

## THE IMPORTANCE OF LITERARY ARGUMENT FOR UNDERSTANDING 1 PETER

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A survey of the literature dealing with Peter's epistles, including New Testament introductions, commentaries, Bible encyclopedias and handbooks, and even journal articles reveals a serious lack of consideration for the argument that flows through each letter. Much attention has been given to identifying Peter's sources and the original form of 1 Peter, and to exegeting and expounding the text. But scholars have expended little energy on thoroughly articulating Peter's comprehensive message and demonstrating the immense influence this message has on the various sections of 1 Peter. Studies in 1 Peter often identify the themes of persecution and suffering, usually in a summary statement regarding the letter's purpose, but those studies seldom demonstrate how these themes are recapitulated throughout the different segments of the work. Some commentators do not address Peter's purpose, theme, or argument in any way.<sup>1</sup>

The neglect of Peter's argument and its influence on his words and their interpretation in individual passages is typical of many expositions of 1 Peter.<sup>2</sup> Instead, the apostle's instructions

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<sup>1</sup> Two well-recognized and often consulted commentaries on 1 Peter that do not address these issues are those by Robert Leighton, *Commentary on First Peter* (London: S. Keble and J. Taylor, 1701; reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1972), and C. E. B. Cranfield, *The First Epistle of Peter* (London: SCM, 1950).

<sup>2</sup> However, three recent commentators who have given consideration to Peter's argument and its influences are Peter Davids, *First Epistle of Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), and to a lesser degree Wayne A. Grudem, *The First Epistle of Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), and J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988).

are usually presented as a kind of teaching catechism without consideration for the basis on which the instruction builds. But the argument of the epistle, particularly the element of the believer's lifestyle in the face of unfair circumstances, is crucial for understanding the full range of Peter's injunctions.

#### THE FUNCTION OF ARGUMENT IN A LITERARY WORK

Because 1 Peter constitutes a literary work, it should be studied as literature having purpose, themes, and a message that influence the meaning and impact of its various parts. Such features as allusion to and citing of Old Testament Scripture, the use of metaphor and simile, and the elements of rhetoric and style, characterize the New Testament epistles as literature.<sup>3</sup> Deissmann argues that as an epistle 1 Peter "is an artistic literary form, a species of literature, just like the dialogue, the oration or the drama."<sup>4</sup> He distinguishes between a true epistle and a letter, suggesting the letter is simply a personal "piece of life," not literary at all, while the epistle is a "product of literary art."<sup>5</sup> Longenecker denies this difference between letters and epistles but does affirm that both are literary in nature.<sup>6</sup> He agrees with Deissmann that 1 Peter is genuinely epistolary and therefore literary.<sup>7</sup> "When the Bible employs a [particular] literary method, it asks to be approached as literature and not as something else."<sup>8</sup>

No principle of literary study is more important than that of grasping the overall message of a literary piece as a single work.<sup>9</sup> Though the idea of the whole must arise from an encounter with parts, the entire work controls, connects, and unifies one's understanding of the parts.<sup>10</sup> As Ryken suggests, the most basic of all artistic principles is unity, and the literary approach to the

<sup>3</sup> Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 157.

<sup>4</sup> Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient Near East: The New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Graeco-Roman World*, trans. Lionel R. M. Strachan (London: Hodder, 1910), 229, 242.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>6</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, "On the Form, Function, and Authority of the New Testament Letters," in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 101.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>8</sup> Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature*, 11-12.

<sup>9</sup> Richard G. Moulton, *The Modern Reader's Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1895), 1719.

<sup>10</sup> E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967), 76.

Bible accordingly looks for literary patterns and wholeness of effect.<sup>11</sup> By way of contrast the form-critical approach studies the small constituent parts of a work. But in reading literature the pattern of the whole should be noted first. "One thing all of these [New Testament letters] do have in common is that they will yield most if they are read as literary wholes."<sup>12</sup>

Considering the whole in relation to the parts of a literary work is essentially noting the author's argument, that is, the flow of his thought or how his controlling message is developed. Therefore reading a piece of literature, including a New Testament epistle, as a literary whole means reading to understand the author's argument. It means tracing the author's train of thought and seeking to understand why he includes a particular section at a particular place within the manuscript. It means trying to understand what he is saying and why he is saying it where he does. Portions of a text have meaning only as they relate to what precedes and what follows, for this reveals how the individual parts relate to the argument (the whole) that controls them. Rollin Chafer calls the argument of a biblical book its scope or design, and he contends that attention to a book's design helps in interpreting its individual parts.<sup>13</sup> Fountain calls a New Testament author's argument his plan for the book: "The reader should always recognize that each writer had some specific purpose in mind for writing; and followed some predetermined plan. . . . The plan is the literary form used by the writer in carrying out his purpose."<sup>14</sup> Inch and Bullock, in their discussion of Petrine literature, earnestly defend the importance of understanding the argument of 1 Peter in order to understand its component parts. This approach is crucial and effective because of "the cohesive flow of argument" through each section.<sup>15</sup>

One must not mistakenly identify the passages in 1 Peter as independent sections. Only as the argument of the book is developed, and each individual section is studied in relation to the whole, can a fully accurate interpretation of individual passages be obtained. And only as each passage is interpreted accurately

<sup>11</sup> Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature*, 29.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>13</sup> Rollin T. Chafer, *The Science of Biblical Hermeneutics: An Outline Study of Its Laws* (Dallas, TX: Bibliotheca Sacra, 1939), 77.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas E. Fountain, *Keys to Understanding and Teaching Your Bible* (Nashville: Nelson, 1983), 75.

<sup>15</sup> Morris A. Inch and C. Hassell Bullock, ed., *The Literature and Meaning of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 249.

can the full implications of Peter's words be comprehended by church leaders who teach the apostle's instructions to modern listeners who need to hear and heed them every bit as much as the author's ancient audience.

### THE MOTIFS AND MESSAGE OF 1 PETER

Peter constructed the message of this epistle by weaving together five primary motifs: the believer's behavior, the believer's unfair treatment, the believer's deference, the believer's motivation by Christ's example, and the believer's anticipation of future glory. The apostle emphasized these themes by using a number of words that occur throughout the document. Taken together the five motifs form the underlying message Peter communicated.

### THE MOTIFS OF 1 PETER

*The believer's behavior.* As Senior and others have noted, a concern for good conduct is typical of the epistle.<sup>16</sup> Most of the letter's sections emphasize the expectation of excellent behavior on the part of the believers Peter addressed. The stress on behavior begins with a call to holiness in 2:1-10, and continues with an explanation of how to behave in a holy way toward Gentile neighbors (2:11-12) and in all other relationships including associations in legal-political affairs, in domestic affairs, and in civil and church affairs (2:13-5:5). The word ἀναστροφή ("behavior," "conduct," "manner of life," "walk," "action") most commonly communicates this theme. Moulton and Milligan note that inscriptional use often associates the term with πάροικοι and παρεπιδήμιοι, which is similar to 1 Peter.<sup>17</sup> He wrote to his audience, "But like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior" (1:15); "you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile *way of life*" (1:18); "Keep your *behavior* excellent among the Gentiles" (2:12); "wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that . . . they may be won without a word by the *behavior* of their wives, as they observe your chaste and respectful *behavior*" (3:1-2); and "Keep a good conscience so that . . . those who revile your good *behavior* in Christ may be put to shame" (3:16).

<sup>16</sup> Donald Senior, "The Conduct of Christians in the World (1 Peter 2:11-3:12)," *Review and Expositor* 79 (1982): 427-38; J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 26; and Grudem, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 43.

<sup>17</sup> James H. Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Sources* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1930), s.v. "ἀναστροφή," 38.

The aorist infinitive βιώσαι ("to live") in 4:2 likely carries the nuance of "to walk," or "to conduct one's life," thus reinforcing the emphasis on behavior in the epistle. The noun βίωσις often means "manner of life" (Acts 26:4).

In 1 Peter 4:3 κατεργάζομαι restates the motif of the believer's behavior, "For the time already past is sufficient for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles." In other versions the word is translated "to have wrought" (KJV), "to do" (NEB), "to behave or live the sort of life" (JB). Its lexical meaning is "to achieve, accomplish, do something." The word therefore appropriately expresses the author's concern for and primary theme of the believer's behavior. Another term Peter used in expounding this theme is συντρέχω: "They are surprised that you do not run with them into the same excess" (4:4). This figure of close association emphasizes again the aspect of doing or behavior.

*The believer's unfair circumstances.* The unfair treatment Peter's readers suffered comprises the second motif of his letter. Their "troubles are the ever-felt background of every paragraph."<sup>18</sup> Davids calls suffering the central concern of 1 Peter,<sup>19</sup> though the believer's behavior in suffering might be a more accurate identification of that central issue.

In the broad sense of trial, tribulation, hardship, and suffering the apostle frequently used the following words: πάσχω ("to suffer, endure," 2:19-21, 23; 3:14, 17; 4:1, 15, 19; 5:10),<sup>20</sup> πάθημα ("suffering, misfortune," 1:11; 4:13; 5:1, 9), πειρασμός ("test, trial, temptation, enticement," 1:6; 4:12), and πύρωσις ("fiery test, fiery ordeal," 4:12). The presence of suffering is expressed in 4:12 ("Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you"), and 5:10 ("After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace . . . will perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you"). The problem of suffering is demonstrated further by the readers' responses of fear (φοβέομαι, 3:6, 14) and anxiety (μέριμνα, 5:7) to their situation. The atmosphere created by suffering evoked these emotions in the hearts and minds of Peter's audience and he sought throughout the letter to exhort and encourage them in view of their sentiments.

Of greater importance to Peter's argument, however, is his consistent emphasis on the more restricted sense in which the readers suffered as victims of unjust hostility and malice. They suffered deprivation, effrontery, and indignity under the rule of a government that demeaned them by assigning them to an infe-

<sup>18</sup> D. Edmond Hiebert, *1 Peter* (Chicago: Moody, 1984), 20.

<sup>19</sup> Davids, *First Epistle of Peter*, 23.

<sup>20</sup> Only twice is the word used for an experience other than suffering.

rior class of citizenry without rank or privilege. They were resident aliens (πάροικοι) and visiting strangers (παρεπιδήμιοι) who received only limited protection under the law and grudging acceptance by the citizens of the region.<sup>21</sup> In many respects their persecution took on a local and private character, originating in the hostility of the surrounding population toward this Christian minority.<sup>22</sup> Much of the persecution they suffered was verbal in nature as verified by Peter's use of καταλαλέω ("to slander," 2:12; 3:16), βλασφημέω ("to injure the reputation, defame," 4:4), ὀνειδίζω ("to insult, reproach, denounce," 4:14), λοιδορέω ("to abuse verbally, insult, speak evil of," 2:23) and ἔπερεάζω ("to mistreat, insult, threaten, abuse," 3:16). Such abuse was undeserved, a fact represented by the meanings of the words themselves, but more directly through Peter's descriptions of his readers as bearing up "under sorrows when suffering unjustly" (2:19), "suffering for the sake of righteousness" (3:14) and "for doing what is right" (3:17), and suffering "according to the will of God" (4:19).

The New Testament especially develops the concept of innocent suffering. The early church experienced great amounts of unfair treatment, and entire books such as 1 Peter are devoted to the issue.<sup>23</sup> Peter addressed this situation, making it one of his points of emphasis. But his message involves more than innocent suffering. It is a matter of suffering while doing good, an issue Peter dealt with in discussing the believer's deference.

*The believer's deference.* First, Peter makes abundantly clear how believers should behave when they suffer, even when they suffer unjustly. Unfair treatment at the hands of unreasonable, often unbelieving people never justifies an offensive spirit or an attempt at retribution. Peter called believers to a different spirit, a spirit of deference—even while experiencing undeserved persecution. The word "deference" conveys the idea of thoughtful consideration of another individual's desires or feelings or the courteous, respectful, or ingratiating regard for another's wishes.<sup>24</sup> "Respect" or "honor" are close synonyms. Deference does not necessarily connote acquiescence, agreement, or passivity, though it does rule out retaliation. Senior rightly observes, "1 Peter is encouraging neither suffering for suffering's sake nor an opium-like religious passivity."<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Senior, "The Conduct of Christians in the World," 427.

<sup>22</sup> J. L. DeVilliers, "Joy in Suffering in 1 Peter," *Neotestamentica* 9 (1975): 64-86.

<sup>23</sup> Davids, *First Epistle of Peter*, 36.

<sup>24</sup> *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Webster, 1972), 216.

<sup>25</sup> Senior, "The Conduct of Christians in the World," 433.

"Deference" refers to a proper attitude that results in behavior characterized by respect. It is not the same as submission to authority, though submission may represent an expression of deference. Deference may be shown in other ways such as treating people respectfully and honorably, which Peter urged Christians to do in all their relationships (2:17). For wives the expression of deference toward their husbands means submitting to them (3:1); for husbands the expression of deference toward their wives involves honoring them (3:7).

As with the first two motifs the apostle's vocabulary demonstrates the importance of this theme. Peter's readers, though pressed, stressed, and beleaguered unfairly were, depending on the relationship involved, to obey (*ὑπακούω*, 3:6), to honor and respect (*τιμάω*, 2:17), or to subordinate themselves (*ὑποτάσσω*, 2:13, 18; 3:1, 5; 5:5) even to those who treated them wrongly. They were to submit not because of coercion but by intention. Their submission was to be freely assumed, conscious, and with the Lord as its only criterion.<sup>26</sup> Peter wrote in 3:8 that they were to be harmonious (*ὁμόφρονες*), sympathetic (*συμπαθεῖς*), brotherly (*φιλάδελφοι*), tender-hearted (*εὐσπλαγχνοὶ*) and humble toward each other in spirit (*ταπεινόφρονες*). They were to be hospitable and without complaint (*φιλοξένοι, ἄνευ γογγυσμοῦ*, 4:9). These words typify the true Christian response to unfair treatment. They were not to return "evil for evil or insult for insult" but were to give "a blessing instead" (3:9). Even church leaders were to minister "not out of compulsion, but voluntarily" (5:2), and not "lording it over" those under their care, but "proving to be examples" (5:3).

*The believer's motivation by Christ's example.* A fourth motif is the recurring emphasis on Christ's example. Jesus' excellent behavior during His undeserved ill treatment in His trial and crucifixion becomes a strong motivation for His followers. Every chapter of 1 Peter includes some reference to the motivational model provided by Christ in His sufferings. Reflecting on the Lord's sufferings helped Peter's audience better anticipate, understand, and endure their own trials. "The example of Christ made the sufferings of Christians plausible, predictable and even tolerable."<sup>27</sup> The apostle admonished, "Like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves" (1:15). "Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected by men, but choice and precious in the sight of God, you also, as living stones, are being built up" (2:4-5); "Christ

<sup>26</sup> F. Refoule, "Bible et éthique sociale lire aujourd'hui 1 Pierre," *Supplement* 131 (1979): 457-82.

<sup>27</sup> Norbert Brox, "Situation and Sprache der Minderheit in ersten Petrusbrief," *Kairos* 19 (1977): 1-13.

also suffered for you, leaving you an example [ὑπογραμμός] for you to follow [ἐπακολουθέω] in His steps" (2:21). "It is better . . . that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong. For Christ also died for sins . . . the just for the unjust" (3:17-18). "Since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose" (τὴν αὐτὴν ἔννοιαν, 4:1). "Share the sufferings of Christ" (4:13). "Be examples [τύποι] to the flock," as Christ has been an example to believers (5:3).

Peter's exposition of the example of Christ is seen most clearly in 2:21-25. Here an extended and impassioned exposition of Christ's innocence in unjust suffering appears as a foundation for the believers' deference when they were treated unfairly. Peter said that Christians had been called to suffer unjustly (referring to vv. 19-20), which agrees with other New Testament teaching (e.g., John 15:18-20; Acts 14:22; 1 Thess. 3:3). But why were they to suffer? Because such suffering was part of the life of Christ, which they had been called to imitate: "Since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in his steps" (v. 21).<sup>28</sup> As the Master was called to suffer unjustly, so the followers also were called, and His attitude was to be theirs. "While being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats" (v. 23).

Peter set the stage for Christ's example in 2:21-25 with the stone *testimonia* of 2:4-8. While Jesus is precious in the sight of God, He nevertheless was rejected by the nation Israel. Since the believers' experience was similar, remembering Christ's example would spur them to righteous deference in the face of injustice.

*The believer's anticipation of future glory.* Peter's fifth motif serves as a second motivational factor in the believers' quest for holy living when they are treated unfairly.<sup>29</sup> In addition to being motivated by Christ's example, they were to be motivated by the promise of reward when Christ returns.

The letter has a vibrant and optimistic eschatological viewpoint.

The final day will be one of triumph when God's salvation will be revealed (1:5), a day of "glory" (4:13) that will reward the faithful and purge the sinful (4:5). . . . Confidence in this day of victory does not lead to vindictiveness but to a positive hope.<sup>30</sup>

Simply put, "Christians are exhorted to rejoice wherever they share in Christ's sufferings, for in this way they shall also par-

<sup>28</sup> Grudem, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 128.

<sup>29</sup> L. M. Antoniotti, "Structure litteraire et Sens de la premiere Epitre de Pierre," *Revue Thomiste* 85 (1985): 533-60.

<sup>30</sup> Senior, "The Conduct of Christians in the World," 429.



take in the revelation of eternal glory."<sup>31</sup>

Peter's broad vocabulary depicts this glory to come. His readers could anticipate with assurance an "inheritance" (κληρονομία) which is "imperishable and undefiled" (ἄφθαρτον καὶ ἀμίαντον), according to 1:4. It would certainly come, for it is reserved in heaven for them. Demonstrating their genuine faith throughout their unjust trials would result in their receiving "praise" (ἔπαινος), "glory" (δόξα) and "honor" (τιμή) when Jesus returns (1:7). Peter also referred to their future glory as the "salvation" (σωτηρία) of their souls (1:9), "glories" (δόξαι) that would follow (1:11), and "grace" (χάρις) to be given to them (1:13). He said they would inherit a "blessing" (εὐλογία, 3:9), and affirmed that they were blessed because the spirit of "glory" (δόξα) rested on them (4:14). They would share in the "glory" (δόξα) to be revealed (5:1), and in the future they would receive the "crown of glory" (τῆς δόξης στέφανον, 5:4). God would "exalt them" (ὑψώω, 5:6) at the proper time, and would then "perfect" (καταρτίζω), "confirm" (στηρίζω), "strengthen" (σθενάω) and "establish" (θεμελιόω) them in Christ (5:10). The assurance of future glory brought by such promises served to motivate believers to carry out good behavior.

#### THE MESSAGE OF 1 PETER

When taken together the motifs of 1 Peter embody a message that may be expressed as follows: "The behavior of believers when they encounter unfair circumstances reflects a spirit of deference in all relationships as they follow Christ's example and anticipate future glory."

#### THE ARGUMENT OF 1 PETER

#### PETER EXTENDED GREETINGS TO BELIEVERS ENCOUNTERING UNFAIR CIRCUMSTANCES

The epistle opens with greetings to believers being treated unfairly (1:1-2). The author revealed his name, Peter, and his authoritative ministry, apostle of Jesus Christ (v. 1a), in characteristic literary fashion, thereby establishing his spiritual and ecclesiastical credibility for those who would receive this message. He addressed the letter's recipients by identifying their status, location, and position (v. 1b-2a). On the earth they resided as visiting strangers (παρεπιδημοί) who were scattered throughout the Roman provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. They were displaced persons, foreigners in the broad

<sup>31</sup> T. Kayalarampil, "Christian Suffering in 1 Peter," *Biblebashyam* 3 (1977): 7-19.

sense, but in the technical sense belonging to a category of people specifically identified, acknowledged, and cataloged by Roman authorities as "resident aliens."<sup>32</sup> Resident alien status brought few privileges but many burdens and much affliction. The government considered them second-class citizens, and while they may have worked the land they were not permitted to own land, to vote, or to hold public office, but were subject to military conscription and the payment of taxes and tribute.<sup>33</sup>

Public hostility and resentment were directed to Peter's audience by the pagan communities in which they lived. Such hostility found its roots not only in the inferior political status of the addressees but also in their religious beliefs, which their neighbors failed to understand or accept. The Christians were viewed with suspicion and contempt, verbally abused and ostracized by their non-Christian counterparts. Thus the apostle early identified his readers as believers who were being treated unfairly, in a foreign environment, surrounded by neighbors who abused them, and governed by a system that took advantage of them. The persecution they experienced was undeserved and the apostle consistently exhorted his readers to excellent behavior so that when they suffered it would be because of their commitment to Christ, not because of legal offense. The fact that Peter's readers were believers being treated unfairly is fundamental to his argument and finds a place in his document almost immediately.

Just as crucial to his argument is Peter's conviction that while his readers lived as strangers and aliens on the earth, intimidated and abused by their adversaries, in the Lord they were people of inestimable value, chosen according to God's eternal knowledge and predetermined plan (1:2a). By the Holy Spirit's sanctifying work they were selected for a twofold divine purpose: to obey Jesus Christ, and to be cleansed by sprinkling with His blood (v. 2b).<sup>34</sup> To God they were not strangers; they were well

<sup>32</sup> John H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless: A Social-Scientific Criticism of 1 Peter* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), chaps. 1-2.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Hiebert (1 Peter, 39-40), and Davids (*First Epistle of Peter*, 48-49), say obedience in 1:2 is obedience to the gospel, that is, faith in Christ, the "human side of salvation." Sprinkling with Christ's blood thus refers to the sealing of the New Covenant by the sacrifice of Christ, and the believer's entrance into that covenant. On the other hand Alan M. Stibbs (*The First Epistle General of Peter*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974]) and Grudem (*The First Epistle of Peter*, 51-54), view obedience and sprinkling here as the believers' life of obedience, the failings of which are cleansed by the blood of Christ.

The latter view may fit Peter's argument better, introducing the balance between the truth of his readers' salvation ("chosen," v. 1), and the expectation of holy living ("obey, sprinkled with His blood," v. 2). Peter maintained this balance in 1:3-12 and 1:13-5:11, respectively.

known personally and were a unique part of His divine plan. Being aware of this plan would allow them to suffer unjustly at that time, but their suffering would not diminish the fullness of their sanctification by the Holy Spirit. The author thus introduced the tension between the believers' vexation at being treated unfairly and their assurance that God was working in their lives because they belonged to Him.

Peter's greeting ends with an appropriate blessing for his beleaguered hearers: "grace and peace be yours in fullest measure" (v. 2c).

#### PETER ASSURED BELIEVERS OF FUTURE GLORY TO ENCOURAGE THEM DURING THEIR ENCOUNTER WITH UNFAIR CIRCUMSTANCES

In the first major section of his letter Peter discussed the assurance of future glory for believers who encounter unfair circumstances (1:3-2:10). The certainty of their future glorification serves as one of two motivational factors to encourage readers in their struggles and to spur them on to godly behavior. His reasoning begins with the assurance of future glory based on their new birth in Christ (1:3-5). Born again in Christ, Peter's readers enjoyed a living hope for future glory, the eager, confident expectation of life to come, which grows and increases in strength year by year.<sup>35</sup> In addition to this sustaining hope, the new birth brought them three promises which assured their future glory (vv. 4-5). Their conversion promised, first, the glory of an inheritance reserved for them in heaven, an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and never fading (κληρονομίαν ἄφθαρτον καὶ ἀμίαντον καὶ ἀμάραντό).

A second promise accompanying the new birth was that of God's sustaining power for obtaining future glory (v. 5a). God was their fortress to arrest any forces bent on depriving them of glory in the time to come.<sup>36</sup> The third promise given with the new birth was eschatological salvation itself (v. 5b), the focal point of the believer's future glory. Stibbs comments on this focus:

This eschatological emphasis means that, however truly salvation may have already begun . . . and however much it may be a daily experience . . . its full character and wonder will be disclosed only in the crowning day that is coming. What Christ's people then enjoy will be "salvation" indeed.<sup>37</sup>

However, the weight of severe trials no doubt dimmed the hopes of glory for Peter's readers. Persecution seemed their eter-

<sup>35</sup> Grudem, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 55.

<sup>36</sup> Davids, *First Epistle of Peter*, 53.

<sup>37</sup> Stibbs, *The First Epistle General of Peter*, 67-77.

nal lot in life, hobbling them in their spiritual journey. So the apostle continued to assure them that the new birth would secure their future glory in spite of present trials (vv. 6-12). These trials were real and varied (1:6), but necessary in order to demonstrate the genuineness of their faith (vv. 7-12). Peter revealed the precious nature of this true faith (vv. 7a-8) when he described it as tested by fire and found pure (v. 7a), and as loving Christ (v. 8a), believing in Him (v. 8b), and rejoicing (v. 8c) while not yet seeing Him. The present trials of these abused believers created an environment in which the true nature of their genuine faith might be demonstrated to all. And so instead of acting as an agent of condemnation, casting doubt on their receiving future glory, these various testings were to be considered elements of encouragement, revealing faith through which future glory was certain to come. God would use this genuine faith to produce a bountiful harvest of blessing and glory for them when Christ returned. They were guaranteed praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus (v. 7b), and again, salvation on that day (v. 9-12).

This salvation was a certainty (v. 9), having already been predicted by the prophets of old (v. 10). Those early predictions foresaw the exemplary sufferings of Christ and His subsequent glories (v. 11). These predictions were given primarily to serve believers in and after Peter's day. The content of the gospel his readers heard was the declaration of these prophecies and the announcement that they had found their fulfillment in Christ (v. 12).<sup>38</sup> Just as surely as Jesus suffered and was glorified, they who suffered would receive glory. His example of suffering was a second factor motivating these believers in their walk through unjust persecution<sup>39</sup> (the first factor being the assurance of future

<sup>38</sup> Grudem, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 71-72.

<sup>39</sup> Kendall suggests that 1:3-12 reflects the major emphasis of the following parnetic section (1:13-5:11) and therefore constitutes a summary of Peter's message in microcosm. The Christian life involves both affliction and hope as seen in Christ's sufferings and subsequent glories, which are the basis of the Christian life (1:10-12). Kendall argues that 1:3-12 serves as the foundation for the exhortations which comprise the bulk of the epistle to follow. First Peter 1:13-2:10 constitutes general implications of Christian existence—being true to their calling as God's people. These general implications are specified in 2:11-4:11. Negatively Christians must repudiate fleshly desires; positively they must maintain good conduct among the pagans. This good conduct is expressed primarily through submission and humility, characteristics preeminently illustrated in the sufferings of Jesus who serves as a model for appropriate Christian response to all forms of conflict. Peter's main concerns are summarized in 4:12-5:11, as his readers face a hostile world, as they relate to one another in the community of believers, and as they battle in their cosmic conflict with the devil (David W. Kendall, "The Literary and Theological Function of 1 Peter 1:3-12," *Perspectives on First Peter*, ed. Charles H. Talbert [Macon: GA: Mercer University Press, 1986], 103-20).

glory). Should not the servant be willing to follow the Master? In chapter 2 Peter developed more fully this concept of Jesus' example as a motivational factor for believers.

Having assured his readers of future glory through their new birth in Christ in spite of their present trials, Peter then introduced a new theme. Their assurance of future glory created the expectation of holy living regardless of their trials (1:13-2:10). Thus the author inserted into his argument the element of the believers' righteous behavior, the primary theme of the epistle.

Peter's readers were to fix their hope completely on the grace to come, girding their minds for action and keeping sober (1:13). Verse 13 serves as a hinge to connect 1:1-12 (assurance of future glory through new birth in Christ) with 1:14-5:11 (expectation of righteous behavior in spite of unfair circumstances). Grudem offers a helpful summary of the relationship of these passages:

Such hope in great blessings when Christ returns not only encourages downcast Christians; it also prompts a reordering of priorities to God's agenda (Mt. 6:19-21, 24) and inevitably leads to ethical changes in one's life (cf. 1 Jn. 3:3). Since Peter is about to launch into an extended section of moral commands (beginning at v. 14 and continuing with only a few interruptions through the rest of the letter), this exhortation to hope appropriately forms the transition point to the rest of the letter. If Peter's readers will first know the great truths about their salvation (vv. 1-12;) and then begin a habit of visualizing themselves personally on a path of life leading without fail to unimaginable heavenly reward (v. 13), they will be mentally and emotionally ready to strive for a life of holiness before God (vv. 14-16, etc.),<sup>40</sup>

Encouraged by the assurance of the hope to come, they were to be holy in all their behavior, not being conformed to their former lusts (1:14-16). They were to conduct themselves with reverent fear during their stay on earth (vv. 17-21). They were to long for the pure milk of the Word, putting aside all malice, guile, hypocrisy, envy, and slander (2:1-10).

The Word they were to long for would enable them to grow with respect to their salvation (2:1-2). The Word would nurture their growth, with Christ as their Cornerstone, into a spiritual house (vv. 3-4). The Word would teach that they who believe in Christ the Cornerstone will not be disappointed v. 6). The Word insured that those who rejected the Stone would stumble, but they who believed were special to God and would receive mercy (vv. 7-10). They were a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, the people of God (vv. 7-10a). They had received mercy from Him (v. 10b).

<sup>40</sup> Grudem, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 76-77.

PETER EXPECTED BELIEVERS ENCOUNTERING UNFAIR CIRCUMSTANCES TO BEHAVE WITH DEFERENCE IN ALL RELATIONSHIPS

Peter explained how believers' behavior should reflect a spirit of deference when they encounter unfair circumstances (2:11-5:11). Peter's emphasis regarding holy living in the midst of harsh trials was the believers' responsibility for deference in all relationships. They were to exhibit genuine respect and thoughtful consideration of other's feelings and desires. They were always to be humble, courteous, respectful, and grateful in their regard for each other. Peter's readers would be living in a holy way when their behavior reflected this spirit of deference in all relationships, especially when they were treated unfairly. The motivation for such holy deference was identified as their anticipation of future glory. Deferential behavior also is motivated by the believer's desire to follow the example of Christ Himself, who suffered unjustly. This holy deference on the part of suffering Christians greatly pleases God because it represents the response His Son made to unfair treatment. This should be the normal Christian response.

Peter began this section by expounding broadly God's expectation of righteous behavior before Gentile neighbors who treated his readers unfairly (2:11-12). The pagans' abuse of Christians was a crucial issue. How should believers behave in the midst of trials? With excellence! They were expected to abstain from fleshly lusts as they lived among Gentile agitators (v. 11). They were expected to behave excellently among neighbors who slandered them as evildoers (v. 12). Their excellent behavior (2:12a), would cause these very neighbors to glorify God when Christ returns (v. 12b).<sup>41</sup> Excellent behavior excludes retribution on the

<sup>41</sup> The meaning of ἡμερα ἐπίσκοπης ("day of visitation") in this passage is explained by three major views: (1) any time in this life when God may deal with unbelievers to bring them to repentance and faith (Stibbs, *The First Epistle General of Peter*, 108; Hiebert, *1 Peter*, 248-49); (2) an unspecified time of visitation when believers will glorify God (Grudem, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 117-18), and (3) an eschatological day of judgment in which all people will give glory to God (Kelly, *Epistles of Peter and Jude*, 106; Davids, *First Epistle of Peter*, 96-97). The third view fits well with the statement in verse 12. The term ἐπίσκοπης may reflect either a visitation of demonstrations of power in a good sense or in an unpleasant sense (Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 209), and in ancient, extrabiblical literature it was used of penalties incurred for making false returns in connection with government inspections (Moulton and Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Sources*, 244). Kelly notes the eschatological tension presupposed in 1 Peter and believes the "visitation" of verse 12 refers to God's "final visitation." He sees it as a time of blessing for those who will glorify God in that day (Kelly, *Epistles of Peter and Jude*, 106). Davids also believes the visitation in verse 12 is eschatological, but he views it in the negative sense of judgment. He comments: "The day of visitation is mentioned in the NT only in Luke

believers' part and requires constructive behavior. It is entirely possible, though the text does not confirm it, that retribution may be considered among the fleshly lusts the believers were to avoid. Excellent, righteous behavior, with no spirit of corresponding antagonism or retribution, would demonstrate to the unbelieving community the supernatural work of God's grace in the believers' lives. The pagans would praise Him for it in the coming day when every knee will bow to Christ.

At this point Peter narrowed his concept of the righteous behavior Christians were to exhibit during periods of unjust persecution. Absence of retribution became the dominant issue as the apostle clarified the expectation of deference—in all relationships when Christians encounter unfair circumstances (2:13-5:5). For example deference on the believers' part was expected in legal and political affairs (2:13-17). They were to subordinate themselves to every human institution including kings and the governors who represented them (vv. 13-15). Though they suffered inordinate limitations of status, they were to act as people who were free with respect to the state but slaves to God for performing righteous service. They were not to use their status as freemen to do evil in political affairs (v. 16) but were to treat all with honor, love, and respect—that is, with deference (v. 17).

Peter's readers were to act with deference toward those who took advantage of them not only in legal and political affairs, but also in domestic matters (2:18-3:7). First was the issue of the deference of believing household slaves to unfair masters (2:18-25).<sup>42</sup> Peter described the experience of the slaves (vv. 18-20), calling them to place themselves willingly under their masters' authority regardless of whether the masters were gentle or harsh (v. 18). Special favor from God rested on them when they endured sorrows when suffering unjustly (vv. 19-20). God's favor accompanied such deference because through it they were following Christ's example (vv. 21-25), which forms the basis for the believ-

19:44 (cf. Luke 1:68), but it appears in the Septuagint in Isa. 10:3 (cf. Gen. 50:24; Job 10:12; Jer. 11:23; Wisd. 3:7). While visitation by God can mean salvation, in the Isaiah passage, which is the only exact parallel, it indicates the day of judgment. All people will have to confess God's powerful display in his people, that is, 'give glory to God,' on that day, even if they have not previously acknowledged his (and their) rightness (cf. Judg. 7:19, where 'give glory to God' is an exhortation to acknowledge God's justice and righteousness by a full confession before execution)" (Davids, *First Epistle of Peter*, 97). Either Kelly's positive view of the day of judgment in verse 12, or Davids's more negative one is possible. The eschatological tone of 1 Peter and the use of "visitation," especially "day of visitation," seem to point to the return of Christ in judgment as the meaning of the term in 2:12.

<sup>42</sup> Though Peter's discussion involves house servants (οἰκεταί) due to his focus on household relationships, it does not preclude the responsibility of all slaves (δοῦλοι) to behave with deference toward their masters.

ers' response to unjust treatment. Peter exhorted them to emulate Christ's behavior during His suffering (v. 21). They were to remember the deference of Christ to unjust men, His humility before them, His submission to them, His lack of retribution toward them, and His consideration of them. They were to realize that through such behavior even in His crucifixion, Jesus bore their sins,<sup>43</sup> and He made it possible for them to follow His example as sheep follow their shepherd (vv. 22-25). Peter viewed Christ's example, along with the anticipation of future glory, as a primary motivational factor for the believers' righteous, deferential behavior when encountering unfair circumstances.

From his instructions to slaves about deference toward harsh masters the apostle moved to the matter of deference of believing wives to their husbands, even unbelieving husbands (3:1-6). Peter called Christian wives to subject themselves voluntarily to their own husbands (v. 1a). This responsibility was not limited to relationships in which both partners were believers, but extended even to marriages of believing wives to unbelieving husbands. The likelihood existed that believing wives, through voluntary subjection, might win their unbelieving husbands to Christ (v. 1b). The wives' most powerful evangelistic tool would not be argumentation, but Christlike behavior (v. 1c), again, the subject of Peter's argument. What would impress unbelieving husbands would be their wives' sincere and respectful behavior (v. 2) and their true, inner beauty (vv. 3-4). Wives were not to waste their time trying to manipulate their husbands through the wearing of ostentatious and sensual apparel (v. 3), for this would oppose the spirit of deference Peter stressed. Instead, wives were to allow their true beauty to show to their husbands. Impressive to husbands antagonistic to Christ would be their wives' gentle and quiet spirit (even in living with unbelieving, unfair husbands), which is precious in God's eyes (v. 4).<sup>44</sup>

Such a spirit of deference exhibited by wives encountering unfair circumstances in marriage was reasonable since godly women of former times had exhibited the same spirit (vv. 5-6). They "dressed themselves" in this same manner, hoping in God, and subjecting themselves voluntarily to their husbands (v. 5).

<sup>43</sup> For a discussion of "by his wounds you have been healed" see Davids, *First Epistle of Peter*, 112-13; Hiebert, *1 Peter*, 178-79; and Raymer, "1 Peter," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, New Testament, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1983), 848.

<sup>44</sup> It is important to understand that deferential behavior, while prohibiting retaliation and returned abuse, does not necessarily rule out the use of legal channels for change or efforts toward dialogue. Indeed Peter charged all believers to be ready to give a reason for their hope (3:15). Deference does, however, rule out an argumentative spirit (3:16).



Sarah, the chief example of this spirit of deference, subjected herself to her husband, Abraham (v. 6a). The wives in Peter's audience became her "daughters" in a figurative sense when they espoused her convictions and reflected them in their relationships to their own husbands. They would be following Sarah's example when they did what was right (obeyed their husbands), without fearing what would happen (v. 6b).

Peter then turned his attention to the responsibility of Christian husbands to behave with deference in their marriages (v. 7). He called husbands to live with their wives in the various aspects of married life, in accord with knowledge (v. 7a). A husband's knowledge of the principles of the Word of God (e.g., Ps. 34:12-16; Isa. 53:9; 1 Pet. 2:22; 3:10-12) would require him to behave toward his wife with a spirit of deference, even when she had caused unfair circumstances for him. These unfair circumstances may have been the result of her being in certain ways the weaker partner of the two (3:7b). But regardless of the wife's part in her husband's hardships, he was not to belittle her nor intimidate her, but to honor her as a Christian, an heir together with her of the gracious gift of life (v. 7c). Such honor toward one's wife reflected the spirit of deference required by the Scriptures. If a husband failed to render such honor to his wife, he might find his spiritual life affected adversely in that his prayers would be hindered (v. 7d).

Peter's emphasis then shifted from the political and domestic spheres of the readers' lives to the sphere of civil affairs and the corresponding expectation of deference (3:8-4:19). He introduced this section with a reminder of the expectation of the believer's deference in all relationships, but especially in unfair circumstances (3:8-12), in which all were to be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble (v. 8). Similarly, they were not to return evil for evil, or insult for insult, but to give a blessing instead, because as a result of such deferential behavior they would inherit a blessing (v. 9). Quoting Psalm 34:12-16, Peter emphasized that when they encountered unfair, perhaps even desperate circumstances, God would bless them when they rendered a blessing in return for insult, but God's disfavor would rest with those who did evil (1 Pet. 3:10-12).

Following this section Peter then addressed a major, current issue facing his readers—their unfair treatment by neighbors in their communities (3:13-4:19). The apostle restated the assurance of God's blessing when they proved zealous for what is good while suffering unjustly, sometimes because of their own righteousness (3:13-14). They were not to be fearful or troubled by their neighbors' intimidation but were to be ready to give a defense of their hope, in a spirit of deference demonstrated by gentleness and re-

spect (v. 15). Their obviously good behavior would become a source of shame for those who continued to slander them (v. 16).

Actually their unjust suffering was of great value to them (vv. 17-22). Suffering for doing what is right is vastly superior to suffering for having done wrong (v. 17). This fact was emphasized and exemplified through the death of Christ, the just one dying for unjust ones (vv. 18-20), whose passion brought salvation to all who appeal to God through Him (vv. 21-22).

Peter confirmed the notion that his readers should expect to experience suffering as had their Lord (4:1-6). He challenged them to follow the example of Christ's behavior in suffering, the ing not for lusts that had motivated them in the past, but for the will of God (vv. 1-2). They were being abused by their neighbors because they no longer participated with them in their sinful activities (vv. 3-4), but their abusers would be judged by God. Any retribution on the believer's part was not fitting with a spirit of deference and was God's prerogative and responsibility not theirs (vv. 5-6).

The suffering of Peter's readers was certain to continue (vv. 7-19). During this time of trial it would be important for believers to strengthen their bond with each other. They would need to be alert to pray for one another, to love each other fervently, to be hospitable to each other, and to serve each other with their spiritual gifts (vv. 7-11).

It would also be important for believers to continue follow Christ's example when He experienced unjust treatment (vv. 12-19). They were not to be surprised at their serious time of testing (v. 12) but were to respond to it with rejoicing, knowing that when they were reviled for the name of Christ they were blessed (vv. 13-14). They were to be careful to avoid suffering that came because of punishment for real crimes (v. 15), but they were not to be ashamed to suffer because of their Christian faith (v. 16). Judgment needed to begin with God's people and they were experiencing that refining process through their trials. Sinners had no recourse in judgment, but Christians can enjoy the comfort of entrusting their souls to a faithful Creator when they behave with deference in their unfair circumstances (vv. 17-19).

Peter also instructed his readers to behave with deference when they encounter unfair circumstances in church affairs (5:1-10). Church elders were not to shepherd their flock from a sense of duty or for financial gain, but voluntarily and eagerly (vv. 1-2). They were not to dominate those under their authority but were to serve as examples to them (v. 3). The Chief Shepherd would give to these shepherds of the flock the unfading crown of glory when He appears (v. 4).

Young people, who often face the temptations of impatience and willfulness, were not to rebel against authorities in the church but were to subject themselves to the elders God had placed over them in positions of leadership (v. 5a).<sup>45</sup>

All in the church were to behave with humility toward others. No one needed to exalt himself, because God would exalt him when the time was right (vv. 5b-6). When they became anxious about their harsh, unfair circumstances, they were to cast those anxieties on Him because He cares for them (v. 7).

The unfair circumstances and suffering experienced by Peter's readers were due, in large measure, to the work of their adversary, the devil, who sought to "devour them" (vv. 8-9). Peter cautioned Christians to be serious about the devil, being on the alert for him (v. 8), and resisting him with a firm faith, as did other Christians around the world (v. 9). Peter listed many sources of the believers' unfair circumstances as he developed the argument of his letter, including political authorities, harsh masters, husbands, wives, and neighbors. Believers were to reflect a spirit of deference in all these relationships, but the devil was the only antagonist they were to resist.

Peter closed the major portion of his letter by encouraging his readers about the outcome of their deference in unfair circumstances (vv. 10-11). They would not always be victims of such unfairness and suffering. Compared to eternity, these harsh experiences would last only a little while, and then God Himself would perfect, confirm, strengthen, and establish them (v. 10). A final benediction reminded Peter's audience that no matter who exercised authority over them on earth at the present time, true dominion belonged to God forever and ever (v. 11).

#### PETER WROTE HIS FINAL WORDS TO BELIEVERS ENCOUNTERING UNFAIR CIRCUMSTANCES

The apostle's final words to these believers encountering unfair circumstances (vv. 12-14) began with a charge to those who suffered (v. 12). Peter had written to them briefly through Silvanus, exhorting and testifying that his message was the true grace of God (v. 12a), in which they were to stand firm (v. 12b). Peter added a personal touch to his epistle by including greet-

<sup>45</sup> Hiebert (*1 Peter*, 290-91), Davids (*First Epistle of Peter*, 182-85), and Grudem (*The First Epistle of Peter*, 192-93) believe "elder" in 5:5 refers to church leaders, not all older people. "Younger" refers to young people in the church, who would most need a reminder to be submissive to authority. Elliott takes the view that by "younger" (νεώτεροι) Peter means "neophyte" believers, those ready for baptism (John H. Elliott, "Ministry and Church Order in the NT: A Traditio-Historical Analysis (1 Pet. 5:1-5 & Parallels)," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 32 [1970]: 367-91).

ings from the church in "Babylon," greetings from Mark, and an invitation to greet one another with a kiss of love (vv. 12-14a).

Peter ended his epistle with a simple blessing to these believers who were suffering unfairly: "peace to all" (v. 14b).

### SUMMARY

Commentators must identify and develop the literary argument of 1 Peter if they hope to interpret and expound the apostle's instructions accurately. Teachers of 1 Peter must understand how the author wove his argument throughout every segment of his epistle. Each individual passage must be studied in light of the author's argument which controls it, not interpreted separately from the overall message of the epistle. Only then do Peter's words achieve their full impact and effectiveness.

When the motifs of 1 Peter are taken together, they produce a message or argument that may be expressed in the following way: "When believers encounter unfair circumstances, their behavior should reflect a spirit of deference in all relationships as they follow Christ's example and anticipate future glory." This controlling theme influences every passage in 1 Peter and provides greater understanding for people who want to apply Peter's principles to their own relationships with the government, neighbors, business colleagues, marriage partners, and Christians in the church fellowship. Only by understanding a passage in light of Peter's overall argument can one achieve the most productive and authoritative application of the apostle's instructions.

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You understood things you didn't understand before, and that shapes your worldview. Fiction deepens your understanding of evolution. Everything evolves – individuals evolve. Paradigms evolve. I am a literature person – I see the world with a literary mind. When I read fiction after a spell of abstinence, it's like taking a long drink of cold water on a hot day when your mouth is dry. Acknowledgement: not all fiction is valuable. Understanding Genres and Literary Forms. As mentioned previously, the Bible is composed of many individual books – a library of books. The types of books in the Bible vary one from the other. While this is not a comprehensive list, it highlights the importance of considering the literary form when interpreting a passage from the Scriptures. If you read carefully, you will recognize when the biblical author is using one or more of these literary forms and you will be able to interpret the text accordingly. Still others are attributed to various apostles and leaders of the early Church, including Peter, James, Jude, and John. The letter genre follows a basic stylistic pattern that has four elements: the opening formula, the thanksgiving, the body of the letter, and the closing.