

1 & 2 Peter: Faith Under Fire

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, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

(1 Peter 1:3–5 ESV)

Faith Foundations

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1 Peter 1:1-5

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Introduction:

Good morning. I want to invite you to open your Bibles this morning to 1 Peter 1:1; that on page 1014 in your pew Bibles. We are starting something new today; we are beginning a series that we have called “Faith Under Fire”. Over the next several weeks and months we are going to be looking at Peter’s letter to a group of Christians living in Pontus Bithynia – a Roman Province just south of the Black Sea in modern day Northern Turkey.

These people were among the very first Christians to experience formal persecution at the hands of the Romans.

Most of the difficulties that we read about in the pages of the New Testament were difficulties between Christians and Jews. The church was mixed – it has Jews and Gentiles in it – but it had come out of Old Testament Judaism – so there were all kinds of difficulties related to that separation, distinction and divorce. The Apostle Paul actually began as a Jewish persecutor of the church and then finished his life as a Jewish Christian evangelist to the Gentiles. This was a turbulent time – but here in 1 Peter we see the very beginnings of Roman STATE persecution of Christians.

This is a different thing and Peter is writing to stabilize his people in the face of this new and

terrifying development.

So, in a sense, 1 Peter was written to people who were, more or less exactly where we are now.

Thom Schreiner puts it this way. He says:

“The only specific suffering noted is discrimination and mistreatment and verbal abuse from former colleagues and friends”¹

So this is MILD persecution – this is social disfavour, this is financial marginalization, this is legal harassment – in other words, this is exactly where we are.

And of course things don’t always go from bad to worse – but in the case of these particular Christians they unfortunately did. About 50 years AFTER Peter wrote this letter these same Christians – or perhaps their children - were investigated by Pliny the Younger on behalf of the Emperor Trajan – Rome looked in on this growing community of Christians. There were so many converts from paganism to Christianity that it actually began changing the local economy and so in AD 112 Pliny was commissioned to investigate the church in Pontus Bithynia and a significant number of Christians were executed upon confession of faith in Jesus Christ.

Thankfully, however, that persecution was short-lived. Christians were very useful citizens and Trajan decided that the Empire could not afford to eradicate such valuable people so he wrote to Pliny and ordered him to cease his investigation.

So these dark clouds that we are reading about in 1 Peter DID IN FACT turn into a full-blown storm of persecution.

But you need to hear the timeline.

There were 50 years of explosive growth and ministry between the MILD persecution that lies behind this letter and the SEVERE PERSECUTION that happened one generation later.

¹ Thomas Schreiner, *1,2 Peter, Jude* The New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 2003), 30.

That's a lifetime of useful Christian service that Peter did not want them to miss out on. That's what this letter is about.

To these TROUBLED and AFFLICTED and HARASSED Christians Peter says: "Now is not the time to hide! Now is not the time to stock up on canned goods, and lock yourself in the basement while you wait for the Rapture – there is MINISTRY TO BE DONE, there ARE SOULS TO BE WON, THERE IS INFLUENCED TO BE USED even if that means that there is SUFFERING TO BE ENDURED. Don't check out, don't be afraid, don't stop speaking to your friends and loved ones about the person and work of Jesus Christ."

That's the message of 1 Peter and that is a message that we need to hear again today so with that in mind I invite you to hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 1.

1 Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia,

2 according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: May grace and peace be multiplied to you.

3 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, 4 to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, 5 who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Peter 1:1–5 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Now if you are a Bible reader then you probably know that most of the letters in the New Testament follow the same basic pattern. They start with theology and they end with application and ethics. Scholars like to say that they begin with INDICATIVES and they end with IMPERATIVES.

Indicates are words that state plainly what is true.

Imperatives are commands that tell us what to do.

And the order is always the same – the order conditioned by the Gospel. The Gospel begins with the truth of who God is, who we are and how God has saved us through the person of Christ.

Those are true things. Those are finished things. And those are the things that we have to deal with first.

And only AFTER we have dealt with those things can we begin to hear and address ethical imperatives.

By the way this is not just the pattern in the New Testament. You see this in the Old Testament too. What are the opening words of the 10 Commandments?

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.” (Exodus 20:2–3 ESV)

Do you hear the pattern?

You need to hear the truth before you hear the commands.

That is the way your Bible is put together. If you reverse the order you get legalism. If you stop after the indicatives and you never move on to the imperatives you get antinomianism – you get permissiveness. You’ve got to read the whole thing and you’ve got to read it in order.

1 Peter is laid out exactly as you would expect.

In the first 12 verses of the letter Peter tells us the truth. He tells what is and then in the rest of the letter he tells us how to live in response. The structure isn’t hard to spot. What’s the first word in verse 13?

Therefore.

In light of what I’ve just told you, live this way.

Those first 12 verses – particularly verses 1-5 which we are going to talk about today – form the theological basis for the instructions Peter provides to these Christians who are living in a hostile world. And everything we are going to talk about for the rest of this series will be grounded in the

foundational truths that Peter unfolds in these initial verses. These are FAITH FOUNDATIONS – these are the truths you need to hold onto if you want to survive the coming storm.

6 Foundational Christian Truths:

There are 6 of them; first one is this:

1. You were saved by the will of God

Look at verse 1:

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1 Peter 1:1 ESV)

The first thing Peter says to these beleaguered Christians is that they are ELECT. They are CHOSEN. He says, ‘you need to know this: GOD CHOSE YOU. You didn’t chose him.’”

Now I know that some people are offended by that – but they need to get over it. Jesus said that. He said it to Peter which is probably why Peter said it to these people. In John 15 Jesus said to Peter and some others:

You did not choose me, but I chose you (John 15:16 ESV)

Now of course there is a sense in which they did choose Jesus but Jesus is saying here that HIS CHOICE COMES FIRST. His will is primary and foundational. Peter knew that because Jesus said that to him.

Peter goes on in verse 2 and he says that we have been chosen and saved:

according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:2 ESV)

Are you hearing that? Peter is saying that All of WHO GOD IS is involved in our salvation. Every member of the Trinity has a role in you becoming a Christian! This is a GOD THING long

before it is a YOU thing. All of who God is was involved in you becoming a Christian. All of who God is is invested in your life and salvation.

Now this is really important to understand particularly when you are beginning to face some headwinds. Listen, we may disagree in here on some of the fine points with respect to this doctrine, but I'm not dealing in fine points here, I'm dealing with heart and soul. Whether you are Calvinist or an Armenian, whether you even know what those words mean or you don't, everyone who takes their Bible seriously understands this. God comes first with respect to our salvation. This was God's idea, before it was your idea. God was highly invested in your salvation before you had even given it a thought. And that's an important concept when you are starting to wonder whether or not you will be strong enough to make it through the storm that is coming.

You see if salvation is all about you – if you are hanging on to a tree branch with all your strength and the winds start to blow, then you are right to be absolutely terrified. If you are just barely hanging on to that branch on a sunny day, how can you expect to hang onto the branch through a hurricane?

But Peter says, salvation isn't like that. It's not about you hanging on to God – it's about God hanging on to you.

If God knew how to save you then God knows how to keep you. God never loses what he saves and he always finishes what he starts.

That's BIG GOD THEOLOGY and I predict that as the clouds get dark out there this doctrine will make a pretty impressive comeback in here.

Thanks be to God!

The second truth you need to lock into is this:

2. You belong to another world

He calls these people the:

elect exiles of the Dispersion (1 Peter 1:1 ESV)

The word translated as “exiles” there means literally ‘pilgrims’ or ‘refugees’. One dictionary defines it as meaning “to live in a foreign country”.² Now scholars generally agree that Peter is writing here primarily to Gentiles. These are Greek speaking non-Jews but Peter applies to them a bit of Old Testament imagery because all the people of God – Jew or Gentile – are by definition - travellers through a foreign land. The author of Hebrews makes this point repeatedly. He says that Abraham – the father of all believers, Jew and Gentile:

was **looking forward** to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. (Hebrews 11:10 ESV)

Abraham was a traveller. He was a pilgrim. He was only passing through. Abraham never owned a stich of the Promised Land. Apart from the cave in which he buried his wife Sara in hope – it always LAY AHEAD. It was always something COMING. So it is with us. This world is not our home so it doesn’t really matter whether we fit in here – we don’t expect to fit in here. We are not from here and we are not STAYING HERE.

Born again Christians should expect to look, feel and to be treated as ALIENS in a foreign land, because that’s who we are. We do sex different, we do family different, we do TRUTH different. We’re WEIRD because we’re from AWAY! We don’t fit in; we’re not supposed to fit in, so get over it and get on with it.

This world is not our home – we are from a coming kingdom.

Thirdly, you need to understand this:

3. You were saved for obedience to Jesus Christ

He says that in verse 2. He says that we were saved:

according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, **for obedience to Jesus Christ**

² Strong’s Greek Accordance version. 3927.

(1 Peter 1:2 ESV)

Did you hear that? The Bible says that we were saved FOR obedience to Jesus Christ – NOT BY obedience to Jesus Christ. That would be a heresy. That would be legalism, but Peter is not saying that. He is saying that we were saved FOR obedience to Jesus Christ.

Now this is very important for us to understand – particularly as we head into a season of suffering. You see if you think that you were saved FOR COMFORT – FOR CONVENIENCE – FOR PROSPERITY then suffering doesn't make any sense. Suffering doesn't factor in. Suffering is to be avoided at all costs - even if you have to compromise or deny the Lord. If comfort is the goal, then such choices are prudent and necessary. But if you were saved for Christ – if you were saved FOR OBEDIENCE TO CHRIST then actually suffering becomes the context in which your faith is developed and ultimately displayed.

Getting this wrong in peacetime friends, is embarrassing but getting this wrong in war time is an absolute disaster.

If you think that God saved you just to bless you and to make you healthier and wealthier than your neighbours then you won't make it through the trials and tribulations ahead. You will quit, you will compromise and you will hide.

Guaranteed.

So get this straight: You were saved FOR OBEDIENCE TO JESUS CHRIST. But thanks be to God you've been given the Spirit of Christ. You've been filled with the Spirit of the obedient, enduring and suffering Christ! So if God chooses to allow you to experience some suffering then you can trust that he will empower you by his Spirit to be faithful and fruitful within it.

If he had enough grace to save you then he has enough grace to sustain you and use you – no matter what the future holds.

God knows how to empower that which he intends.

So don't hide, don't compromise, don't quit. Just pray. Pray like St. Augustine! Say: "O God! Command what you will and give what you command."

The fourth thing Peter says is this; he says:

4. You were saved by the mercy and grace of God

Look at verse 3:

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 (1 Peter 1:3 ESV)

Now here Peter talks about how God saved us through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Those are the climactic events of Jesus' life through which God effected our salvation. The most famous verse in the Bible says:

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16 ESV)

We are saved by what God GAVE. And Jesus is what God GAVE for the salvation of the world, now here Peter speaks in short hand – he talks about the death and resurrection of Jesus and we do that all the time but even to speak of his death is to assume his life and to speak of his resurrection is to assume his life now in heaven so sometimes theologians will stretch that out and say that we are actually saved by 5 things that Jesus did.

We are saved first of all by

- i. His birth.
- ii. His obedient life
- iii. His death
- iv. His resurrection
- v. His present intercession

That's what God GAVE in Christ for your salvation.

And none of that is effected by events at ground level.

Most of that already happened.

Most of that is DONE.

Jesus already did for us what we could never do for ourselves. He already obeyed God and earned all the blessings of heaven.

He already died on the cross as a payment for our sin.

He already rose from the dead as a demonstration of God's receipt and approval of that payment.

So brothers and sisters, if we are in Christ, then we are God's children NOW.

Irrespective of what is happening at ground level.

Now that's not to say that God is indifferent to events as ground level – no! In fact the Bible says that Jesus is alive now and interceding for us in the heavens – that's the fifth thing that we just mentioned above.

Hebrews 7:25 says:

he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. (Hebrews 7:25 ESV)

Peter says that Jesus was RAISED – that is to say he is ALIVE. But he's not here – he is in heaven, the Bible says, praying, right now for us.

Thanks be to God!

Those are the FACTS of your salvation, brothers and sisters, and they are not at risk from this

storm.

The fifth thing Peter says is:

5. You were saved to an eternity of riches

Look at verse 4. Peter says that they have been saved:

to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you (1 Peter 1:4 ESV)

Are you hearing that? Peter says: “No matter how high the waters of this flood rise – they will not rise that high! Your inheritance is not threatened by this storm.”

That’s good news brothers and sisters – and this is why the Prosperity Gospel is so unhelpful. The Prosperity Gospel puts the emphasis on the wrong SYL-A-BLE. It talks about inheritance here and now – which is, according to Jesus, exactly wrong. Jesus said:

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, 20 but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.” (Matthew 6:19–20 ESV)

You don’t want a Gospel that promises you riches on earth – because riches on earth are subject to decay. Riches on earth can be swept away by wind, water and wave – you want a Gospel that promises you an inheritance in eternity – imperishable, undefiled, unfading, kept in heaven for you.

That’s what you want – if you understand the world – and that according to the Peter is the Gospel that these people believed. So they already have it all. Their treasure is out of CAESAR’S REACH. What can man do to them? What can the government take from them? They have it all and it is far out of reach. It is safe from fire, wind and rain.

Now you may have to walk through hell and high water to get there, Peter says, but don’t despair because:

6. You are being shielded and guarded by the power of God

That's the sixth thing. Look at verse 5, Peter talks about believers – born again Christians:

who by God's **power** are being **guarded** through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.
(1 Peter 1:5 ESV)

This is so important for us to understand. God does not exempt us from suffering and persecution rather he protects us as we go through suffering and persecution. There are few doctrines in more urgent need of recovery in North American than this. God never promises us an EXEMPTION from tribulation. On the contrary Jesus said:

In the world you will have tribulation. (John 16:33 ESV)

Jesus PROMISED US THAT. Peter says: Get ready for that because its coming. He goes on to say in chapter 1 verses 6-9 that there will be various trials, we will be tested with fire as we make our way forward toward the goal of obtaining the outcome of our faith. You have an inheritance but you have to walk through the FLAMES in order to receive it.

But don't worry because God is in there with you.

He knows how to preserve his people through the fire. Do you remember the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego? They were elect exiles in a foreign land as well and they found themselves in a fiery furnace - literally. The King of Babylon became angry with them because they would not go along with everyone else and because they claimed allegiance to a higher power and he wouldn't tolerate that so he threw them into the fiery furnace. But the Bible says:

²⁴Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste. He declared to his counselors, "Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?" They answered and said to the king, "True, O king."²⁵ He answered and said, "But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods." (Daniel 3:24–25 ESV)

O friends, do you see that? Jesus WALKS IN THE FIRE WITH HIS PEOPLE. That's what the Bible says.

In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world. (John 16:33 ESV)

Our God is fire proof and so if you are in him and he is in you then you are going to be fine. You are going to make it because HE WILL HOLD YOU FAST.

This is the faith that the prophets longed and hoped for. Peter says that in the following verses. He says:

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully (1 Peter 1:10 ESV)

This is the salvation that we've been longing for – this is what the prophets said was coming! Isaiah spoke about this – he said that God would make a way for us to go home – to our inheritance, to all of the promises – to himself! Isaiah said that God would make a way and he would keep us on it!

And a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Way of Holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it. It shall belong to those who walk on the way; even if they are fools, they shall not go astray. (Isaiah 35:8 ESV)

As a fool I find that very comforting. I will finish this race, not because I am stronger than the temptations of the devil and not because I am wiser than the wisdom of the world – I will make it to the end because God will not let me stray or stumble. He will guard me in my faith with his power ALL the long way home. Through wind and FIRE – he will hold me fast.

This is the hope into which we have been born again. This is the Gospel and this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God, let's pray together.