6)? Don’t we all continue to sin every day? These are a few of the questions that may arise when reading the rest of the New Testament.

In light of the challenges that these books pose and the relative lack of attention devoted to them, the purpose of this volume is to help us understand what each of these books teaches about the salvation accomplished by Christ, and how this relates to life. Indeed, one of the striking features of these books is how relevant they are today. They are written after the coming of Christ—after his incarnation, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension—and reflect on his work and teaching for the early church communities. These churches were made up of people just like us, and it turns out that they faced problems that are not too different from things we face in the twenty-first century. They dealt with social ostracism—and perhaps worse—because of their faith in a crucified and resurrected man and because of their distinctive way of living in this world. They were confronted with those who opposed their traditional beliefs about Jesus, especially the “outdated” notion that Jesus was coming back. Many teachers in the church were more interested in money, sex, and the acclamation of others than with genuine love for Christ and the true gospel. They were confronted with splits in the church from those who were espousing a supposedly better way to think about theology and life than what the apostles taught. The early Christians faced real dilemmas; they often struggled to understand their identity in a world that did not share their convictions. This is why the apostles wrote urgently to them to ensure that they understood the sufficiency of Christ’s work, and

how we are to live faithfully in light of it. These letters explain important aspects of the gospel of grace and warn us against real dangers of distorting that gospel. We neglect the rest of the New Testament at our own peril.

We will see that these letters often explain the work of Christ in unique ways, though always in accord with what we find elsewhere in the Bible. By focusing both on the work of Christ for us and on the calls to discipleship in these letters, we will also gain a greater vision for how we are to live in this present age. Stated another way, these letters provide a great opportunity to consider the relationship between the indicative and imperative in the Bible. Simply stated, the *indicative* refers to the saving work of God in Christ on our behalf. The *imperative* assumes and logically follows the indicative, and entails commands for how to live. It is important to recognize the indicative-imperative theological structure because it helps us keep in proper perspective the relationship between the definitive accomplishment of salvation and the Bible's very real call to Christian obedience. The primacy of the indicative keeps us from thinking that our works ever make us righteous before God. The necessity of the imperative means that we are not free to disregard the clear commands of Scripture, even though we are saved freely by grace alone.<sup>2</sup>

Allow me to emphasize two things about the indicative-imperative relationship as it relates to the present book. First, the order of the two cannot be switched: the indicative must precede the imperative. The foundation for our salvation and acceptance with God is always the work of Christ, and never from anything that we do. This point cannot be overstressed. In terms of being made right with God (justification), we can

2. For further discussion on the indicative-imperative relationship in the General Epistles, see G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 851–56.

do nothing that would add any righteousness to our status before God. To treat commands as if they were the means by which we could earn our salvation would be an egregious perversion of the gospel of salvation by grace through faith. The Bible makes it clear that God sought us when we did not seek him, even while we were dead in our sins (see, among many others, Rom. 5:8; Eph. 2:4–9; 1 John 4:10). Therefore, the ability for us truly to please God by obedience is dependent on the application of the redemption accomplished by Christ to each of us personally, and this comes by faith, not by our works. We often see this indicative-imperative relationship reflected even in the structure of biblical books, as biblical authors articulate the work of Christ before giving practical exhortations. This basic structure is evident, for example, in Romans (indicative: Rom. 1–11; imperative: Rom. 12–16) and Ephesians (indicative: Eph. 1–3; imperative: Eph. 4–6), but we even see it in the Old Testament with books such as Deuteronomy (for example, Deut. 6:20–25). Even where an imperative may be given before an explicit statement about the indicative, the indicative remains logically prior to the imperative. In this spirit, our study of each letter among the General Epistles will begin by considering what each states about the salvation accomplished by Christ.

The second important aspect of the indicative-imperative relationship is that the indicative and imperative can never be separated. In other words, the gospel entails legitimate calls to Christian obedience that are founded on the work of Christ (see Phil. 2:12–13). Indeed, we can even say that there is no salvation without accompanying discipleship. Put in theological terms, justification (being made right with God definitively) and sanctification (the process of growing in holiness) are always a package deal. Thus, although our good works can never secure us a right standing before God, we are not saved without the



fruit of good works (see Eph. 2:10 in light of Eph. 2:8–9). The necessity of good works for salvation may seem to contradict the free grace of the gospel, yet it simply means that faith alone saves, but the faith that saves is never alone. A denial of this crucial theological point may be in the background of several of the letters we will consider in this book. It appears that too many in the early church were wrongly teaching and living in a way that proclaimed that the call to holiness for Christians is (at best) optional, and that we have no responsibility to live in accord with God’s standards. As we will see, however, it is clear that God requires holiness among his people—even among those who are saved by the righteousness of Christ. I will have much more to say on this point in due course.

Thus, we can never add any value to the completed, sufficient work of Christ, but we must take the biblical commands seriously. The good news is that the false teachers were wrong about what brings liberty: freedom comes not by following the sinful desires of one’s own heart, but through the liberating grace of God. Indeed, James has much to say about the law of *liberty*. As we progress through each of these letters, focusing on both the indicative and the imperative, I pray that we will appreciate the freeing and enlivening benefits of grace in a new way.

## **Scallywags, Scoffers, and Schisms: Understanding the Structure of This Book**

Maybe you have picked up this book and are still reading simply because you want to understand the meaning of the titles for the book’s first three parts. Perhaps you are wondering: how do the terms *scallywags*, *scoffers*, and *schisms* relate to this portion of the New Testament? I have chosen these alliterative (and, I hope, memorable) terms to help us organize our thinking about some of the main contributions of each of these letters.

### *Scallywags*

*Scallywags* refers to the way in which the world views Christians, according to 1 Peter. A scallywag is a rogue, a troublemaker, a good-for-nothing person who is (or, in the case of 1 Peter, seems to be) causing problems. In 1 Peter, Christians are faced with difficult circumstances and various sorts of opposition, but they are called to demonstrate by their manner of life, as they follow the selfless pattern of Christ himself, that they are anything but scallywags. First Peter makes it clear that when Christians are living faithfully, they support the public good and are above dispute and dishonor. In other words, Christians are to disprove the charge of being scallywags by living in accord with the gospel.

### *Scoffers*

The title of this book's second part focuses on 2 Peter and Jude. Here we find that many *scoffers* will arise and distort the true teaching of Scripture. We will also see that when false teaching as described in 2 Peter and Jude holds sway, it leads not simply to scoffing at theological propositions, but also to scoffing at the call to discipleship and the call to be holy as God is holy.

### *Schisms*

*Schisms* is a term that might refer to any number of books or issues in the New Testament, but understanding schisms is particularly important for interpreting 1 John. This epistle may seem to contain many confusing or troublesome statements, but we will see that part of what John was addressing was schisms, or divisions, arising in the early church, led by those who did not follow the apostolic teaching. These schismatics had their own ideas about what makes one spiritual,

and they eventually left the church. Thus, we will consider how recognizing the schisms in the background of John's writings helps us understand the teaching of 1-3 John as it relates to us today.

### *Wisdom for Life*

Finally, we will consider how the teaching of James, the brother of Jesus, helps us navigate life in this present age. We will certainly consider what James has to say about the indicative of salvation (he says more than we may realize at first glance), but we will also consider the way James reflects on the teachings of Jesus with a view to helping Christians live well as we await Jesus' return.

### **Moving Forward**

I think you will find that there is much to glean about the nature of salvation in James, 1-2 Peter, 1-3 John, and Jude. At the same time, we will see that the biblical authors wrote to help the church navigate some tricky issues, many of which are still with us today. In terms of reading strategy, it will be helpful to read each biblical book before reading the corresponding chapters in this volume. It will also be helpful to read the biblical texts, as much as possible, in one sitting to be attuned to the overall flow of the texts. Questions for reflection and discussion are included at the end of each chapter. You may want to read these after (or possibly before) each chapter to help stimulate your thinking.

May God grant that all of us will see more clearly and deeply the depths of his love in Christ, and enable us by his grace to love and serve him and those around us with greater faithfulness. To this end, let us now embark on our study of these important New Testament letters.

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Have you read any of the letters of James through Jude before? If so, what do you remember? What may have been difficult or confusing about them?
2. What does the *indicative* of salvation refer to, generally speaking?
3. What does the *imperative* of salvation refer to, generally speaking?
4. What two points are necessary to remember about the relationship between the indicative and the imperative?

## ABBREVIATIONS

ACCSNT	Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BST	Bible Speaks Today
EBT	Explorations in Biblical Theology
ESV	English Standard Version
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
NAC	New American Commentary
NACSBT	New American Commentary Studies in Bible and Theology
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIV	New International Version
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
NTC	New Testament Commentary [Baker]
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
PPS	Popular Patristics Series
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentary

ABBREVIATIONS

WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith
WLC	Westminster Larger Catechism
WSC	Westminster Shorter Catechism
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>

*Part 1*

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*SCALLYWAGS*





# I

## AN ETERNAL INHERITANCE: SALVATION IN I PETER



*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, to an inheritance that is  
imperishable, undefiled, and unfading. (1 Peter 1:3-4a)*

*But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy  
nation, a people for his own possession, that you may  
proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of  
darkness into his marvelous light. (1 Peter 2:9)*

*[Jesus] himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that  
we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his  
wounds you have been healed. (1 Peter 2:24)*

AS WE BOARDED the train in Paris that January evening, it was already getting dark. Along with four friends, I was on my way to Normandy to visit the famous D-Day beaches where the

Allied troops had landed in Europe during World War II. Being entrusted with the map, I was fairly certain I knew where we were going, and the appropriate station at which to disembark, but backpacking through Europe is not always a precise science. We had no hotel reservations, we had no plan of transportation once we got off the train, and none of us spoke French very well. (I might add that this was before the days of ubiquitous smartphones and GPS devices.) As we had already done on a number of occasions, we were planning on walking a short distance from the train station until we found suitable lodging for the night. When we stepped into the darkness of rural France, however, we could see little, aside from the train heading methodically down the rails to its next destination. We were on our own.

We headed in the direction where we surmised the closest town must be, but there were no landmarks, no lights, and apparently no end in sight. After what seemed like an hour, we finally found a building with the lights on. We stopped and asked directions, only to discover that the language was a significant barrier. After doing our best to translate the directions we received, we resumed our journey, but found ourselves back at the same place some time later! It was a frustrating and desperate feeling. When we eventually found a hotel, it was much nicer than anything we were used to. Despite the cost, we booked our rooms right away. When I removed my backpack that evening, the burden that was lifted was as much psychological as physical. We had finally made it to a haven of rest after being lost in the darkness of a foreign country.

Perhaps you have had a similar experience. It is an unsettling feeling to be in a strange place and not know what to do next. In many respects, this was the situation facing the first readers of 1 Peter. Peter wrote this letter to Christians who had very likely been displaced from their homes and transplanted in a foreign land far away from all that was

familiar. But they were also navigating a more fundamental issue, one that all Christians can identify with. The recipients of the letter found themselves professing a faith in a world that did not understand their convictions, which often led to pressures and persecutions. As we will see in this chapter, however, Peter wrote to encourage Christians with the immeasurable love of God directed toward them, even in the midst of their difficult circumstances. Although his readers were facing the vicissitudes of uncertainty, Peter explains that a glorious reward, one that is eternally secure, is laid up in heaven for them. In this chapter, we will primarily consider the theological underpinnings of Peter's message; in the next chapter, we will see how a solid grasp of the love of God for us in Christ empowers us to live faithfully in the present age, even in the face of fiery trials.

## **Elect Exiles: The Audience of 1 Peter**

### *The Historical Context of Exile*

The apostle Peter addresses his first epistle to the elect exiles of the Dispersion in various portions of what is called Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey): Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. Who were these people, and why were they described as *exiles*? Although we cannot be certain of all the historical details, the audience may have comprised Christians who had left Rome behind to be resettled in these Roman provinces.<sup>1</sup> If so, they may have gone to Asia Minor willingly, with the prospect of new opportunities. But it is more likely that they would have been forced to leave Rome because they were viewed as foreigners who were a threat to the order of Rome. We know, for example, that the emperor Claudius (reigned A.D. 41–54) established Roman

1. On the historical situation of 1 Peter, I largely follow Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 28–41.

cities in all five of the provinces mentioned in 1 Peter 1:1. We also know that Claudius was zealous for traditional Roman religion, and he expelled Jews from Rome in the A.D. 40s (see Acts 18:2). The Roman historian Suetonius, writing in the early second century A.D., even connects the expulsion of Jews from Rome to a certain *Chrestus*, which may be a misspelling of *Christus*, the Latin word for *Christ*.<sup>2</sup> If so, Claudius's deportations of Jews may also have included Christians. (In the early days of Christianity, it was often difficult for outsiders to distinguish between Christians and Jews.)

Thus, it is quite plausible that Christians may have been forced to leave Rome because of their religious beliefs. If so, it may also be true that these deportees would not have officially been Roman citizens, even if they and their families had lived in Rome for generations. This would leave them in the uncomfortable situation of being a people without a homeland: though they were living in Rome, their lack of Roman citizenship meant that they had to leave behind the only place that many of them probably ever knew as home. When they were resettled in Asia Minor, they were also viewed as outsiders by the local populaces. If this historical reconstruction is correct, then the audience may quite literally have been exiles without a homeland.

To make matters worse, even though the political and religious pressures of the city of Rome may have been left behind, the exiles were not free from religious, political, or social pressures in Asia Minor. There would have been immense pressure for the dispersed Christians to conform to local religious and cultural customs; failure to do so would have led to antagonism and accusations. For example, if Christians were abstaining from worshiping traditional deities who were thought to bless Rome, then they would have been considered to be unpatriotic

2. Suetonius, *Claudius* 25.4.

scallywags.<sup>3</sup> (In ancient Rome, religion and society were closely intertwined in ways that may strike many today, especially in the United States, as foreign.) How, then, could Christians live faithfully in a society that did not understand—much less abide by—Christian beliefs? Christians were viewed as immoral (their lifestyles did not accord with the broader culture, see 1 Peter 3:16; 4:4) and atheistic (Christians denied the traditional pantheon of gods).<sup>4</sup> The word *Christian* was even used in the early days of the church as a derogatory term (4:14, 16). Peter writes in the midst of this anti-Christian context, making it clear to his audience of Christians that they should supply no ground to the charge of being scallywags. As we will see in the next chapter, Christians are to be model citizens, paragons of patience, and steadfast in their love (2:15; 3:9, 13, 16).

### *Exile in Scripture*

Whatever the details of the historical situation in 1 Peter, the theological message of elect exiles is clear. Exile is an important theme in Scripture. In the Old Testament, exile is set forth as the preeminent covenantal curse if God's people turned aside to other gods and forsook the Lord (Lev. 26:27–39; Deut. 28:25–68). Exile meant that God's people were expelled from the Promised Land and were subject to pagan kings who had no desire to live according to God's law. To be in exile would be to hit rock bottom. As the Old Testament unfolds, we find that the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel (2 Kings 17), and the Babylonians took the Judahites into exile, even burning down Solomon's temple (2 Kings 25). These passages show us that, tragically, the covenantal curse of exile did become a reality for God's people.

3. See Robert Louis Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).

4. See Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 28–36.

Exile, however, is not the last word of the Old Testament. Isaiah prophesied a future overcoming of the exile and blessings for God's people (Isa. 40–66). We go on to read that after the Persians conquered the Babylonians, Persian King Cyrus allowed the Israelites to return to their homeland and even paid their way (2 Chron. 36:22; Ezra 1)! Their return led to the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls (Nehemiah) and the rebuilding of the temple (Ezra). The return from exile was a promising prospect for God's people, but the fullness of eschatological blessings that the prophets had foretold would come after the end of exile did not immediately come to fruition. The rebuilt temple was not as impressive as Solomon's temple. No king was on the throne in Jerusalem. God's people still struggled to live in covenantal faithfulness. After the prophet Malachi, who anticipates the return of Elijah, Israel endured around 400 years of silence and uncertainty. Was the exile really over, if the full blessings of the return from exile had not yet been experienced?

Enter Matthew's genealogy (Matt. 1:1–17). It may seem like a boring read to many today, but that may be because we do not understand the gravity of the darkness facing God's people in the days before Jesus came, and the corresponding anticipation for the coming king to occupy the throne of David. If the exile was over, where was the king? In reality, there was no legitimate Davidic king on the throne of Israel (Herod the Great was merely a squatter). In this context, Jesus is introduced as the Son of Abraham (he is descended from the fountainhead of Israel) and Son of David (he is the true King). Following the ministry of John the Baptist (who had come in the spirit and power of Elijah in accord with Malachi), Jesus embarked on a kingly ministry and defeated the enemies that oppressed God's people. Indeed, John the Baptist's ministry of preparation is explained by a prominent Old Testament passage that heralds the ultimate end of exile and a new day of salvation (Isa. 40:3).

The way in which Jesus brought salvation, however, was surprising. The Messiah was generally expected to be a king who would conquer the Roman Empire. Yet Jesus was put to death on a Roman cross! Was Jesus not the conquering King? Indeed he was (and is)! Whereas many of Jesus' contemporaries considered the Roman occupiers to be the primary enemy, Jesus fought a deeper, more significant battle primarily against sin and the kingdom of darkness. To be sure, Jesus' work has all sorts of ramifications for the rule of Rome (as we will see in 1 Peter), but Jesus did not come merely to topple Rome; he came to conquer the devil, sin, and even death (1 John 3:8). Jesus conquered the root of the problem.

How does all this relate to exile? Jesus preached the kingdom of God and showed himself to be the true King of Jerusalem in accord with Scripture (Zech. 9:9; Matt. 21:5). He spoke a word of judgment against the temple of his day, declaring himself to be the true Temple, and became the One who would reverse the curse on his people by undergoing the curse of death himself (Deut. 21:23; Gal. 3:13). The coming of the true King from the line of David and his substitutionary cursing brought the end of the exile and the beginning of the age of the fulfillment of God's blessings. Central to the age of blessing is the outpouring of the Spirit, which was anticipated by the Old Testament prophets (Joel 2:28-32). The prophets also anticipated the making of a new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34), the unification of God's people under one king (Ezek. 37:15-28), and the establishment of an everlasting kingdom (Isa. 9:6-7; Dan. 2:44). These are the blessings of the last days, which Peter indicates we are already beginning to experience, since we live in the last days (1 Peter 1:20). Yet the perfect experience of these blessings is yet to come. This tension is what theologians often call the *already* and *not yet* structure of New Testament eschatology (with *eschatology* meaning that we are now living in the latter days of blessing anticipated by



Scripture). Although the curse of the exile is already over for God's people because of the work of Jesus the Messiah, difficulties and hardships remain.

This brief survey of exile serves to show that the exile of the Christians in 1 Peter is not to be equated with the covenantal curses from the Old Testament, but refers more to the reality that there is a *not yet* to the perfect experience of God's blessings. We await the consummation of the kingdom of God that will occur when Christ returns. Yet we also must not neglect Peter's emphasis that we are already experiencing the benefits of living in the age of fulfillment.

Despite the melancholic imagery that the exile evokes, the term *exiles* is also a designation for God's true people in the midst of a foreign, ungodly society. By using this term, Peter connects his audience (who may have been mainly Gentiles) to the people of God in the Old Testament by focusing on their shared experience of exile. The way in which Peter uses this scriptural topos has significant implications for how we understand the church's relationship to Israel in the New Testament. Peter is telling us here that the church—made up of both Jew and Gentile—is heir to the Old Testament promises. He will return to this point throughout the letter.

Therefore, the term *exiles*, while perhaps reflecting the actual situation of the original audience, is the perfect metaphor for Peter to use to explain the relationship of Christians to the unbelieving world. Peter picks up on this theme for his readers in 1:1, 17; 2:11, and even refers to himself as an exile by writing from "Babylon" (5:13), which is probably a covert reference to Rome,<sup>5</sup> since Babylon was the quintessential place of exile in the Old Testament. By focusing on the theme of exile in these ways, Peter instructs his readers that they will not be comfortable in this world. In fact, they should expect

5. *Babylon* also seems to be referring to Rome on some level in Revelation 16–18.

opposition, because this present world, as it now exists, is not their true home.

### *God's Love for Exiles*

Peter not only reminds the readers that they are exiles, but refers to them as *elect* exiles. This is a significant juxtaposition of terms. Their status as *elect*, in addition to connecting them to God's *elect* people in the Old Testament (Deut. 7:6–8), is a way to assure the readers of God's love for them. Perhaps some reading this book consider election to be a controversial topic. Yet we should recognize that election is a biblical term. The Bible uses the concept of election to encourage us that God is at work in us even before we seek him. Election should encourage us that our salvation is God's work and God's blessing to us. Election is not intended to discourage us, force us to engage in impossible guessing games about God's secret decree, or entrap us in fearful introspection. Election is an eminently practical doctrine that should cause us to look outside ourselves to the priority of God's action in salvation—action that God took even before we were born! God's election is not based on anything good we have done or will do, but is solely because of God's good pleasure. And the good news is that we are chosen *in Christ*, the Beloved Son, and through faith in him we are granted the privilege of becoming beloved children of God (cf. Eph. 1:4–6).

This brings us to a very practical question: how do we know whether we are *elect*? One way is by asking whether we love the things God loves. Do we love Jesus? Do we look to him in faith as our only hope for salvation? Do we seek to honor him and follow his commandments? Do we mourn over and repent of our sins? These are some indications of election. There is no love more precious, no word more reassuring, than to know that God has purposed to choose us in Christ before the foundation of

the world—even if the world itself thinks we are no better than scallywags. We may be exiles, but we are *elect* exiles.

Along with the election of God, we also read of his foreknowledge (1 Peter 1:2). God not only foreknows our *situation*—a reminder that all things are in his hands—but also foreknows *his people*. As Edmund Clowney states: “The expression *foreknowledge* does not mean that God had information in advance about Christ, or about his elect. Rather it means that both Christ and his people were the objects of God’s loving concern from all eternity”<sup>6</sup> (1:20). This is a deep, loving, personal foreknowledge that should lead us to greater trust and praise of our heavenly Father, who is never taken by surprise.

In addition to the foreknowledge of God the Father, Peter also mentions the work of God the Holy Spirit and God the Son on our behalf (1 Peter 1:2). Here we have an opportunity to reflect on the nature of the indicative of our salvation. The sanctification of the Spirit most likely refers primarily to the work of the Spirit in setting us apart definitively from this world and establishing us in the kingdom of God. The Holy Spirit applies the finished work of Christ to us personally: when we trust in Christ by faith, his blood covers our sins and we become part of God’s holy people.

At least two Old Testament passages help us understand the richness of the imagery in 1 Peter 1:2. First is the covenant ceremony in Exodus 24:3–8. In this passage, God sets apart his holy people by the sprinkling of the blood of the covenant, and the people in turn promise to walk in his commands. Again we see that Old Testament imagery for the people of God is applied to the church. But as we read the narratives of the Old Testament, we find that the Israelites failed to keep their end of the covenant. The good news is that God promised to make a new

6. Edmund P. Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter: The Way of the Cross*, BST (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 33.

covenant, which is established by the blood of Christ (also mentioned in 1 Peter 1:2), and along with this new covenant comes the outpouring of God's Spirit.

This leads us to the second Old Testament text to consider, Ezekiel 36:24–28. In this text, we find that God will overcome the exile and establish his people in their own land. He will sprinkle clean water on them, and they will be clean. What is more, God promises his Spirit to his people to enable them to walk in his ways. Thus, the phrase “sanctification of the Spirit” in 1 Peter 1:2 not only may refer to the once-for-all setting apart of God's people as holy, but may also connote sanctification *by the Spirit* as we are enabled to walk in God's commands. These two aspects are complementary. Now that the Spirit has been freely poured out on all of God's people after Pentecost (Acts 2), we are enabled through the Spirit of Christ to grow more in holiness after the pattern of Christ.<sup>7</sup> Obedience is therefore not something we muster in our own natural strength, but is part of the benefit of being filled with God's Spirit.

We should also note in 1 Peter 1:2 the Trinitarian nature of salvation. Our salvation comes from one God in three persons, each of whom is the same in substance, equal in power and glory. And each person of the Godhead plays a special role in our salvation. In this text we read of the foreknowledge of God, the sanctification of the Holy Spirit, and the sprinkling of the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ. First Peter is an important reminder that the Trinity is not a doctrine that was invented by church councils long after the New Testament, but a truth that is revealed in Scripture itself. And this doctrine is not some theological abstraction with no practical implications; rather, our Trinitarian-shaped salvation empowers God's people to persevere

7. See further Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, *Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 142–44.

despite unfair allegations and treatment. Let us now consider the blessings of this Trinitarian salvation in more detail.

## The Blessings of Salvation

As Peter moves into a reflection on the blessings of salvation, it is striking that he sets it in the context of praise. The blessings of our salvation are incalculably great, and the proper response is to bless God for the riches he has bestowed upon us in Christ. Let us look at a few of these aspects here. Note, first of all, that Peter praises God for causing us to be born again to a living hope. *Born again* is a term that many in our culture associate with a certain type of conservative Christian belief; we may even hear it in association with voting demographics. But according to Jesus, being born again is a necessity for all who desire to be a part of the kingdom of God (John 3:3). In other words, the Bible is clear that a new birth is required, because we are all born into sin and are therefore guilty by nature and by infraction. And the impetus for this new birth, just as we saw in 1 Peter 1:2, is God's own will and action: *God* caused us to be born again to a living hope. Being born again is a gift that underscores the grace of our salvation. Who can take credit for being born?<sup>8</sup> We can also connect the new birth with the forgiving blood of Christ and the sanctification of the Spirit. Indeed, as we saw in Ezekiel 36, the promise of the coming Spirit included the promise of a new heart: an inward change by the definitive action of God that surpassed the blessings of previous generations (see Heb. 10:19–22). Again we see that we are living in the *already* of the kingdom.

Peter adds that we are born again to a *living hope*. This living hope is closely connected to—indeed, it is based on—our living Savior, who has been raised from the dead. Our hope

8. Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, NAC 37 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 61.

is living and abiding—it will never be annulled—because our Savior is the resurrected, exalted Lord of all, and he has secured the benefits of salvation for us. Our hope is also *living* in the sense that it is not futile; it is not based on deception.<sup>9</sup> Our living hope is as sure as the reality that Christ has been raised from the dead. We therefore have a living hope that does not disappoint, but is guaranteed for all time. What is more, this living hope even leads to fullness of life in the present time, as the benefits of the resurrection are already experienced in an anticipatory way by believers now (cf. Eph. 2:6).

But something else is significant about these blessings that we must not miss. God not only bestows on us a glorious salvation, but does so even though we were his enemies (Rom. 5:8). This former enmity is in view when Peter mentions the great mercy of God (1 Peter 1:3). We do not start out in a state of being naturally in God's favor, nor do we even begin in a neutral position. Instead, the Bible is clear that we are by nature enemies of God because of our sin. Yet in spite of the punishment we deserve, God has mercy on us. Not only does he freely forgive the sins of all who trust in Christ, but he bestows blessings beyond compare. It would be impossible to overstate the greatness of God's love for us in this passage.

In 1 Peter 1:4 we see the goal of our hope: "an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven" for all those who have been born again. This eternal inheritance is part of what our living hope has in view. In the Old Testament, the land and its fullness, with the accompanying blessing of life, was given as an inheritance to Israel as God's firstborn son (Ex. 4:22; Deut. 4:21; we also find that Israel was God's inheritance, Deut. 4:20). We also know, however, that the inheritance of the Promised Land was not the ultimate blessing; it was anticipatory. In the New Testament, this theme is further developed. Jesus

9. Jobes, *1 Peter*, 84.

proclaims that the meek will inherit the earth (Matt. 5:5), and Paul writes that the promise to Abraham was that he would inherit the whole world (Rom. 4:13). This incredible covenantal blessing can also be described in terms of eternal life (Matt. 19:29).<sup>10</sup> As those who are now born into the family of God, we also become those who inherit the blessings promised to God's children.

Peter's teaching that our heavenly inheritance is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading thus accords with Jesus' advice that we should store up for ourselves treasure in heaven, where it is secure (Matt. 6:20). In contrast to worldly goods, our eternal inheritance will never pass away, will never be tarnished, and will never wane in beauty. To speak in modern-day terms, our heavenly inheritance yields an incredible return on investment. What an encouragement this permanence would have been for those exiles who may have left homes, livelihoods, and possibly earthly inheritances behind. What an encouragement this should be for all of us who live as exiles in the present world. The world may not appreciate our heavenly inheritance, but Scripture tells us that followers of Christ are rich beyond all measure.

The permanence of this inheritance should motivate us in the midst of present pressures. Yet not only is it the inheritance that is kept for Christians, but Peter also tells us that Christians themselves are kept through faith as we await the salvation that will be revealed (1 Peter 1:5). Those whom God has foreknown and predestined he guards, and continues to work in, until the day of final salvation. In 1 Peter 1:23 we read that we "have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God." Our salvation is eternally secure because God's Word is eternally secure. Our inheritance is imperishable because God's Word is imperishable.

To drive this point home, Peter quotes from a prominent Old Testament passage (Isaiah 40) in 1 Peter 1:24–25. He con-

10. See Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 62–63.

trasts the eternal, effectual nature of God’s Word with the transience and hollow authority of human rulers who oppose God’s people. Isaiah 40 is a fitting passage for Peter to invoke, because it was addressed to exiles living in a foreign land under Babylonian rule. Isaiah foretold the day when the Lord would break through in history to deliver his people from exile. The situation of Isaiah’s audience and the situation of Peter’s audience were similar. Peter is assuring his readers that God knows their troubles and would deliver them.<sup>11</sup> Whereas opposition to believers in Christ is fleeting, their eternal inheritance is firmly established.

Peter thus promises that Christians and their inheritance are being preserved for “a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Peter 1:5). What is the salvation that is to be revealed? A comparison with 1 Peter 1:7 helps us see that the return of Christ is in view. We will find that the return of Christ is of the utmost importance, both doctrinally and practically, for the early Christians. Perhaps all sorts of things come to mind when we think about the return of Christ—fear, uncertainty, even the particular views of some popular books and movies—but Peter describes the return of Christ in terms of salvation and grace that will be brought to us (1:13; 5:4). Indeed, for the Christian, the return of Christ is something to eagerly anticipate. When Jesus returns, he will deliver us from opposition and usher in the age of perfection. When we understand the backdrop of the exiles in 1 Peter, it is easier to understand the early Christian prayer *Maranatha*—“come (quickly), Lord Jesus” (see 1 Cor. 16:22; Rev. 22:20). We should share in this prayer for the return of Jesus because the future blessings (which we begin to experience now) provide hope for the present.<sup>12</sup>

11. See D. A. Carson, “1 Peter,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 1019–22.

12. See similarly Jobes, *1 Peter*, 88.



## Not a People, Now a People

In the book of Exodus, God intervenes in history to rescue his people Israel, his firstborn son, from slavery in Egypt. After bringing plagues on Egypt and leading his people safely through the Red Sea, God establishes his covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai. Before the actual covenant ceremony or the giving of the Ten Commandments, Exodus 19:5–6 provides something of a charter for the nascent nation—a Declaration of Independence of sorts—as God declares Israel to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. This text stands in the background of 1 Peter 2:9: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession.”

We have already noted the love of God for his people in election, a theme that Peter reminds us of here. But now he identifies his readers as a royal priesthood and a holy nation. *Royal priesthood* reflects Israel’s status as the people of the great King. The Lord demonstrated his superiority to all other gods in the way he defeated Pharaoh and the Egyptians who opposed him and his people. Israel was also a priesthood, which pointed to their role as mediating the knowledge of God to the peoples around them. This will have significant ramifications for our discussion in the next chapter. As a *holy nation*, God’s people were set apart by their covenant with God. They were therefore to reflect the holiness of their King by living according to God’s law.

Both Exodus and 1 Peter reflect the indicative-imperative structure that pervades the biblical worldview. Notice that before God gives his law (first in Ex. 20–23), he intervenes to save his people from slavery (Ex. 4–17). Thus, the indicative precedes the imperative already in the Old Testament. Likewise in 1 Peter, Christians are identified as the elect of God that are chosen for God’s own possession (indicative). On the basis of this great indicative, we are set apart to be holy, in order that we might

proclaim the excellencies of the One who has called us out of darkness into light (1 Peter 2:9). Understanding this structure should greatly help if we are ever tempted to think that either the Old Testament or the New Testament gives us commands to follow in order that we might *earn* salvation. May it never be! Instead, God intervenes to save his people, and his chosen people are consequently to live lives of holiness as a beloved, royal priesthood.

The greatness of this blessing for God's people is magnified when we take into consideration that this high privilege is now applied to those who were outside the general purview of covenant blessings in the Old Testament. Peter is likely addressing mainly Gentiles (that is, non-Jews), those who were formerly not a people (2:10), who had been redeemed from futile ways inherited from their ancestors (1:18). Again we see the great mercy of God in extending the privileges of being his people to all who believe in Christ, even those who may be Gentiles by race.

Since this applies to most who make up the church today, it is worth pausing to reflect on the magnanimous mercy of God to seek those of us who by nature might not be expected to participate in God's blessing, but who have now been brought near because of the scope of God's love. Once we were in darkness, without mercy, and apart from Christ. But now, if we believe in Christ, we are the people of God who receive mercy and walk in his marvelous light. Gentiles are not second-class citizens in the eyes of God; they are not "Plan B." Instead, Peter shows us that the church, composed of both Jew and Gentile, is the people of God and heir to the glorious promises of the Old Testament. Therefore, Peter uses the Old Testament extensively to explain the glories of Christ's work.

Before we continue, we should consider two aspects of how we should understand the Old Testament prophets in relation to our salvation. We will focus here on 1 Peter 1:10–12. First,

Old Testament prophecy is thoroughly about Christ's sufferings and subsequent glories. Peter is not the first to point this out, but is following the explanation given by Jesus himself, who explained the Christological character of Old Testament revelation on the road to Emmaus after his resurrection:

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem." (Luke 24:44-47)

Second, Peter instructs us that the Old Testament prophets were not serving themselves, but were serving those of us who live in the age of fulfillment. Here we might remember Jesus' words that the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than the greatest prophet of the old era, John the Baptist (Matt. 11:9-13). The prophets were looking forward to the days of fulfillment, to the days when God's true King would rule over all of God's people, and throngs from all over the world would worship the God of Israel. That day is now becoming a reality through Christ, the King of kings.

Returning to Peter's appropriation of Old Testament themes, we find that he utilizes the temple on various levels to describe our salvation in Christ. The temple was immeasurably important for the nation of Israel. Much more than just a place to gather for worship, the temple was in many ways the center of all religious life in Israel. It was the place where sacrifice for sin was made. It was the locus of God's presence with his people. It was understood to be the place where heaven and earth met. If we want a sense of the temple's significance, we might read Solo-

mon's lengthy prayer at the dedication of the temple in 1 Kings 8 (and we might also note the twenty-two thousand oxen and one hundred twenty thousand sheep that were sacrificed on that occasion!). Later, when the exiles returned from Babylon, one of their first desires was to rebuild the temple that had been razed.

In the New Testament we must focus our understanding of the temple through the lens of Jesus. Although Jesus is presented at the temple as a child, and visits the temple on numerous occasions, he also cleanses (or we might even say *curses*) the temple (Mark 11:12–21). Additionally, he predicts the destruction of the temple (Matt. 24:2) and even refers to himself as the Temple that would be raised three days after its destruction (John 2:19–21). Should we then still consider the temple to be important? Indeed, we must. Yet we must also recognize that the temple is more than just a building in Palestine. Jesus has revealed himself to be the true Temple, the reality to which the temple building pointed. He is the One in whom the glory of God dwells bodily (John 1:14). He is the One in whom we trust as our sacrifice for sin. He is the Mediator between heaven and earth. Thus, Jesus' statements show us that the temple is not ultimately a stone building. The temple points us to the person and work of Christ, the true Temple.

This brief survey helps provide the biblical context for what Peter says about the temple. In 1 Peter 2:4, Jesus is identified as a living Stone who was rejected by men but is exceedingly precious to God. This passage has in view not just any old rock, but a living, Temple Stone. In addition to Isaiah 28:16, which mentions Mount Zion, Peter cites Psalm 118:22 to refer to Jesus as the rejected Cornerstone. Jesus quoted from this psalm while he was in the temple during the last days of his earthly ministry, to explain his role as the rejected Messiah who was precious to God (Matt. 21:33–44). Jesus is the living, messianic Cornerstone—the ultimate Temple.

First Peter 2:4 also includes the people of the church as part of the temple in the new era (cf. 1 Cor. 3:16; Eph. 2:20–22). What is true of Jesus is true by extension of Jesus’ people, who are united to him by faith. Jesus is the living Stone, the resurrected Messiah who is the locus of God’s presence and brings his people in as living stones to be part of the ever-expanding temple of God, mediating God’s presence as a royal priesthood to the surrounding world.<sup>13</sup>

We also see that Jesus as the Cornerstone is rejected by men. Yet—and this is hugely significant for Peter’s audience—this does not mean that he was rejected by God. On the contrary, Jesus is the exceedingly precious Cornerstone to God, even though the world (and many among his own people) rejected him (Luke 2:34). This perspective provides encouragement for God’s people today. Although we may be rejected by the world as scallywags, we are exceedingly precious to God if we trust in Christ. The temple imagery is one way in which Peter communicates this truth.

The rejection of Jesus also highlights the permanence of our hope in a slightly different way. Christ is the Stone of stumbling and Rock of offense: those who revile him will not destroy him, but they will fall. The promise for all who trust in Christ is that they will not be put to shame, since Christ is the immovable Cornerstone that will never be shaken. Like the rock not made by human hands that crushes all opposing kingdoms in Daniel 2:44–45, Christ and his kingdom will abide forever.

## **Ransomed by the Precious Blood of Christ**

As we have already noted, our holiness before God comes through the blood of Christ. Let us now consider three key texts that reveal the nature of Christ’s work for us.

13. For more on the temple in Scripture, see G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, NSBT 17 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

First is 1 Peter 1:18–21, where Peter emphasizes the preciousness of Christ’s blood to ransom us from sin. We have already seen Peter’s concern to communicate God’s deep love for his people, and here we see it again. What could be more precious to God than the blood of his own Son? That which Abraham did not have to do (sacrifice his son), God himself did for us. Paul explains the logic of this in Romans 8:32: “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” God has demonstrated his love for us by sending his own Son as the spotless, sacrificial Lamb. Yet we should also not miss Christ’s active role in going to the cross: Jesus was not merely a passive victim in his death on our behalf. He was every bit as committed to our salvation as his Father. The persons of the Trinity work together in perfect harmony. Jesus delighted to do his Father’s will, submitting even when he was facing the difficulty of the cross. Consider what great love Christ has, to come to us in our humanity and willingly endure the ridicule and shame of rejection for us and for our salvation.

Jesus’ death was necessary because he had to *redeem* us. This is a significant term that conveys the reality that we are by nature enslaved to sin. God must intervene to deliver us from the bondage of our own doing, and only the blood of Christ is able to redeem us fully from sin. All the sacrifices from the Old Testament were anticipating his final, perfect sacrifice that no longer needs to be repeated (Heb. 10:14). We should also not miss, however, that Jesus’ death is not the end of the story. Jesus’ death is effectual because he overcame the penalty of death through his resurrection and ascension into heaven. Indeed, 1 Peter 1:21 reminds us that our hope is in the slain Lamb of God, because he has been raised from the dead and is thus the source of eternal hope.

The imagery of a spotless Lamb slain for his people is also in view in the second text to consider, 1 Peter 2:22–25. Here Peter cites

Isaiah 53, the famous Old Testament passage describing the ministry of the Suffering Servant. We will see in the next chapter how this provides the model for Christians in our own day, but we dare not miss the connection between Jesus as the Suffering Servant and the forgiveness of our sins. Before we move to the imperative, we must take due note of the great indicative of our salvation, that God's Son has come as God's Servant and suffered in our place. He died willingly that he might reconcile us to God. Apart from our trusting in his wounds by faith, we remain slaves to sin. Here we are reminded of the actual suffering of Jesus on our behalf, most acutely as he died on the tree (cross) for our sins. What Jesus accomplished during his earthly life is crucially important; were Jesus' life, death, and resurrection not actual, historical events, then we would still be in our sin. But thanks be to God that Jesus really did come, he really did pay the penalty for our sins, and we really can have eternal life through him. He is the Servant who suffered on behalf of his wayward people.

Before we consider the third text that explains Jesus' work, it is illuminating to observe that Jesus not only is the slain Lamb and Suffering Servant, but is also described in overlapping imagery as the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 2:25). Thus Jesus is both the Lamb of God who pays the penalty for sin and the Shepherd of the sheep who guides his people and gives his life for his sheep (John 10:14-15).

The third text to consider is 1 Peter 3:18-22, which also combines the suffering of Jesus with his subsequent glory, much as we saw in 1:18-21. The emphasis in 3:18-22, however, is more on the exaltation of Christ than on his suffering. Before we consider this text further, I should point out that this is a confusing and sometimes controversial text, especially verses 19-21. These are important verses and important issues. But it is not my intention to address all the questions that may arise when one reads 1 Peter 3. In my estimation, the main message of 3:18-22

can be easily missed because of the sticky issues that arise in verses 19–21. So for the present discussion I want to focus on verses 18 and 22, passing over the details of 3:19–21. (Interested readers can turn to the appendix for some guidance on how to understand 3:19–21.)

First Peter 3:18 makes several points. First, Christ suffered once for our sins. His sacrifice did not need to be repeated because it was perfect. Second, he suffered in the flesh. The physical suffering of Jesus may seem obvious to us, but it was not always obvious in the early church (nor is it always obvious today) that Jesus really did physically suffer for sins. Third, Jesus is the fully Righteous One, the One who had no sin, and he suffered as a substitute for those who are unrighteous. Jesus was uniquely qualified to suffer for sins because he was the spotless Lamb, the One who was completely free from the blemish of sin. This is true not only because he lived a sinless life of true devotion to God, but also because he was born of a virgin. The manner of his birth guaranteed that he had a true human nature, yet his lack of a physical father meant that Jesus was not implicated in the sin of Adam’s race. Fourth, Jesus died to bring us to God. We have already seen how Christ’s death brings peace with God, but it is worth noting again because of how fundamental this is to the purpose of the cross. Jesus’ death reconciles us to God, and this reconciliation is necessary because our sin puts us naturally at enmity with God.

Fifth—and this is where much of the emphasis lies in this text—Jesus overcame death by being made alive by the Spirit.<sup>14</sup> We thus observe a contrast here between the low estate of Jesus’

14. Readers of the ESV will note that I am not following this translation precisely at this point. There is debate about the nuance of the Greek wording here, and the words are flexible enough to be translated different ways. I take the phrase to include a dative of agency (“by”) with reference to the (Holy) Spirit. My translation here accords with the NIV (1984), though the more recent NIV (2011) simply reads “in the Spirit.” See further Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter; Jude*, 183–84.



humiliation (being made low unto a physical death) and the high estate of Jesus' exaltation (being made alive by the Spirit). From this point Peter mentions some more or less parenthetical details about how this relates to Noah (1 Peter 3:19–21a) and then returns to Jesus' resurrection in 3:21b. The exaltation of Jesus in 3:22 includes his ascension and present reign far above all rulers, powers, and authorities (Eph. 1:20–23); no being in the universe is superior to Jesus. The One who suffered in the flesh for our sins is the One who was made alive by the Holy Spirit and overcame all hostility. The pattern of Jesus shows us how the agony of suffering can lead to glory unimaginable. The call for Christians is to trust in Christ, the ultimate Victor, who will return one day as the conquering Lord of all and deliver his people.

## Conclusion

In spite of the trials of living as exiles in this world, 1 Peter encourages God's people with the eternal inheritance that has been secured for us through the work of Christ. Our heavenly reward is sure because God's Word is sure, and because Jesus has overcome all opposition as the reigning King of kings. The reality of the greatness of our salvation is given for our encouragement in the midst of difficulties. Though Jesus is resurrected and rules over all opposition, we must also not miss the pattern of his life: suffering first, then glory. For those who want to experience the fullness of divine blessings, we should not expect that we will receive them in a different way from Jesus himself. In fact, as we will see in the next chapter, the pattern of Jesus' life is the pattern for the Christian's life as well.

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Have you ever been lost or displaced from your home? How did it feel not to know where you were or when you would get home?

2. How was the physical situation of the exiles in 1 Peter related to the spiritual reality of being exiles?
3. What do you think of when you hear the term *election*? What does the use of this term in 1 Peter tell us about God's work in salvation?
4. How might the inheritance that Peter speaks of resonate with the experience of the first audience? How does that inheritance motivate us in the present?
5. Discuss the implications of the following statement: "Our salvation is eternally secure because God's Word is eternally secure."
6. What images come to mind when you think of the return of Christ? What do you think Peter would have us envision?
7. How should the life and ministry of Christ impact our understanding of the temple today?
8. What does Peter emphasize about the nature of Christ's death?

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