

# Introduction to First Peter

*Steve Lewis - spiritandtruth.org*

*(1 Peter 1:1)*

As we begin to study the first letter that Peter wrote almost 2000 years ago, we are seeking to understand an ancient piece of correspondence. We are also looking at an English translation of a letter which was originally written in the Greek language. In addition to the language gap, there are descriptions of people, places, and events that happened in a foreign land quite different from our own. Our goal is to understand Peter's message and the principles which believers today can use to live lives that are worthy of Christ.

**1 Peter 1:1 - Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia,**

**Peter's** life is documented in all four Gospels, the first fifteen chapters of the book of Acts, and he is mentioned in the books of Galatians and 1 Corinthians. He was born Simon the son of Jonah (Matt 16:17), whose brother Andrew was a disciple of John the Baptist. When Andrew realized that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, he brought his brother to meet Him. When Jesus saw Simon approaching, He said, "You are Simon the son of John; you shall be called Cephas (which is translated Peter)" (John 1:41-42). Peter's name was given to him by Jesus Himself.

Peter was a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee (Matt 4:18; Luke 5:3-10), he was married (Matt 8:14; 1 Cor 9:5), and he lived near Capernaum (Matt 4:12-22). Several of the important events in Peter's life include his call to be an apostle (Matt 10:2) and his public declaration that Jesus is the Messiah (Matt 16:16). He was one of only three disciples who witnessed the raising of a dead girl (Mark 5:37) and the glorious transfiguration of Jesus (Matt 17:1-5). Upon Jesus' arrest, however, Peter denied the Lord three times (Mark 14:66-72).

At Christ's ascension into heaven, Peter watched with the others until a cloud hid Jesus from their sight. Afterward, Peter led the effort to have God fill the apostolic vacancy left by Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:15-26). He preached the first gospel sermon in Acts 2, and later he preached in the temple and also defended himself before the Sanhedrin (Acts 3-4). Shortly afterward he visited the disciples in Samaria (Acts 8), and Peter received the vision from God which opened the door of the gospel to the Gentiles at Caesarea (Acts 10).

Persecution began against the believers, and Herod Agrippa arrested Peter with the intention of executing him. Peter was miraculously delivered from prison (Acts 12). We then see Peter in Acts 15 giving testimony to the Jerusalem Council about the salvation of the Gentiles. There is very little information about his ministry after that time, but the apostle Paul reported that Peter spent time with the disciples at the important Jewish center in Antioch of Syria (Gal 2:11-14). Paul also mentioned that Peter ministered throughout the region, traveling along with his wife (1 Cor 9:5). From 1 Peter 5:13 we know that Peter visited the large Jewish community in Babylon, again with his wife at his side.

Jesus had predicted a violent death for Peter (John 21:18-19), and this is said to have occurred by crucifixion under orders from the Roman emperor Nero. Church tradition alleges that Peter died a martyr's death in Rome about AD 67, but there is no reliable information regarding the end of Peter's life. Many have called Peter the "Chief of the Apostles," and he certainly played an important leadership role early in the spread of Christianity throughout the known world of his day. This is a brief glimpse of the man, Peter, who wrote the letter we are studying.

In this first verse Peter identified himself as **an apostle** (*apostolos*) of Jesus Christ. Apostleship was an important office that was active during the first years of the church. It involved laying the foundation for the New Testament church (1 Cor 3:9-11; Eph 2:19-22) and recording divinely inspired instructions for the church age. Peter was personally commissioned by Jesus as an apostle, and to authenticate his ministry he was given special gifts, including the ability to perform miracles (Acts 3:1-10).

Apostles were men personally chosen by Jesus to have a unique ministry after His ascension. The function of apostles was limited to the lifetime of those individuals who met the personal qualifications for apostleship, which was based on direct contact with the Lord Jesus Christ. It was not a self-perpetuating gift where the first apostles could appoint successors who would continue throughout the church age. God used the original apostles to provide leadership, inspiration, and direction for the foundation of the church, and He often used them to record new revelation for the church age. But the men who qualified as eyewitnesses of Christ's life and resurrection had passed from the pages of history by AD 100. They had completed Christ's mission for establishing the church, so there was no longer a need for any more apostles after their passing.

There are three ways that Peter identified the recipients of his letter. First the recipients were: **those who reside as aliens**. This is from a single Greek word (*parepidēmos*) which describes people from a foreign country who come into a land that is not their own to reside there alongside the natives. It is sometimes translated as sojourner, foreigner, or pilgrim. These people were part of a specific nation and previously had a country of their own, but (due to various circumstances) they were living outside of their own land. This word is used only three times in the New Testament, and two of them are in this letter. 1 Peter 2:11 pairs this word with "aliens" (*paroikos*) who are foreigners "dwelling alongside" the native people. Hebrews 11:13 pairs this word with "strangers" (*xenos*) who are foreigners "without a share" in the native land.

Second, these people who had left their own country were now **scattered**. This is the Greek word *diaspora* which was a special term for Jews who were dispersed among the Gentile nations. This same word was used several times in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (Septuagint or LXX) to describe God's scattering of the Israelites in judgment due to their disobedience (Deut 30:4; Neh 1:9; Jer 15:7). In the New Testament this word was used only three times, the other places being John 7:35 and James 1:1 where the word specifically referred to Jews who were scattered across foreign countries as a consequence of God's judgment on the nation of Israel.

These first two identifiers tell us that Peter was writing primarily to Jewish believers who were living outside of their native land. This seems reasonable because Peter was known as an

apostle to “the circumcision” with his primary ministry to the Jews. In Gal 2:7-9 the apostle Paul specifically mentioned Peter, James, and John as apostles whose focus was ministering to the lost sheep of Israel.

Third, Peter identified the recipients as being spread **throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia**. These Roman provinces were in what was called Asia Minor (within the country of Turkey today). How did the gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ reach these people? We know from Acts 2 that there were Jews from at least three of these provinces who were in Jerusalem for the celebration of Shavuot or Pentecost which occurs on the 50th day after the sheaf offering celebrated during Passover. The provinces of Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia were all represented (Acts 2:9), and it is likely that Jews from Galatia and Bithynia were also present for that feast.

These Jews witnessed the outpouring of the Holy Spirit promised to the disciples by Jesus (Acts 1:8), and they heard the first gospel sermon proclaimed to them by Peter. Acts 2:41 says, “So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.” These new Jewish believers then returned to their homes in the provinces of northern Asia Minor where they would have shared the good news with their families, friends, and neighbors.



In 1 Peter 5:13 we see that Peter was in **Babylon** when he wrote this letter. At this time there were four major Jewish population centers: Jerusalem, Alexandria in Egypt, Antioch in Syria, and Babylon in Mesopotamia, each of which was estimated to have at least one million Jewish residents. We know from the book of Acts that Peter ministered in Jerusalem and Antioch of Syria, so it is likely that he visited each of these important Jewish communities during his years of ministry.

It seems best to take Peter at his word and place him in Babylon when he was writing. Some commentators believe that Peter was writing from Rome during the persecutions under emperor Nero, and that he used the word “Babylon” as a code word so as not to give away His actual location. But if Peter wanted to hide his location, he could have simply omitted it from this letter. Also, why would he try to hide his own location while clearly giving away the locations of his recipients? We would have expected Peter to do the opposite.

When Peter listed the Roman provinces which were destined to receive his letter, he gave them in the order in which they would be viewed by someone in the east. Again, it seems best to take Peter at his word and accept that he was visiting the major Jewish center in Babylon when he wrote to the provinces of northern Asia Minor. This was clearly meant to be an encyclical letter which would be read, copied, and circulated to all of the believers across the region.

The fact that the letter is addressed mainly to Jewish believers does not mean that Peter's words were inapplicable to non-Jewish believers. As Peter was writing this letter during his final years it had been apparent for several decades that both Jewish and Gentile believers were members together of one body, the church, over which Jesus Christ is the head (Eph 2:11-22). One of my goals for this study is to help explain Peter's teaching for Jewish believers who might read it in the future – especially those who will come to faith in their Messiah during that period called the "Great Tribulation" (Matt 24:21) or the "Day of the Lord" (Joel 1:15; 2:1-11; Amos 5:18-20; Zeph 1:14-18). There will be millions of Jews and Gentiles who will trust in the Lord Jesus Christ during that time.

This first letter of Peter is filled with doctrinal instruction as well as much-needed encouragement. God is mentioned over seventy times (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), but apart from that, the most frequent theme is *suffering*. Its keywords are mentioned twenty times (suffer, test, trial, and ordeal) in all five chapters in this letter.

As we work through this letter verse by verse we will notice that Peter's message is filled with references to the Old Testament. It is obvious that Peter was so familiar with God's Word that it permeated his thinking, and it flowed from his thoughts to his words as he recorded the message God had given him for the believers in Asia Minor.

Another thing we will see is that Peter was equally familiar with the latest New Testament revelation that was being given through James and Paul. There are half a dozen cases where Peter echoed the words recorded in the book of James, and there are almost two dozen times where Peter echoed the words of the apostle Paul. This tells us that by the time Peter was writing his letter, the previous letters of both James and Paul were being collected and circulated among the churches. Quite early in church history (~AD 45), James addressed his letter to Jewish believers: "to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad." Peter also alluded to words from Paul which were written over a span of almost twenty years, the latest of which was written only a year or two earlier than when Peter himself was writing. This tells us that the apostles were succeeding in completing their task of recording New Testament revelation and building the foundation for the church.