

1 Peter: Persisting Through Difficulty

Session 1 Introduction 1 Peter 1:1-13

I. Introduction to 1 Peter

1. In order to understand 1 Peter, it is necessary to know something about the those to whom it was written and their circumstances. In general, we can say that the basic challenge that 1 Peter offers is that of orienting all of life to God and dealing with the difficulties which this will bring about. In other words, 1 Peter requires us to think about our fundamental allegiances and how we are willing to act upon them.
2. Most New Testament scholars place 1 Peter in the category of the “Catholic Epistles,” meaning that it is one of several circular or general letters in the New Testament (the others are 2 Peter, James, Jude, and 1, 2,3 John).
3. The recipients of the letter are in “Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bythnia” (1:1) or modern Turkey. 2:10 seems to hint that the addressees are Gentiles who have converted to Christianity from paganism. This does not mean that the addressees were exclusively Gentile; there were probably Jewish Christians among the churches addressed. As you read the letter, you will notice that it makes many references to what we now call the Old Testament. We need to remember that for the readers of 1 Peter, the Old Testament was simply the Bible. (We will need to remember that this letter was probably read in the churches to which it was sent with the reader being someone who was authorized to carry the letter. This person would not only have read the letter aloud but would also have interpreted it at points.)
4. We get a hint about the situation of the readers in 2:11 where they are addressed as “sojourners” and “exiles”. In other words, these people are being addressed as foreigners in their own homeland. The reason for this is not hard to guess. Their conversion to Christianity has meant that they no longer participated in the civic religion that was an essential element of the Greco-Roman world. They are now on the cultural margins of society and appear strange and even threatening to their fellow citizens who interpret their religion as fundamentally antisocial.
5. While the emperor Nero launched a general persecution of Christians sometime between AD 63-65, a persecution in which Peter himself was executed (AD 64-65), this persecution only took place in Rome. 1 Peter seems to address Christians who were the objects of social ostracism, slander and scorn. They were not persecuted by the government but by their fellow citizens. The refusal of Christians to participate in the civic religion (and we must remind ourselves that in the Greco-Roman world there was no “separation of church and state”) was seen as subversive and this is why Christians would be called “atheists”

(they did not worship the recognized deities of the city or the state). From the standpoint of those who participated in the civic religion, the Christians were placing them at risk due to their refusal to honor the deities of the city and empire.

6. 1 Peter addresses a perennial question: how should Christians persist in hostile situations, situation in which their faith is not only rejected but regarded as dangerous and strange? How should Christians think of themselves as they realize that the culture in which they live is not their real home? To put this question in a very specific way: How should we live if we are not primarily Americans but “sojourners” in America?

II. 1 Peter 1:1-2

1. Peter addresses the suffering of his fellow Christians. In doing this, two things are completely missing. First, Peter never suggests that their suffering is a punishment sent upon them by God. Quite the reverse is true. Peter makes it clear that they are suffering as a consequence of their faith. For Peter, faithfulness will bring suffering and the archetypal case of this is Jesus. Second, Peter never offers cheap consolation, the kind that says things like “Well, just think how much worse it could be. You should be thanking God.” Instead, Peter acknowledges genuine suffering and injustice. Instead of offering cheap consolation, he invites his addressees to contemplate the life of Jesus.
2. This is the greeting of the letter which, following ancient form, names the writer first, then identifies the recipient and finally offers some greeting/blessing. Such greetings are not simply fluff for they often give advance hints of the author’s main concerns. (A good example of this is Romans 1:1-7.)
3. Peter identifies himself simply as “an apostle of Jesus Christ” (1:1). The word apostle has the sense of “official representative”. Peter is an authorized representative of Jesus Christ, someone authorized to act on his behalf.
4. Significantly, Peter devotes much more effort to identifying the recipients of the letter. This identification is not fluff but has the purpose of reminding them of their true identity. They may be treated as “exiles” (1:1) and “sojourners” (2:11) or, in other words illegal aliens, but this is not their true identity.
5. Peter refers to them as “elect exiles of the dispersion” (1:1) and in doing so draws on the language of the Old Testament. The ideas of exile and diaspora have their origin in the Babylonian Exile (586 BC) in which the majority of the population of Judah was removed to Babylon. In this case, the terms have a theological meaning and not a geographical one. The recipients of 1 Peter are “exiles” in their homelands because their homelands are not their real home. Jews who lived outside of Palestine were spoken of as being part of the Diaspora, those living outside the promised land of Palestine. The recipients of 1 Peter are also living outside the promised land which is creation brought to its fulfillment in Christ. Peter is calling their attention to an important fact. Their state of exile and suffering is not the result of punishment for sin but the consequence of their faith in Jesus as Lord. In a world not fully redeemed, those who endeavor to live under Christ’s lordship will suffer as a matter of course.
6. It is important to note Peter’s strategy here. The temptation for those suffering for their faith, who are experiencing persecution for not “fitting in,” is to begin the process of

assimilation. Peter clearly wants to guard against this. Their true identity is the one they have before God. This is why Peter addresses them as “elect” (1:1). This word is drawn from the Old Testament where it is less about the predestination of individuals to salvation and far more about God creating a people who will serve him. 1 Peter 2:9 is clearly an allusion to Exodus 19:4-6. Peter’s “illegal aliens” have an identity through (gracious) election and are God’s “treasured possession among all the peoples” (Exodus 19:5). Elect here does not mean “individually chosen to receive a guaranteed salvation” but “chosen by God to be his witnessing people before the world”. To be God’s elect in this sense is to be constantly “on the way,” on pilgrimage to the promised land (which is an image for the fulfillment of God’s purposes). God’s elect are citizens of God’s Kingdom. The second century *Epistle to Diognetus* describes Christians as those who “live in their respective countries, but only as resident aliens; they participate in all things as citizens, and they endure all things as foreigners.”

7. All of this may sound odd to us who think of ourselves as living in a “Christian nation” or, at least, as having some historical connection with Christendom. But what if a “Christian nation” is less a reality than something we have constructed to help blur the edges of the Church and the nation?
8. It is important to notice that the recipients are described in a Trinitarian way. Their identity is the result of the “foreknowledge” of the Father, the “sanctification” of the Holy Spirit and “obedience” to Jesus Christ.
9. The situation of the recipients is “according to the foreknowledge of God the Father” (1:2). Once again, this is not a matter of predestination but a matter of the divine purpose. It is not the case that their current suffering indicates that God’s plan has somehow failed. Rather, their suffering is actually part of God’s plan because in this plan suffering is the prelude to glory (and this is most clearly seen in Christ). Present suffering does not indicate that God is unconcerned about us or that God’s plan has failed. Present suffering is part of the plan.
10. The Holy Spirit is the agent of God’s power and is particularly associated with sanctification—the Holy Spirit brings about holiness in humans. The phrase “in the sanctification of the Holy Spirit” (1:2) is enormously important for it indicates the “place” where God’s people dwell. While they are “exiles” in the world, they live in the Holy Spirit. This requires a “conversion of the imagination”. Christians, Peter says, may dwell in certain geographical and political spaces but their real “home” is within the realm of holiness brought about by the Holy Spirit.
11. The phrase “for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood” (1:2) draws upon the Old Testament’s theology of atonement. Jesus’ perfect obedience makes it possible for him to be the perfect sacrifice of atonement for sin. On the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16), it was the sprinkling of sacrificial animal’s blood on the Mercy Seat that brought about atonement for Israel’s sins. Jesus’ perfect obedience (through suffering and death!) reveals his perfect love of God. The Holy Spirit incorporates Christians into his act of perfect love/obedience and in this way, they are released from the guilt and power of sin. It is important to realize that the fundamental role of the Holy Spirit is to introduce the obedience/love of the Son into the people of God.

12. “May grace and peace be multiplied to you.” The electing and sanctifying work of the Triune God within the Church is what sustains it and allows the Church to bear witness in the world. This is a reminder that the Church does not create or sustain herself, though her members (afflicted with sin) will often think that she does.

III. 1 Peter 1:3-12

1. 1:3-12 is one continuous sentence in Greek! This section is a doxology which declares the mercy of God. It has the important function of preparing the letter’s recipients for the reception of the instruction which the letter offers. Note that in the midst of struggle and persecution, Peter wishes to focus attention on the gracious mercy of God. This calls attention to an important fact: Christians place their current struggles within the larger context of God’s character and action. The Church’s primary mission, even in the midst of persecution and difficulty, is to praise God and to proclaim and celebrate his gracious work of redemption, reconciliation and sanctification.
2. At the center of this section is the Old Testament’s notion of God’s mercy, God’s faithful lovingkindness. All God’s relationships with his human creatures flow from his gracious and generous nature and always result from his initiative.
3. 1:3-5: One of God’s greatest blessings is named in v. 3. God has revealed himself with specificity such that we know him for who he is. God is never simply a generic “god” but always the “Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”. The meaning of God’s fatherhood is not drawn from our experience (good or bad) but what from what God has revealed about himself to Israel and, finally, in Jesus Christ. God reveals himself to be the One who creates out of sheer generosity (creation is not necessary) and the One who elects, redeems, justifies and sanctifies out of sheer generosity (God does not simply act in response to our perceived needs). In order to understand who God is, we have to closely attend to the narrative of Scripture which begins with the gracious call of Abraham and concludes with the gracious coming of the Holy Spirit. Only as we attend to this narrative, do we really understand God’s “great mercy” (1:3). All of God’s benefits can be summarized in one sentence: God has “caused us to be born again to a living hope” (1:3). In 1 Peter, this rebirth has a double meaning. It refers to both to the fact that we have been adopted as God’s children and to the fact that God’s new creation has begun in Jesus’ resurrection and that we share in this new creation. Through the gracious mercy of God the Father, we are adopted as his children and given a share in the new creation through the resurrection of Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Through faith and baptism we have been included into the messianic community which has a “living hope” (a hope that is lively and life-giving) because the Head of the Church has been raised from death, has ascended into heaven and now rules over creation. We may now look forward to final redemption, the resurrection of the dead, this enables us to persist through difficulty. The Christian pattern of life is one of cruciformity or Christoformity—conformation to Christ which involves faithfulness through suffering and weakness. Because we are now God’s adopted children, we may expect to receive an “inheritance” from God. In the Old Testament, Israel’s “inheritance” was the land of Palestine; the Christian “inheritance” is new creation. This inheritance is “kept in heaven for you” (1:4).

This does not mean that we are going to heaven to receive the inheritance but that it is completely secure, not subject to the uncertainties of earthly life. It is kept securely in heaven but will be given to us on earth at the arrival of God's Reign and the renewal of creation (Revelation 21:3). Note the implication of this: even the most powerful of political structures can offer no inheritance! No nation, no culture and no government can offer any real inheritance, so the inheritance that God guards for his adopted children is the only one there is. In the midst of history with its temptations, disasters, suffering and ambiguity, God guards the faith of his Church so as to preserve its witness (1:5). The resurrection of Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit point to the fact that there is a "salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1:5). This salvation is what has already happened in Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension and in the coming of the Holy Spirit. This salvation is the new creation and in the risen Jesus and the Holy Spirit and it is already present as a reality but will appear in its fullness "at the last time". Of course, the Jesus' resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit have already initiated "the last time". The Church lives in anticipation of this future which it has already partially entered.

4. 1:6-9: The Church is empowered by a "living hope" (1:3) which means that it looks forward to the completion of God's work. A living hope is energizing. Because Jesus' resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit have already changed things (Romans 6:5-14), it is possible for the Church to "result" (or even "exult"). This is the case even in the midst of "trials". "Living hope" put afflictions in context and makes it possible to rejoice. While the recipients of the letter endure social ostracism, hostility, skepticism and suspicion, they can rejoice because their faith will be vindicated. It is important to note there that the suffering spoken of here is very specific. It is not the suffering of a difficult job, or marriage difficulties or a health problem. Suffering here means suffering because of one's faith and one's witness to that faith. Conformity to Christ (Christoformity) will put us at odd with the world and we must be ready for the consequences of this. For Peter, that this kind of suffering comes upon Christians is no surprise. The Church is always in a process in which its faith is authenticated (proved genuine). Does it bear it bear confident witness to Jesus' merciful, non-violent and trusting overcoming of evil or does it attempt to adjust to the "realities" of the world (which, of course, are not realities)? The question for Christians is that of whether we are more formed by our "living hope" or by our conformity to the world. For Peter, faith (which involves trust in the absence of knowledge) leads to "joy that is inexpressible" (1:8) for the simple reason that it involves participation in the perfect joy of God. Faith leads to joy because it carries with it the sure hope of realization in the new creation.
5. 1:10-12: Christ and the salvation he brings did not appear unanticipated and unheralded. There was a long period of preparation wrought by the "Spirit of Christ" (1:11). This is an interesting phrase in that the Holy Spirit is usually presented as being sent from the Father. Paul can speak of the "Spirit of the Lord" (2 Corinthians 3:17) and, thus, associate the Spirit with Christ. This close association suggests that the Spirit bears witness to Christ and that his work is fundamentally to conform people to Christ (Romans 8:29). The Spirit enabled the prophets to offer prefigurations of Christ's suffering and glorification. We should not understand the Old Testament as containing a series of predictions regarding Christ, predictions which only required a sharp mind to notice and then correctly interpret

6. them. The actual events of Jesus' death and glorification (resurrection, ascension) make it possible to see this pattern embedded in the Old Testament. The theme which Peter sounds here is exactly the theme Paul sounds in Romans 8:17: the messianic people follow the pattern of the Messiah which is that of suffering first and then glory. The "Spirit of Christ" revealed to the prophets that these prefigurations were not for them but for a later time when the Old Testament scriptures would be read according to the Messiah "in the Messiah". When we think about the "end of history" we often think about a series of events. Peter reminds us that Christ is himself "the end of history" for in him the full meaning of God's work is disclosed. Apart from the Messiah, the Old Testament remains something of a closed book. This is the meaning of Luke 24:26-27. Note the source of the "good news" (Gospel): the Holy Spirit (1:12). There is no good news apart from the work of the Son and the Holy Spirit.

IV. Questions for Reflection

1. Peter refers to his addressees as "exiles" (1:1). What would it mean for you to consider yourself an "exile" in America (in the sense of this not being your true home)?
2. It has been suggested that one of our greatest problems today is that many people live without any real sense of hope and that, in the absence of it, tend toward cynicism, anger or depression. What would it mean to live with a true sense of "living hope" (1:3) grounded in Jesus' resurrection?
3. One of the meanings of our "new birth" (1:3) in Christ is that we are God's adopted children. What would this mean to you in daily life?
4. Peter reminds us that we are called to be "holy in all your conduct" (1:15). What would this mean for each of us in our current context?