

1 Peter Christian Living Under Persecution

We'll begin today with some very basic introductory matters that will help us understand the book better.

Author and Date¹

The opening verse of the epistle claims it was written by Peter, the leader among Christ's apostles. We have no reason to doubt that Peter was the author.

Peter wrote the book somewhere around AD 64.

Background and Setting of the book

In July of that year, a large fire burned in the city of Rome. Many of the Romans believed that their emperor, Nero, had purposely set the city on fire. Nero quickly spread the word that the Christians had set the fires. As a result, a vicious persecution against Christians began and soon spread throughout the Roman Empire.

Peter was probably in prison at the time, perhaps in Rome. This was shortly after Paul had been executed. In light of these events, Peter wanted to address the believers who were suffering persecution.

In this letter, Peter exhorts persecuted and bewildered Christians to stand fast in their faith.² He also urges his readers to live virtuously, to submit to authorities, and to pursue proper human relationships. *Christian living under persecution* is the basic theme and the title of this series.

If we were to pick a key verse, it could be

1Pe 4:19 *Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator.*

Genre

This is obviously a letter/epistle that Peter wrote to a group of churches in northern Asia Minor, modern Turkey, to encourage them in light of the current persecution.

¹ Some of this from John MacArthur, *1 & 2 Peter: Courage in Times of Trouble*, MacArthur Bible Studies (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2000)

² New Geneva Study Bible, notes on 1 Peter.

Peter begins this letter by identifying himself and his readers (1:1–2), thanks God for them (1:3–12), and then discusses various aspects of the Christian life. He finishes by with a final greetings (5:12–14a), and a benediction (5:14b).³

Recipients

Most of the original readers of this letter were probably Gentiles. That’s a little bit odd, in that, in Galatians (2:6-10), Paul says that *he* was the apostle to the Gentiles while Peter was reaching the Jews. Of course, both of them evangelized both Jews and Gentiles.

We don’t really know how these churches were established or how Peter was related to them. But we know that they were enduring persecution because of their faith. Peter also addresses several basic aspects of Christian living and behavior in this letter, so they must have needed some instruction on such topics. So under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Peter wrote this epistle to strengthen and instruct the Christians as they were enduring hostility from their wicked culture.

With all of that in mind, let’s begin our study of the first two verses of the book. It will take us two messages to get through the first two verses; this is part 1.

1 Peter 1:1-2 Peter Identifies and Blesses His Audience

Peter begins by identifying himself and his readers.

I. Peter identifies himself. .1a

- A. Peter’s name was originally “Simon/Simeon.” That’s what his parents named him.

Jesus gave Simon the name Peter, which is the Greek translation of the Aramaic name, “Cephas.” He was known by all three names.

Both “Cephas” and “Peter” mean “rock” or “stone.”

- B. He’s “an apostle of Jesus Christ.”

The word “apostle” is based on the word “to send.” An apostle is a “sent one,” and particularly, one sent with authority of the sender.

³ Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 13.

In the NT sense, an apostle is an official representative of Jesus with the authority to carry out his will for the church. As the church began, apostles had authority to establish churches and teach people Christian doctrine and appropriate behavior.

- C. Peter is identifying himself very closely with Jesus. Jesus named him and gave him authority as an apostle, and it is with this authority that he is writing this letter. So they had better pay attention to what he writes.

BTW, we do not have apostles today. Some people *claim* to be apostles, but we should disregard those claims. No one today fits the qualifications of a genuine apostle.

Now that we know who the *writer* is, ...

II. Peter identifies his readers. .1b-2a

- A. They are “strangers.” (παρεπιδήμιος)
 - 1. A “stranger” in this sense is a sojourner, a traveler, a resident alien, an exile.
 - 2. Later in the book (2:11), Peter describes believers as “strangers and pilgrims.” The AH uses the same language in Heb 11:13.
 - 3. Biblical authors use this word to describe Christians; we are strangers and pilgrims in this world. We are God’s people living in a region where most people are not Christians. We are foreign in this environment. We have a different set of values and standards from the rest of the world, and that sets us apart from other people.

That was especially true of Christians in the Roman Empire. Christians were a small and despised group of people. Many in that culture hated and persecuted them. They were the “out” group because of their faith in Christ.

App: So we are, in a sense, foreigners, exiles. We should not feel too comfortable in this present world.

Cf. Rom 12:1-2—be not conformed to the world

James 4:4 tells us that friendship with the world is enmity with God.

1 John 2:15-17—love not the world

Spiritually, we are citizens of heaven even while we are citizens of earth. Our final, eternal home is heaven. Our ultimate loyalty is to God and his kingdom, not the kingdoms of this world. We are expecting our king to return, and we look forward to living with our king in his kingdom. We don't belong to this place and time.

Quote: Christians, whose citizenship is in heaven (cf. Phil. 3:20), live in the midst of a pagan society as aliens and sojourners, displaced persons whose thoughts should often turn toward their true home.⁴

Colossians 3:2 *Set your affections on things above, not on things on the earth.*

Because we are strangers and pilgrims, we do not acclimate to this world; we do not fully assimilate/integrate into the culture. We remain strangers; we don't accept this world's system; we remain somewhat separate and distinct from this world. Cf. Mt 5:13f; Phil 2:15—shine as lights; 2 Cor 6:19f “be ye separate...”

I feel myself more and more estranged from the modern culture.

These strangers/sojourners/pilgrims are ...

- B. They are “scattered” throughout the Roman province of Asia.
 - 1. The word here is “diaspora” (διασπορά) – the dispersion, the dispersed ones.
 - a) The word literally refers to scattered seed; a farmer would sow seed by scattering it on his fields.
 - b) The word often referred to Jews living outside of the Promised Land, Jews dispersed among the Gentile nations.
 - 2. He's probably referring to Christians living outside of Israel. Most of the Christians at this time were living in or near Israel. But the faith was beginning to spread around the whole Roman Empire.
 - 3. He lists four regions in Asia Minor, modern day Turkey, where his readers were living:

⁴ Roger M. Raymer, “1 Peter,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 839.

- a) Pontus and Bithynia—in the northern part of this region; they make up one province.
- b) Galatia—central area; probably the northern regions of Galatia
- c) Cappadocia—south
- d) Asia—in the western part; this is the Roman province, He’s not referring to *east* Asia; this is western Turkey, across the Aegean Sea from Greece. Asia is where the seven churches of Revelation are located—Philadelphia, Ephesus, Colossae, Smyrna, Pergamum, Sardis, Thyatira, Laodicea, etc.

4. We do not know what Peter’s relationship was to these people.

- a) We know that *Paul* had established churches in the southern part of Asia Minor—i.e., the churches of Galatia. He wrote a letter/book to them.
- b) There is no record of Peter ever traveling to that region, but we have no records at all of what Peter did after about Acts 15. Peter drops out of the narrative at that point.

Paul may have established the churches there, or maybe one of Paul’s colleagues, or maybe Peter himself had traveled to that region. We don’t really know how these churches were established or why Peter took an interest in them.

All we know is that Peter knew these people and wanted to address various issues the churches there were experiencing.

After describing his readers’ *physical location*, he goes on to describe their *spiritual condition*.

C. .2a They are “elect.”

We are only beginning vs. 2 of the first chapter, and already Peter gets into some rather deep theology here.

His readers may have been suffering, but they should not doubt their true spiritual condition as God’s chosen people. They are “strangers” in this world’s system, but they are the “elect” in God’s system. In fact, they are strangers and pilgrims in this world *because* they are God’s elect people.

[The word order here in the English translation is a little bit unusual. The original language here has “elect” right after “apostle of Jesus Christ.” So “to the elect strangers scattered...” The KJV moves the word down to verse 2, but it’s actually located in vs. 1. Everything in vs. 2 describes the “elect.”]

Note several things Peter teaches here about election. What does Peter mean when he says that Christians are “elect”?

1. Election is God’s choosing.

- a) The word “elect” (ἐκλεκτός) simply means “pick out, choose.”

Peter applies the same word to Jesus in 1 Pet 2:6 – “elect, precious...” Jesus was God’s chosen means to redeem his people.

- b) The word is an adjective describing the word “strangers.” The strangers are elect. (ἐκλεκτοῖς παρεπιδήμοις)

- c) What does this choosing/election pertain to? The context of vs. 2 shows that these strangers were elect through sanctification of the Spirit and unto obedience and the sprinkling of the blood of Christ. So the election in view here pertains to salvation. Only saved people are sanctified by the HSp and are sprinkled with the blood of Christ. Election pertains to salvation. The elect are the saved; they are Christians.

Many other passages in the NT mention this idea of God’s election or choosing; it is a thoroughly biblical concept.

Ephesians 1:4 ... *He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love,*

2 Thessalonians 2:13 ... *God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth,*

So election, in this context, pertains to salvation. Election is the first step of the salvation process. God is the one doing the choosing here, not his readers.

So he's writing to Christian people. The unsaved world might harass and persecute them, but God has chosen them for himself. This truth would be very comforting and encouraging to a persecuted group of people.

App: We should pause here to consider whether you are among the elect—are you saved?

Peter goes on to say three things about this election/choice. He uses three prepositional phrases to describe what he means by “elect.” *He gives us three elements of election.*⁵

We'll consider just the first one today.

2. .2a Election is “according to the foreknowledge of God.”

- a) Foreknowledge (πρόγνωσις) sometimes means “knowledge beforehand.” God knows things before they happen; he knows the end from the beginning. He can see the future.

Isa 46:10 [God declares] the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure:

How does God know the future? God foreknows because he fore-plans. God knows how things are going to turn out because he has planned for them to turn out that way. God knows the future because he is sovereign over the future. His plans come to pass; he decrees the end from the beginning; his counsel stands; he does all his pleasure.

Ephesians 1:11 In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will

So foreknowledge is not merely seeing into the future; it is knowing the future because God is sovereign over the future.

⁵ That phrase comes from John MacArthur's sermon on this passage. <https://www.gty.org/sermons/60-2/chosen-by-god-part-1>

- b) However, foreknowledge is more than merely knowing something ahead of time. Foreknowledge is a personal relationship of loving concern that God has for his people.

Cf. 1 Peter 1:19-20 “[Jesus] was foreordained/foreknown (προγινώσκω) before the foundation of the world.”

Did God simply foresee that Jesus would be the Messiah, or did God plan for him to be the Messiah? Did God merely know about Jesus’ death ahead of time, or did God plan it ahead of time? Obviously, God foreordained it—he planned it, he decreed it.

Foreknowledge or foreordination have to do with God’s decree/choice/plan that something will happen. Jesus’ death was prophesied, foretold, and foreordained ahead of time.

Acts 2:23 *[Jesus was] delivered by the determined counsel and foreknowledge (πρόγνωσις) of God, ...*

Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion happened according to God’s plan. These things were foreordained. So foreknowledge is planning and choosing ahead of time.

Likewise, the word “foreknow” also applies to Israel, God’s chosen people.

Cf. Rom 11:2 *God hath not cast away his people which he foreknew. ...*

Did God simply know about Israel, or was Israel God’s chosen people? Foreknowledge, in this sense, is almost synonymous with election. To foreknow is to choose beforehand, to establish a relationship beforehand, to foreordain.

- c) .2 Believers are foreknown by “God the Father.” Just like a father has a personal, caring relationship with his children, so God has personal concern and care for those he elects through his foreknowledge.

- d) And we should notice that this electing foreknowledge pertains to *persons* here, not things or events. Peter's audience were the elect. What God foreknows in this case is people, not particularly their actions.

God foreknew Israel and Jesus, and God foreknows believers. This foreknowledge is not God's previous knowledge that we would get saved. This foreknowledge is a prior regard/love for us, even before we put our faith in Christ. Foreknowledge in this sense is personal; God foreknows every Christian.

- e) And the preposition "according to" (κατά) means "in keeping with." Election and foreknowledge work together. God elects because he has fore-ordained to set his love on people.

- (1) Election is not merely choosing a course of action that God can see in the future. It's not merely God looking through the tunnel of time to see what's going to happen, and then choosing based on what he sees that we will do.
- (2) Election is God's choice based on his pre-ordained plan. God extends his love/regard for us ahead of time, and thus he chooses/elects us even prior to our salvation.

God does not choose us because we got saved; we got saved because God chose us. We don't become the elect once we get saved; we get saved because we are already among the elect. Election and foreknowledge happen within the mind of God long before we get saved.

- f) So when Peter says that we are elect by the foreknowledge of God, we should understand him to be saying that our election was foreordained by God's previous decree or plan.

God not only knew about it before it happened; he preordained for it to happen. He pre-planned it. He can do that because he is God.

Quote: When Peter said that believers are elect “according to the foreknowledge of God the Father,” he emphasized God’s sovereignty and initiative in salvation. Believers are elect because God the Father has set his covenantal affection upon them.⁶

- g) People are not saved haphazardly or by chance. Ultimately, people are saved because of God’s work on their behalf. Election is not based on what we could do or would do. Election is not based on our merit or work or even on our faith, but solely on God’s grace and love. God is the one doing the choosing, and he chooses based on his foreordaining plan. We respond to that electing foreknowledge at some point in time and get saved by putting our faith in Christ.

Election and foreknowledge are profound ideas. They may raise many questions in your mind. You may have objections to these ideas. But this text is quite clear. Peter expected his audience to understand what he was saying, and God expects us to understand it as well.

Peter has just barely begun his letter, and we already have several profound ideas to understand and ponder.

If you are saved, you are strangers to this world, but you are among the chosen people of God. Instead of integrating into this evil world’s system, we ought to be committed to God and his system. We are strangers and pilgrims here; we should not feel too comfortable in this evil, pagan society.

If you are saved, you should be exceedingly thankful that God set his love on you, not because of anything you ever accomplished or will accomplish. Salvation is purely by God’s grace.

⁶ Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, vol. 37, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), 54.