

8 WITNESSES FROM 1&2 PETER

article 2

introduction

“This epistle of Peter is one of the grandest of the New Testament, and it is the true, pure gospel. For Peter . . . inculcates the true doctrine of faith—how Christ has been given to us, who takes away our sins and saves us.”

— Martin Luther

Peter’s two letters are a mere 166 verses. Nonetheless, they are packed with keen wisdom from a seasoned pastor about how to live amidst life’s trials in light of the person and work of Jesus, who also suffered unjustly.

As the opening lines of 1 Peter indicate, he is writing to a multi-campus church scattered over a wide geographic region. The ancient cities of “Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia” were located in modern-day Turkey.

Bible commentator Karen Jobes says, “This is a vast area of approximately 129,000 square miles. . . . (As a comparison, the state of California covers about 159,000 square miles.)”⁸ She goes on to say,

The residents practiced many religions, spoke several languages, and were never really assimilated into the Greco-Roman culture. . . . And yet this untamed region became the cradle of Christianity. . . . We may surmise that, in no small part because of this letter [1 Peter] and the faithfulness of those who received it, well-established churches flourished in all five of these regions by AD 180. Their bishops attended the great councils of the second through the fourth centuries, where the doctrines were forged that Christians hold dear yet today.⁹

Where and when were 1 and 2 Peter written?

In 1 Peter 5:13 Peter says he is writing from “Babylon.” This seems like a reference to the local church in Babylon, but it is unlikely that Peter would have gone to the former capital of Nebuchadnezzar’s empire. This is because by Peter’s time it was a sparsely inhabited ruin (fulfilling Isaiah 14:23). In Revelation 16:19 and 17:5, “Babylon” is used as a cryptic name for Rome, and Colossians 4:10 and Philemon 24 (most likely written in Rome) show that Mark was there with Paul.

In 2 Timothy 4:11, Mark is in Asia Minor, and Paul sends for him to come, most probably to Rome. The fact that neither Peter nor Paul mentions the other in the list of those sending greetings from Rome merely suggests that they were together at the time of writing their letters. All this points to the theory that Peter

was writing from Rome, which is supported by the evidence of Tertullian¹⁰ and Eusebius.¹¹

Regarding when 1 and 2 Peter were written, a date in the reign of Nero (AD 54–68) would seem best. Since Peter makes no reference to Paul’s martyrdom, which is thought to have taken place during the outburst of persecution in Rome in 64, the letter was probably written before then (see also 1 Peter 2:13). Links with other writings are thought to suggest a date after 60. So far as we can draw any conclusions from the evidence, the letters were probably written c. 63–64.

Why were 1 and 2 Peter written?

The churches and Christians who received Peter’s letter would have been tremendously honored and encouraged at the willingness of such a noteworthy Christian leader to take the time, although he had never even met them, to speak into their life with practical pastoral affection. Also, the fact that Peter took the time to pen not one but two letters indicates that there were serious concerns that had escalated to the point of urgency.

The original audience of 1 Peter was a suffering audience. What was the nature of this suffering? Jobes writes, “Virtually all commentators understand the persecutions referred to in 1 Peter to be sporadic, personal, and unorganized social ostracism of Christians with varying intensity, probably reinforced at the local level by the increasing suspicions of Roman officials at all levels.”¹²

Bible commentator Paul Achtemeier agrees that the persecution in 1 Peter is:

due more to unofficial harassment than to official policy, more local than regional, and more at the initiation of the general populace as the result of a reaction against the lifestyle of the Christians than at the initiation of Roman officials because of some general policy of seeking out and punishing Christians. That does not rule out the possibility that persecutions occurred over large areas of the empire; they surely did, but they were spasmodic and broke out at different times in different places, the result of the flare-up of local hatreds rather than because Roman officials were engaged in the regular discharge of official policy.¹³

Peter’s underlying concern was about what we today call tolerance, diversity, and religious pluralism. Subsequently, the letters, although a few thousand years old, are incredibly timely to our current culture in which Christians are welcome to love Jesus so long as they agree that other religions and spiritualities are equally valid, do nothing to discourage others from patronizing their spiritualities and religions by speaking against them or evangelizing people, and are willing to actively participate as requested with practitioners of other religions and spiritualities so as to be loving, tolerant, and non-judgmental in the eyes of the world. One wonders if they also had an ancient great-grandmother of Oprah on their televisions in Bithynia.

Christianity spread to the region where Peter’s letter was originally sent as

those converted to Jesus at the Pentecost holiday recorded in Acts 2:9 returned to their hometowns. Following regeneration by God the Holy Spirit, their minds, desires, and actions changed, which made them unpopular with mainstream culture. They would have looked to Peter as something of a spiritual father because the first converts from their area who brought the message of Jesus were converted under Peter's evangelistic sermon in Acts 2.

The unpopularity of Christians was in large part due to the fact that their moral conduct had changed. The Christians were no longer willing to eat too much, drink too much, party sinfully, or engage in sex outside of marriage (1 Pet. 4:1–4). Those who had known them and enjoyed sinning with them prior to their conversion to Jesus considered their life change negatively. The drinking buddies who lost their wingmen and the boyfriends who got dumped by their live-in girlfriends who moved out to walk with Jesus were not pleased with the influence Christianity was having on their friends because it was upsetting their own lives.

The unpopularity of Christians was also due to the fact that their devotion to Jesus above everyone and everything else caused them to be viewed as subversive people overturning long-held familial and cultural norms. Simply, once people became Christians, their lifestyle changed and they stopped worshiping the gods of their empire, city, trade guild, or family.

In that day, paying religious homage to the gods and goddesses of the nation was akin to waving a flag or saying the pledge of allegiance in our cultural context. So, when the Christians refused to participate in any religious homage, worship, or devotion to the state gods, they were seen as unpatriotic.

Cities had their own gods and goddesses who were honored in various city-wide events and were considered a unifying aspect of culture that brought people together. When Christians refused to be involved in any city-wide events that included honoring gods and goddesses other than Jesus Christ, they were seen as bad neighbors.

Various professions were held together by trade guilds, akin to our unions, that included meetings with religious rites and ceremonies dedicated to various gods and goddesses. When Christians refused to participate in any religious aspects of their trade guild, they were considered unprofessional. They were likely even demoted or terminated from their jobs, suffering financial loss for their unyielding devotion to Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, families were held together in large part by religious traditions that included holiday parties and meals dedicated to various gods and goddesses who were honored by the family at both home and temple events. When Christians refused to participate in these kinds of holiday events, they were considered disrespectful to their families.

How does 1 and 2 Peter relate to us today?

The truth is that, in general, the people of that day were not loyally devoted to their gods and goddesses. Rather, the gods and goddesses were simply part of the cultural tradition. This would be akin to the spiritual customs and traditions in our

own day that have some vague spiritual connection. To help illustrate this point, I will use some examples from my own pastoral experience.

One woman was raised in a family that celebrated Halloween as a major holiday, complete with her parents' home being decorated up with witches, skeletons, spider webs, and more. The entire family would gather at the home dressed up as witches, warlocks, and the like to hand out candy to the neighborhood children. They also set up a false graveyard and a small haunted house in which they showed fake murders and other things intended to frighten children. Upon her conversion, the woman (who was by this time a mother with her own young children) refused to dress up like a witch, dress her daughter up like a witch, and participate with her extended family in their annual Halloween celebration. As a result, her family regularly criticized her, exerting pressure on her to coexist with the rest of the family by violating her Christian conscience.

A man who was baptized as an infant in a very dead church grew up as a non-Christian whose family virtually never entered church other than for weddings and funerals. Later in life, he was saved and grew quickly as a Bible-believing Christian. He married a godly woman and God blessed them with a healthy, beautiful baby boy. His non-Christian parents pressured him to have the baby baptized in the church they never attended as a sort of superstitious rite; they wrongly believed that by baptizing the baby he would automatically go to heaven if he died as an infant. The man lovingly tried to explain to his parents that he would do no such thing because it was not his church and he did not share their beliefs. Eventually, the entire extended family formed something of an alliance against him, as each of them had had their own children baptized in the parents' church even though none of them was living as a Christian. He lovingly and graciously held his ground but was in many ways ostracized by his entire family and his deeply hurt parents even threatened to cut him out of his inheritance for dishonoring them.

The threat that Peter responds to is one that we face in our own day. That threat is that Christians will fold under trial, as Peter often did until God put some steel in his spine. Second Timothy 3:12 promises, "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." Sometimes this persecution is life-threatening, or even life-taking. This degree of persecution broke out a few years after Peter penned his letters, when the madman Emperor Nero burned Christians alive as torches for his parties, threw them into the arena to be killed by gladiators and eaten by lions, and killed their pastors including Paul and Peter. In this way, Peter's reference to "fiery trials" may in fact have been a very literal warning of impending persecution. Still, the kind of persecution faced by Christians is more frequently the kind that 1 and 2 Peter address.

In a word, the Christians were marginalized as weirdos. They were weirdos who loved Jesus so much that they lived their lives and viewed their faith in a way that made them holy, or different, than other people. Because they would not get drunk, sleep around, or practice other religions and spiritualities—or even endorse such things by their approval—they were viewed by everyone else as basically just plain weird, and way too serious about Jesus.

Subsequently, they suffered shame, discrimination, mockery, half-truths, lies,

vicious rumors, slander, harassment, abuse, economic persecution, rejection, and mob violence on occasion, although such persecution was not yet state sponsored. Basically, Christians stepped out to live with, for, like, and to Jesus. In response, the world pushed back and tried to get them to go back in the closet with a private faith that did not affect their external life and role in the greater culture. Thus, and this point is vital to a correct understanding of Peter's letters, they were suffering not because of their sin but rather because of their faithful devotion to Jesus.

However, they were wavering in their devotion. Like so many college students who weary of being mocked by their professors for being Bible-believing Christians, husbands who are mocked for not looking at porn or partying with their buddies, wives who forego a professional career to stay at home and be a wife and mother, singles who are the butt of jokes at the office for waiting until marriage to have sex, and net surfers who can't stomach one more nasty blog or negative news story about their faith and church, their resolve was tried. They responded in one of four ways.

One, some were enticed by the liberal route of compromise. They wanted to cut out—or at least explain away—the parts of the Bible that they were being criticized for believing. In our day, this would be most typified by the mainline liberal Christian denominations with pastors who endorse all religions and spiritualities under the oversight of unsaved bishops who appreciate their tolerance, pluralism, and minds so open that their brains fall out. This is one of the central issues in 2 Peter.

Two, some were compelled to privatize their faith. Sure, in private they would pray to and worship Jesus. But in public they would shut their mouths and keep their faith to themselves so as to not be considered the weirdo for Jesus on the block.

Three, some were considering junking their faith altogether. They were tired of being the butt of jokes in the press and on the late-night talk shows and wearied of being the Jesus freaks. Why? Because most people simply do not like being the oddball, misfit, and outcast—especially those who are young and want to be cool and those who are old with privileged social positions to uphold.

Four, still others were attracted to the fighting posture of fundamentalism. They were preparing to separate from the culture, set up their own subculture, defend themselves, and talk trash about the non-Christians who were criticizing them, all in the name of a culture war.

What role does trial play in Christian faith?

With a steady hand, the now-seasoned Pastor Peter penned Spirit-inspired wise counsel. His big idea was that Christians are “exiles” on mission for Jesus in a world that is not their home. Subsequently, their life is filled with trial. God uses trial for much good in us, for us, and through us. In particular, Peter gives us four guiding principles for Christian trial:

Principle #1 – Our life is a trial.

- “You have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by

fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” (1 Pet. 1:6–7)

- “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.” (1 Pet. 4:12)
- “The Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials.” (2 Pet. 2:9)

Principle #2 – We are to live in light of God’s judgment trial at the end.

- “And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one’s deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile.” (1 Pet. 1:17)
- “They will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.” (1 Pet. 4:5)

Principle #3 – Like Jesus, we are to live in worship to God and witness to others in the midst of trial.

- “When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.” (1 Pet. 2:23)

Principle #4 – Trial in life is a purposeful opportunity for our sanctification, worship, and witness to God’s glory and our joy.

- “. . . in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ . . .” (1 Pet. 1:2)
- “In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory.” (1 Pet. 1:6–8)
- “Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.” (1 Pet. 2:12)
- “In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.” (1 Pet. 3:15–16)
- “But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.” (1 Pet. 4:13)

- “And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.” (1 Pet. 5:10)
- “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence.” (2 Pet. 1:3)
- “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.” (2 Pet. 3:18)

Trials come to all Christians. Trials come without warning. Trials do not necessarily come one at a time, and sometimes it feels like we’re at war on every front for the simple reason that we are. Trials can repeat, which means that just because you’ve lived through it does not mean that it is over. Trials range in severity and duration from momentary annoyance to lifelong anguish.

Still, as Peter will show us, every trial is either from God’s hand or through God’s hand. Thus, if we embrace trials as an opportunity from God, they can and do result in his glory and our good.

Trial: Eight Witnesses from 1 and 2 Peter is a theme taken directly from the two books. Peter uses the theme to teach that a trial is an opportunity God uses in our life to help us become Christians, or grow in maturity as Christians. Through trials we can learn about Jesus and grow to be more like him. The trials that we will cover as we study 1 and 2 Peter fit within the eight categories of temptation, submission, marriage, suffering, humility, faith, doctrine, and perseverance. How we respond to each trial is a witness to whether or not we are Christians, and how closely we are walking with Jesus. Furthermore, for Christians, each trial that we face is a witness to the genuineness of our faith, to reassure us that God has saved us, and to reveal to others the difference that salvation makes.

Peter’s own words serve as a matchless closing exhortation, which is the purpose of this entire series. In 1 Peter 5:12 he says, “I have written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it.”

NOTES

8. Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 19.
9. Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 22–23.
10. *Against Heresies*, 36.
11. *Ecclesiastical History*, 2.25.8; 2.15.2; 3.1.2–3.
12. Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 9.
13. Peter Achtemeier, *1 Peter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 35–36.