

When Life is Hard...



A VERSE BY VERSE
EXPOSITION OF
THE EPISTLE OF
FIRST PETER

Resident Aliens

1 Peter 1:1a-1c

This morning I am beginning a 35-sermon series from the book of I Peter. Unless the wiser determinations of God dictate otherwise we shall finish what is begun today on November 14th of this year. That's ten months. Ten months is a long time. I suggest you settle in. Make I Peter your "book of choice" this year. Read it regularly as part of your preparation for worship each week. Today is but an introduction to the book. My goal is simply to orient you to this wonderful epistle. We'll unpack this letter verse-by-verse, paragraph-by-paragraph, chapter-by-chapter over the course of the year. I will be preaching I Peter from the New American Standard Version of the Bible. In order to follow the exposition more closely you may want to bring that particular version with you on Sunday mornings.

Well, let's take the first step of this journey by reading **I Peter 1:1**, *Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.*

It had been some 30 years since the extraordinary events of the passion of Jesus Christ – Gethsemane, His arrest and trial, the terrible torture and death, His glorious resurrection and ascension. It had been some 30 years since the extraordinary events in Jerusalem immediately following Christ’s departure into heaven (**Acts 1:9**) – Pentecost, the powerful, public preaching of the gospel, the great ingathering of converts, miracles, the awesome and winsome atmosphere among the believers in Jerusalem. It had been some 30 years since the stoning of Stephen and the persecution that followed. It had been some 30 years since the conversion of Paul on the Damascus road. During those 30 years the gospel had spread through the faithful and powerful witness of the early church (**Acts 6:7; 8:12, 25, 40; 9:31; 11:19-21; 13:48-49; 16:5; 17:11-12**).

In the middle of those extraordinary events was Peter - Peter from Bethsaida and Capernaum; Peter, the brother of Andrew; Peter, the fisherman; Peter, called by Jesus to follow Him as His disciple; Peter, one of the inner circle round the Master; Peter, the man of impulsive devotion; Peter, who beheld the transfigured Christ on the mountain and who denied the suffering Christ outside the courtyard of the High Priest; Peter, absolutely transformed at Pentecost; Peter, the confident leader of the fledgling community of the followers of Jesus of Nazareth; Peter, powerful and fearless preacher of the gospel in those days; Peter, worker of miracles; and (as we have it here in our text) ***Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ (1:1a)***.

We now find ourselves in the 60’s. And just like the 1960’s in America the decade of the 60’s after the birth of Christ was a turbulent, even terrifying time. We find ourselves in Rome. It is sometime in AD 63. Paul has left having been released from his first imprisonment the year before – AD 62. It is sometime in

AD 63. In a year or so, July 19, AD 64, Rome itself - like Chicago in October 1871 - will be consumed by the Great Fire. The Emperor Nero will place the blame on the Christians and thus will begin the first official and widespread savage persecution of the Church.

And so between the departure of Paul in AD 62 and the breakout of the Neronian persecution in AD 64, the apostle Peter pens this letter. In the powerful providence of God Peter's correspondence is preserved for us in the New Testament of the Christian Scriptures. On account of the strong reference to baptism in **3:18-22**, over the years some have suggested that I Peter is not a letter [at all] but a catechetical instruction to accompany the sacrament of baptism or even a liturgy for the baptismal service. Others have argued that I Peter is an early Christian hymn or confession of faith (**2:21-24; 3:18-22**). But in the end we settle on the view that I Peter is a Christian letter - a letter of "578 different Greek words" (Hillyer, p. 5); a letter of 105 verses; a letter following the standard form of thousands of other letters of that era. It was originally an encyclical letter intended to be read aloud in the various Christian assemblies. And according to **5:12** it may very well be that Silvanus, we also know him as Silas, the missionary companion of Paul, delivered this letter and that he had a part in its composition.

But to whom does Peter send his letter? *Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who reside as aliens, scattered **throughout Pontus, Galatia, Caappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia**.* This verse connects Peter with Christians in northern Asia Minor. These regions are mentioned back in **Acts 16:6-8**, and *[Paul and Silas] passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia; and when they had come to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them; and passing by Mysia, they came*

down to Troas. It may be that the Spirit's prohibition on Paul's entry into Bithynia may have been due to the fact that Peter was at work there.

But where in the world are these places? You may want to turn to the back of your Bible. There are maps in most and usually one that shows Paul's missionary journeys. These five regions make up a significant portion of the area of present-day Turkey. Peter's letter circulated in the area bounded by the Taurus Mountain range on the south and the Black Sea on the north. It must have been a fascinating area with its variety of geographical features (mountains, coastal plains, lakes, rivers), and its variety of cultures with their respective languages, religions, customs, and politics. The Christian church had probably taken root in the tribal villages shortly after Pentecost. From **Acts 2:9** we know that people from *Cappadocia, Pontus, and Asia* were in Jerusalem at that time. And it may be that the believers who were scattered on account of the persecution that arose after the stoning of Stephen preached the gospel in these regions. Whatever the case, it seems clear that Peter thinks of the churches to which he writes as predominantly Gentile. Indeed, Fred Craddock writes that the church was "heavily Gentile in membership" (p. 13).

But why did Peter write this piece of correspondence? Why did he dispatch his friend from Rome to make such a long and arduous journey? Authors generally have a purpose for writing something. This is certainly the case for the writers of the books of the Bible. Listen, for example, to **John 20:31**, *but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.* Now turn to **I Peter 5:12**. Here is the purpose of this letter in the words of Peter himself, *through Silvanus, our faithful brother, I have written to you briefly, exhorting and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Stand*

firm in it! Remember we have suggested that this letter was written prior to the major period of Roman persecution under Nero. Edmond Clowney concludes, “The letter does not reflect a situation of official and general oppression. Rather, it is a time of local harassment and sporadic persecution” (*I Peter*, p. 20). Craddock says, “We do know they were identified in the society by a name, *Christian* (4:16), and wearing that name brought social ostracism and various kinds of abuse ... First Peter reflects the kind of persecution inflicted by the citizenry, not the government ... Clearly I Peter was written to encourage the Christians of Asia Minor, to call them to confidence in the power of God, to renew hope, to help them find meaning in their sufferings, and to urge them to stay together in mutual support” (*First and Second Peter and Jude*, p. 14-15). John N. D. Kelly says, “This letter ... presents itself as a message of encouragement from the Apostle Peter to Christian communities in Asia Minor which are bewildered by the cruel treatment and persecution to which they are being subjected” (*The Epistles of Peter and of Jude*, p. 1). William Barclay says, “First Peter was written to meet no theological heresy; it was written to strengthen men and women in jeopardy of their lives” (*The Letters of James and Peter*, p. 150). *Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.*

This brings us to the theme and overall big idea of the book. I believe the overall theme of I Peter is clearly hope. And so I’ve titled this entire series *Hope When Life is Hard*. File that away in your memory. And here is what I believe is the big idea of the entire letter. *The lively hope* (confident expectation) *of salvation* (gospel promises) *sustains the believer* (in both faith and godliness) *in times of suffering* (trial, hardship, difficulties met with in the path of obedience). We will spend the next ten months working this idea.

Now, how is Peter's letter organized? This letter is most often divided into three major sections: 1:3 – 2:10, 2:11 – 4:11, and 4:12 – 5:11. Let's look first at **1:3 – 2:10**. In this first section Peter lifts his readers to the elevated heights of the great mercy of God in salvation. Look at **verse 3**. *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who **according to His great mercy** has caused us to be born again.* Note also that in **verses 1 and 2** Peter refers to the recipients of his letter as those *who are **chosen** according to the foreknowledge of God the Father.* Now at the end of the first section these same two terms reappear. Flip over to **2:9**. Peter again reminds the recipients that they *are a **chosen** race.* And now **2:10**, *you had not received **mercy**, but now you have received **mercy**.* In between those verses Peter exalts the glory of the promises of God in the gospel of Christ. As an accomplished harpist skillfully plucks the strings to produce a beautiful melody, Peter strikes the great truths of the gospel to establish a beautiful and firm foundation for our hope. He reminds us of our status, our identity, our privileged standing as the people of God. In the middle section, **2:11 – 4:11**, the emphasis shifts. Peter's focus here is on how God is glorified in the righteous behavior of suffering saints. If indeed all of the gospel promises cited in the first section are true then how are we to live. It is not until the third section, **4:12 – 5:11**, that Peter turns his attention to their present circumstances. It seems strange to us that this should be the last section rather than the first, but we shall see the beauty of this arrangement as we make our way through the book.

Now for the final phrase in verse 1. *To **those who reside as aliens, scattered.*** Behind these seven English words are but two Greek words more literally translated *sojourners of the dispersion*. Technically the Greek term *diaspora* refers to scattered Jews outside of Palestine (**John 7:35**). But the churches among which

this letter was circulated were mostly Gentile. So something beyond mere geographical considerations is in view here. *Diaspora* is used in another sense. Indeed, according to Thomas Constable, “in this letter [Peter] emphasizes that Christians are really citizens of heaven and our sojourn here on earth is only temporary” (*Notes on I Peter*, p. 4).

Those who reside as aliens, scattered. This phrase, situated as it is in the very first sentence accomplishes two extraordinary purposes. First it hints at hardship right off the bat by suggesting that at least some (particularly the Jewish converts among them) have been physically displaced from their earthly homes (see **Acts 2:5, 9-10; 8:1-4**). This may sound like a minor consideration but how many of you know of folks who have struggled after having been forced to move from their homes to another part of the country or to another culture altogether? In the context of I Peter such displacement is just one more “trial” to add to the mix.

But the phrase *reside as aliens* also serves a second, more profound purpose. The Spirit of God, the real author of the letter, sets up the great contrast that, like some invisible undercurrent, runs through the entire letter. It is the contrast between two kingdoms, between present and future, between heaven and earth. It is the contrast between two citizenships, between the lives of these dear people as part of the culture around them and their lives as part of the community of faith. And the point that Peter establishes within the first seven Greek words of his letter is this: *Christians are temporary residents in the world.*

Beloved, as Christians we do not belong to the world. Yes, we purchase homes and settle down. Yes, we pursue our careers. Yes, we have children and seek to raise them to the best of our abilities. Yes, we prepare for the future as

responsible people do. But Peter tells us that we are, all the same, *strangers* in this world. This is not our real home. It is not here that we will spend eternity. The writer of Hebrews tells us that all true Christians do not belong here: *For here we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking the city which is to come* (**Heb. 13:14**).

A perusal of the obituaries tells us that no one lives forever on this earth. **James 4:14**, *yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.* **Psalm 39:4-5**, *Lord, make me know my end, and what is the extent of my days, let me know how transient I am. Behold, Thou hast made my days as handbreadths, and my lifetime as nothing in Thy sight, surely every man at his best is a mere breath.*

John wrote some very solemn words: *Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him* (**I John 2:15**). This is not a verse reserved for monks. It is for all of God's blood-bought people. Beloved, we should be living as pilgrims on the earth. Because we are temporary residents on this earth, the things of the world should not be held too tightly. Even so we are to enjoy and be grateful for all of God's good gifts to us. Because we are temporary residents on this earth we are not to give ourselves to the sinful pleasures of this life. We do not give the impression that having a good time is all that matters. We are careful not to get too tangled up in the affairs of this life. It's not as if we are to be unconcerned or irresponsible in our attitude toward the world and those in it. That which we must combat is adopting and adapting to its values, its priorities, and its pursuits as if this were our permanent residence. We live our earthly lives in the light of the heavenly one that is to come and we always remember that we are only strangers in the world (see Bentley, *Living for Christ*, pp. 20-21).

I often use Dr. John Baillie's *Diary of Private Prayer* in my devotions. This past Thursday morning I was struck almost immediately with how his prayer resonated with this idea of resident aliens; this idea of living my earthly life in the light of the heavenly one that is to come. I want to read the prayer as it was written and annotate along the way. The first part of Dr. Baillie's prayer expresses clearly a heavenly consciousness that ought to mark each one of us.

"O Lord my God, I would kneel before Thee in lowly adoration ere I set out to face the tasks and interests of another day. I thank Thee for the blessed assurance that I shall not be called upon to face them alone or in my own strength, but shall at all times be accompanied by Thy presence and fortified by Thy grace. I thank Thee that through all our human life there run the footprints of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who for our sakes was made flesh and tasted all the changes of our mortal lot. I thank Thee for the many spiritual presences with which I shall today be surrounded as I go about my work. For the heavenly host above, for the saints who rest from their labors, for patriarchs, prophets, and apostles, for the noble army of martyrs, for all holy and humble men of heart, for my own dear departed friends, I bless and adore Thy great name. I rejoice, O God, that Thou hast called me to be a member of the Church of Christ. Let the consciousness of this holy fellowship follow me whithersoever I go, cheering me in loneliness, protecting me in company, strengthening me against temptation and encouraging me to all just and charitable deeds."

Did you pick up on the consciousness of spiritual realities? Now, in the second paragraph Dr. Baillie's prayer turns to focus on his life **in the world** in light of these heavenly realities he has just rehearsed.

"O Lord Jesus Christ, who didst bid Thy disciples to shine as lights in a dark world, in shame and contrition of heart do I acknowledge before Thee the many faults and weaknesses of which we are guilty who in this generation represent Thy Church before the world; and especially do I acknowledge my own part in the same. Forgive me, I beseech Thee, the

feebleness of my witness, the smallness of my charity, and the slackness of my zeal. Make me to be a more worthy follower of Him who cared for the poor and the oppressed, and who could never see disease without seeking to heal it or any kind of human need without turning aside to help. Let Thy power, O Christ, be in us all, to share the world's suffering and redress its wrongs. Amen" (p. 93).

Beloved, like a drop of ink in a glass of clear water this idea of living our earthly lives in light of the heavenly one colors the entire book of I Peter. Here at the start I want to leave you with six questions to reflect upon over the course of the week. Here they are.

Of which kingdom are you most conscious?

In which kingdom do you take the greatest delight?

To which kingdom are you most strongly attached?

For which kingdom do you make the most diligent preparation?

By which kingdom are you most influenced?

With which kingdom are you most concerned?

These are not empty questions. Indeed, your response to, your joy in, and your endurance through hardship hang upon your answer. *Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.*

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Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.

Between the departure of Paul in AD _____ and the breakout of the Neronian persecution in AD _____ the apostle Peter pens this letter.

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Why did Peter write this piece of correspondence?

I Peter 5:12, *through Silvanus, our faithful brother, I have written to you briefly, exhorting and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it!*

“This letter ... presents itself as a message of encouragement from the Apostle Peter to Christian communities in Asia Minor which are bewildered by the cruel treatment and persecution to which they are being subjected”

(John N. D. Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and of Jude*, p. 1).

Series Title: _____ When Life is _____

Big Idea of I Peter: *The lively hope (confident expectation) of salvation (gospel promises) sustains the believer (in both faith and godliness) in times of suffering (trial, hardship, difficulties met with in the path of obedience).*

Three major sections of the I Peter: **1:3 – 2:10**, **2:11 – 4:11**, and **4:12 – 5:11**

*Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout
Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.*

Point: Christians are _____ residents in the world.

Of which kingdom are you most _____?

In which kingdom do you take the greatest _____?

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