

1 PETER

GRACE-DRIVEN DISCIPLESHIP
IN A DIFFICULT AGE

A 13-LESSON STUDY

REFORMED EXPOSITORY
BIBLE STUDY

JON NIELSON
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REFORMED EXPOSITORY BIBLE STUDIES

A Companion Series to the Reformed Expository Commentaries

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SERIES INTRODUCTION

Studying the Bible will change your life. This is the consistent witness of Scripture and the experience of people all over the world, in every period of church history.

King David said, “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes” (Ps. 19:7–8). So anyone who wants to be wiser and happier, and who wants to feel more alive, with a clearer perception of spiritual reality, should study the Scriptures.

Whether we study the Bible alone or with other Christians, it will change us from the inside out. The Reformed Expository Bible Studies provide tools for biblical transformation. Written as a companion to the Reformed Expository Commentary, this series of short books for personal or group study is designed to help people study the Bible for themselves, understand its message, and then apply its truths to daily life.

Each Bible study is introduced by a pastor-scholar who has written a full-length expository commentary on the same book of the Bible. The individual chapters start with the summary of a Bible passage, explaining **The Big Picture** of this portion of God’s Word. Then the questions in **Getting Started** introduce one or two of the passage’s main themes in ways that connect to life experience. These questions may be especially helpful for group leaders in generating lively conversation.

Understanding the Bible’s message starts with seeing what is actually there, which is where **Observing the Text** comes in. Then the Bible study provides a longer and more in-depth set of questions entitled **Understanding the Text**. These questions carefully guide students through the entire passage, verse by verse or section by section.

It is important not to read a Bible passage in isolation, but to see it in the wider context of Scripture. So each Bible study includes two **Bible Connections** questions that invite readers to investigate passages from other places in Scripture—passages that add important background, offer valuable contrasts or comparisons, and especially connect the main passage to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The next section is one of the most distinctive features of the Reformed Expository Bible Studies. The authors believe that the Bible teaches important doctrines of the Christian faith, and that reading biblical literature is enhanced when we know something about its underlying theology. The questions in **Theology Connections** identify some of these doctrines by bringing the Bible passage into conversation with creeds and confessions from the Reformed tradition, as well as with learned theologians of the church.

Our aim in all of this is to help ordinary Christians apply biblical truth to daily life. **Applying the Text** uses open-ended questions to get people thinking about sins that need to be confessed, attitudes that need to change, and areas of new obedience that need to come alive by the power and influence of the Holy Spirit. Finally, each study ends with a **Prayer Prompt** that invites Bible students to respond to what they are learning with petitions for God's help and words of praise and gratitude.

You will notice boxed quotations throughout the Bible study. These quotations come from one of the volumes in the Reformed Expository Commentary. Although the Bible study can stand alone and includes everything you need for a life-changing encounter with a book of the Bible, it is also intended to serve as a companion to a full commentary on the same biblical book. Reading the full commentary is especially useful for teachers who want to help their students answer the questions in the Bible study at a deeper level, as well as for students who wish to further enrich their own biblical understanding.

The people who worked together to produce this series of Bible studies have prayed that they will engage you more intimately with Scripture, producing the kind of spiritual transformation that only the Bible can bring.

Philip Graham Ryken
Coeditor of the Reformed Expository Commentary series

INTRODUCING 1 PETER

The apostle Peter addressed his first epistle to elect men and women “in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia” (1:1). Millions of Gentiles lived in this area—one that was larger than France or Germany—but Peter wrote to describe the privileges and life of God’s *elect*. Adopting a Trinitarian framework, he declares that they have been chosen “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” (1:2). The Father has chosen his people, the Spirit is sanctifying them, and the Son has atoned for their sins.

Peter’s **audience** is “elect exiles of the Dispersion” (1:1) or “strangers in the world” (NIV). Before God the church is “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation,” but within the empire believers are “sojourners and exiles” (2:9, 11). *Sojourner* can refer to a temporary resident, whose stay is measured in weeks or months, while an *exile* is a longer-term resident. Both words signify that a person belongs elsewhere. So the church that enjoys privileges from God suffers disadvantages within society. Gentiles will defame disciples—in part because they are “surprised” when disciples stop “living in sensuality,” as Gentiles commonly do (4:3–4). Peter’s readers will never be completely at home in this world.

Peter chiefly wrote to converted Gentiles. They “were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from [their] forefathers” (1:18) and their neighbors now “are surprised” (4:4) that, after years of “doing what the Gentiles want to do” (4:3), they have abandoned their lives of dissipation. Those in the churches he is writing to thus stand outside the mainstream of the empire; God’s salvation has estranged them from their native culture. Peter’s message is germane today, since Christians continue to feel out of place—like exiles—even in their own cultures.

Indeed, Peter became an outsider, even within Israel, after becoming a disciple. He left his home to traverse Israel with Jesus. In Acts, Peter performed miracles like Jesus and in his name (see Acts 3–4). As the church grew, the authorities threatened, beat, and jailed him (see Acts 4–5; 12). Peter tells the elect they will be outsiders too.

The exiles Peter addressed included many peoples, cultures, and languages. Peter ignored such differences and accented their status as God’s elect. Jesus had shed his blood for their sin, given them eternal life, made them part of a chosen race, and changed their conduct (see 1 Peter 1:1–2:12). Henceforth, they would be exemplary citizens, servants, and spouses (see 2:13–3:7).

Exiles live between two worlds. Their new world partially alienates them from their old world and old friends. The change from pagan polytheist to Christian was great, so Christian exiles never perfectly fit in pagan society. We ourselves sense that acutely at times. Still, Peter doesn’t tell anyone to abandon or curse this world. God sent his Son to redeem and restore his creation, and we should remain engaged with this world as well. We are to be ready to defend or explain our hope and our faith. We are to do good, live well, and *deserve* a positive reputation even if we never gain one (see 2:12; 3:13–17). The faith and the behavior of Christians guarantee that we will be strangers within our culture.

In many lands, Christianity is now sufficiently widespread to be able to enjoy tolerance, and even respect, but disciples cannot perfectly fit within secular societies. Still, the care of elders who follow Jesus’s example (see 5:1–4) provides a place where “God’s people” do fit (2:10), as we await “an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading” (1:4).

The **author** of 1 Peter is “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ” (1:1). The early church testifies that he wrote his letter while living in Rome, around A.D. 65, drawing on a lifetime of wisdom and conviction. He had walked with Jesus daily for roughly three years, experiencing everything alongside him. And this had been no accident; Jesus had *chosen* Peter to witness his deeds and words so he could then declare their meaning as his ambassador.

We thus read 1 Peter through the lens of his role as disciple and apostle. Peter was not only one of “the Twelve” (Mark 10:32; 14:10) but also a member of the inner three: Peter, James, and John (see 5:37; 9:2; 14:33).

He was a spokesman for the twelve disciples; he blurted out their worst errors and articulated their best thoughts—culminating with the declaration that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16; see also the rest of vv. 13–18).

After his resurrection, Jesus charged the apostles to disciple the nations (see Matt. 28:18–20). And despite Peter’s failures, Jesus recommissioned him to be an apostle and commanded him to feed his sheep (see John 21:15–17). In Acts, Peter proclaimed Jesus’s resurrection, and thousands repented, believed, and were baptized. Once the church was born, he testified to Christ, solved problems, rebuked sin. Then, at the Spirit’s direction, he inaugurated the church’s mission to the Gentiles (see Acts 10).

The books of the New Testament often state their theme at both the beginning and the end. The first of 1 Peter’s **themes** is *God’s grace*. Peter begins his letter, “May grace and peace be multiplied to you” (1 Peter 1:2). He closes by testifying to “the true grace of God” and telling readers, “Stand firm in it” (5:12).

This is no empty theological rhetoric! Peter’s history illumines both the man and his message. He denied Jesus three times and swore that he didn’t even know him. He repented in tears, and Jesus forgave him and restored him as an apostle (see Luke 22:62; John 21:15–17). Peter lived and served by grace, and he wanted the same for his people.

Peter’s need of grace was most acute when he denied Jesus before the crucifixion. It is moving, therefore, that he wrote his letter with the **purpose** of helping God’s elect as they are “grieved by various *trials*” (1 Peter 1:6)—a second theme. Yet trials bring more than misery and temptation. When we endure trials and remain loyal, Peter says, it proves our faith to be genuine (see 1:6–7). That brings glory when Christ is revealed. Being willing to suffer for Jesus shows we truly belong to him (see 4:1) and are standing fast with him (see 5:12). We stand fast when we remain holy in a corrupt age (see 1:14–16; 4:1–4) and when we remain loyal to Jesus through persecution (see 4:12–16).

Again, as Peter begins his letter, he tells his people that they have been chosen by the Father, sanctified by the Spirit, and sprinkled by the blood of Jesus Christ (see 1 Peter 1:1–2). God gives us grace, and we owe him obedience (see 1:2). We praise God for his mercy, for our new birth, and for the hope of an eternal inheritance with Christ (see 1:3–4, 7).

In the community of God's people, everyone receives a gift, which is also a grace (see 4:10). In love, everyone speaks and serves in ways that edify the church and glorify God (see 4:7–12). Peter has stewarded “God's varied grace” throughout his letter (4:10)—a grace that begins with Jesus's atonement (see 1:2, 18–21) and continues with assurance that he is our shepherd and overseer, even in suffering (see 2:25). Further, while Satan prowls and while brothers throughout the world suffer, “the God of all grace” pledges to restore, strengthen, and establish his people (5:10; see also the rest of vv. 8–11). The grace that Peter refers to when he closes his letter in 5:12 thus begins with Jesus's substitutionary atonement for sins (1:18–21; 2:24; 3:18–22), includes God's promise of protection in present suffering, and foretells glory with Christ in the future (see 1:6–9).

First Peter's second theme—trials and the church's faithfulness in suffering—is also prominent. Neither the empire nor the Jewish establishment persecuted the church systematically in Peter's day, but persecution was always a possibility. Christians followed Jesus, a condemned and crucified Jew who claimed to be Lord of Israel, and that could sound threatening to Rome. So every chapter of 1 Peter mentions trials and suffering (see 1:6–9; 2:18–25; 3:13–18; 4:12–19; 5:9) and the warnings grow sharper. Compare 1 Peter 3 and 4:

Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. . . . Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. (3:13–15 NIV)

Do not be surprised at the fiery trial . . . as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings. (4:12–13)

In 1 Peter 3, persecution seems possible; in 1 Peter 4, it seems almost certain. Peter anticipates trouble, so he warns his churches to be ready *if* there is persecution. Later he urges his churches to see trouble in the context of their union with Christ *when* it happens.

Peter also teaches believers how to be faithful and to minimize danger in a hostile context. He calls for holiness in general (see 1:16; 2:9). Then,

citing Psalm 34, he commends the behavior that makes life easier in every society—controlling the tongue, shunning evil, doing good, and seeking peace (see 3:8–12). Throughout, the church remains ready to endure. We follow Jesus’s example by entrusting ourselves to God instead of retaliating when we are mistreated (see 2:21–23; 3:13–18; 4:12–16).

Although suffering is prominent throughout the letter, Peter’s **focus** is first on Jesus. He “suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring [us] to God” (3:18)—and he did this for “the salvation of your souls,” shedding his blood as a “lamb without blemish” (1:19). By this sacrifice, true members of Peter’s churches “were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from [their] forefathers” (1:18).

Peter’s people are now God’s people (see 2:4–10), so they have broken with the pagan life they inherited from their fathers (see 1:14, 18). Yes, this makes them seem strange to their former friends (see 2:12; 4:1–4), but they are now united to Christ and heirs of eternal life with him (see 1:3–9; 4:13; 5:1–10). In every age and culture, the faithful stand against common practices when they stand with Jesus.

We see the theme of holiness amid trial throughout the **structure** of the book. After his greeting in the opening two verses, Peter praises God for granting believers new birth into a living hope (see 1:3–12). God calls his people to a holiness that rests on the redemptive work of Christ. Because God is holy, we are holy. Because Jesus ransomed us and we have tasted his goodness, we put away sin (see 1:13–2:3). Because we are God’s chosen, holy nation, we abstain from sin and live honorably, even if slandered (see 2:4–12).

Holiness manifests itself socially in submission to governors and masters (see 2:13–25). Wives are to submit to their husbands, even if they are unbelievers, and husbands are to honor their wives, that they may enjoy “the grace of life” together (3:7; see also vv. 1–6). Believers can *ordinarily* expect a good life if they are good and peaceful (see 3:8–13)—though they may suffer for doing good, as Jesus did (see 3:14–22).

Jesus’s example prepares believers for opposition from Gentiles (see 4:1–6). Regardless of how they are treated, disciples show self-control, love, and hospitality while using God’s gifts to administer his grace (see 4:7–12). This will be necessary if we hope to face impending trials (see 4:13–19). While individual believers seek to endure and to do good, the elders of the

church lead by setting an example and by overseeing everyone (see 5:1–5). In all this, believers humble themselves before God, cast their cares on him, resist Satan, and stand firm in God’s grace (see 5:6–14).

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LESSON 1

STRANGERS WITH HOPE

1 Peter 1:1–12

THE BIG PICTURE

The opening words of Peter’s first epistle make his audience clear: he is writing to “elect exiles,” or strangers, of the “Dispersion.” These were Christians who lived under Roman rule and belonged to various churches scattered throughout different cities and regions in ancient Asia Minor (1:1). Peter reminds them of their glorious identity in Jesus Christ: they have been foreknown by God, sanctified by the Spirit, and sprinkled with the blood of Jesus so that they might live in obedience to him (1:2). Though Peter’s audience may feel like exiles in the world in which they live, they belong to the great Savior and King, who has chosen them for eternal salvation.

Peter’s audience likely faced various forms of trial, trouble, and persecution as they followed Jesus in the ancient world (1:6). Though their circumstances and experiences differed, most Christians in these ancient cities faced at least some degree of social marginalization, insult, and mockery for worshiping Jesus and living holy and obedient lives for his sake. Thus Peter reminds them of the hope they have through their Savior (1:3–9). Not only has Jesus saved them, but he has also secured for them an eternal future and inheritance that cannot be shaken by any amount of earthly suffering, pain, or hardship.

Peter goes on to tell his audience that the prophets of the Old Testament “inquired carefully” into how God intended to graciously save his people; even the angels “long[ed] to look” into God’s plan (1:10–12). Now the

splendor of this glorious salvation has been fully revealed—both to these first-century believers and to every follower of Christ who comes after them.

Read 1 Peter 1:1–12.

GETTING STARTED

1. Have you, as a follower of Christ, ever felt out of place in your culture or community? Why might this feeling be a good sign for your spiritual health?

2. Have you ever been mocked or insulted for your belief in Jesus or in the truths of Scripture? What effect did this treatment have on your faith?

OBSERVING THE TEXT

3. How does Peter identify himself as he opens his letter? Who does he say his audience is—and what does he tell them about the identity they share (1:1–2)?

4. What is the living hope that Peter offers to these believers in 1:3–9? To what future realities does he direct their eyes and hearts?

5. Peter looks back in 1:10–12 to the witness of the prophets concerning God’s coming salvation through Jesus. What does he say was significant about their witness?

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

6. Peter refers to his audience as earthly “exiles” in 1:1. Why are they exiles, according to 1:2? What do we learn about God’s role in salvation through Peter’s use of the adjective “elect” to describe the Christian exiles to whom he writes?

God’s Ambassador, pgs. 4–5

Peter wrote from a lifetime of wisdom and conviction. He experienced everything, not least the trials and suffering that he describes in his letter. He also walked with Jesus every day for roughly three years. Yet Peter drew on more than experience when he wrote his epistles. He was an apostle, God’s ambassador, chosen by Jesus to see his deeds, hear his words, and declare what it all means.

7. What specific actions by the three persons of the Godhead does Peter call attention to in verse 2? What do we learn from this about the work that the triune God performs for the sake of our salvation?

8. What is the “living hope” that Peter mentions in 1:3? What words does he use to describe his readers’ inheritance (1:4; see v. 5 for more context)? What might have made these particular words encouraging to exiled believers in difficult situations?

9. What does Peter acknowledge is taking place in the lives of these Christians (1:6)? What does he say is the purpose of their trials (1:7)? How can this help us as well?

10. How does Peter describe faith in 1:8–9? In what sense is our salvation both a present and a future reality?

11. What does Peter say was the role of the Old Testament prophets (1:10–11)? In 1:11–12, Peter is showing that his readers have it better than the prophets of old—and even the angels. Why do they?

BIBLE CONNECTIONS

12. Read James 1:2–4, and compare it to 1 Peter 1:6–7. What additional reasons does James give for the trials in our lives? How should Christians view such trials?
13. Read Hebrews 1:1–2. How do Peter’s words in 1:10–12 connect with these verses from Hebrews?

Essential Hope, pg. 15

Peter’s churches, scattered through the region now called Asia Minor, suffered all kinds of trials (1 Peter 1:6). These fiery trials tested and refined their faith, but also provoked fear (3:14; 4:12). Peter assures his people that God’s power will shield them. They will pass these tests, prove their faith genuine, and gain honor when their salvation is complete (1:7–9).

THEOLOGY CONNECTIONS

14. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to be good and faithful citizens of our earthly countries. And Peter’s opening comments remind us that we are also, ultimately, citizens of heaven. How do we balance these two citizenships? How might remembering your heavenly citizenship help you to be a better earthly citizen too?
15. Answer 38 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism reminds Christians of the benefits we will receive on the day of resurrection: “At the resurrection, believers being raised up in glory, shall be openly acknowledged and acquitted in the day of judgment, and made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God to all eternity.” What is the significance of earthly suffering or persecution in light of this future? Why should we think of this coming day more often?

Patterns, pg. 27

The prophets foretold . . . salvation, Jesus accomplished it, and the Spirit led Peter and the apostles to describe it. The pattern is *prediction* of salvation, the *fulfillment* of salvation, and the *interpretation* of saving events. . . . Scripture contains a great many things, but in essence it describes our creation in God’s image, our rebellion and its catastrophic consequences, and then God’s plan for restoration, announced by the prophets, and accomplished in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

APPLYING THE TEXT

16. Christians today are experiencing exile just as those in Peter's audience were. What would it look like for you to live with an "exilic identity" as you worship Jesus and obey God's Word?

17. What "trials" are you currently facing (1:6)? What is tempting you to lose hope?

18. Peter tells us that our salvation has past, present, and future aspects. What encouragement can you take from this to live with hope in the midst of trials, pain, suffering, and hardship? Write down some encouraging eternal realities for you to keep in mind this week.

PRAYER PROMPT

As you wrap up your first study on 1 Peter, meditate on Peter's initial description of his audience: "elect exiles." Remember that if you belong to Jesus Christ by faith, you too are an exile—a stranger in this world. Pray that God would remind you that you are destined for an eternal inheritance in Christ that nothing in this world can shake. Praise God for the glorious and gracious gift of salvation he has offered through his Son!