

1 Peter: For Christians Under Pressure

Introduction

The Christians to whom 1 Peter was written were under pressure—extreme pressure. It was the kind of pressure that only Christians who have faced physical danger because of their faith have experienced. Are you one of those? Possibly, but not likely if you live in western Europe, the USA, Canada, Australia, and some other countries. However, as some of you know, if you live in the mid-east, Asia, much of Africa, Mexico, and other places where Communism or religious fanaticism exists, you or those you know continuously live in physical and social danger—simply because you follow Jesus as your Saviour and God.

As for those of you who live in nations where all religious practices and propagation are protected, few Christians you know personally have faced the threat of physical persecution. Maybe you should ask yourselves why you have not. Is it that you are blessed to have secular law that protects religious behaviour? Or is it that you lack insight into the kinds of actions you should take as Christians? Or is it that you simply lack—woefully lack—courage and commitment?

We do not know all of the details of the situation of these long-ago Christian brothers and sisters of ours who first read 1 Peter. We do know, though, that they lived in the area we know as northwest Turkey. In the first century AD, this area was identified as the Roman provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1 Peter 1:1). From studying other New Testament books, we know something about the Christian churches in this area, although they are not mentioned by name in 1 Peter. We know of Paul's Letter to the Galatians and his visits to Galatia, including the cities of Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. We do not know whether these churches, which were in the southern part of Galatia, would have been included as recipients of this letter. From Acts, Paul's writings, and the Book of Revelation, we recognize the names of churches in Asia, in such places as Ephesus, Colossae, Laodicea, Sardis, Thyatira, Smyrna, Philadelphia, and Pergamum.

The situation with which these Christians were dealing involved physical persecution for their faith. Likely this persecution was fairly localized at this time, rather than being spread across the Roman Empire as the Book of Revelation seems to reflect later. Perhaps these Christians who first read 1 Peter were already suffering some persecution. More likely, they had not yet suffered persecution, but it was so near that they could see its sharp teeth. Whatever the case, the New Testament book we know as 1 Peter was written to give them guidance and, even more, courage.

Peter calls these Christians "exiles" (1 Peter 1:1) and "aliens" (2:11). Perhaps this means that as Christians their true citizenship was in heaven rather than in their earthly culture. Furthermore, they were not to spend their time figuring out how to get out of exile but rather to redouble their efforts to be faithful to God "during the time of your exile" (1:17).

So, living as Christians in exile—and thus being different from their surrounding culture and having to pay a price for their differentness—was their problem. It's our problem, too. Sometimes it's hard to remember we are to live as Christians when we get our mail

addressed to our postal code rather than fluttering to us on the wings of angelic messengers. Sometimes it's easy to live "as the Romans live" rather than as Christ wants us to live. Living as Christ wants us to live is even more challenging when we know that if we do we will face ridicule or even persecution.

How relevant is this letter to you and most Christians you know? That depends on whether we want our Christian faith to be a Christianity of convenience rather than a Christianity of genuine commitment. Here's hoping you will opt for being a serious, faithful Christian as you learn of the situation these Christians faced and what this letter said they should do. If you do make this choice to be a serious Christian, you'll find that you will be eager to take 1 Peter's guidance and encouragement into your own heart as you seek to live for Christ. You'll need it.

Peter had been with Jesus throughout his ministry. He was the first disciple to be called by Jesus (Mark 1:16, Matthew 10:2); he was present with Jesus and James and John at the transfiguration (Mark 9:2-12); he confessed Jesus as Christ, the son of the living God before others had reached that understanding (Matthew 16:16); he denied knowing Jesus during the trial before the Sanhedrin (Matthew 26:69-75) and received the forgiveness of Jesus (Mark 16:7). On the day of Pentecost he preached and about three thousand people were saved (Acts 2:14-41). He was an important leader in the early church. He acknowledged the help of Silas in the writing of 1 and 2 Peter (1 Peter 5:12). Peter had been a fisherman when he was called by Jesus. His education was probably limited. God used him in remarkable ways even to the writing of these letters.

Session Titles and Scripture references

Session 1	<i>Keep Life in Perspective</i>	1 Peter 1:1-12
Session 2	<i>Focus Your Life</i>	1 Peter 1:13—2:3
Session 3	<i>Live Up to Who You Are</i>	1 Peter 2:4-10
Session 4	<i>Live Commendably in Your World</i>	1 Peter 2:11—3:8
Session 5	<i>Face Opposition with Humble Confidence</i>	1 Peter 3:13—4:2
Session 6	<i>Be Willing to Share Christ's Sufferings</i>	1 Peter 4:12-19
Session 7	<i>Be a Healthy Church in a Tough Situation</i>	1 Peter 5:1-11