

BE

HOPEFUL

HOW TO MAKE THE BEST OF TIMES OUT OF
YOUR WORST OF TIMES

NT COMMENTARY

I PETER

Warren W. Wiersbe

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To our daughters-in-law

SUSAN WIERSBE

and

KAREN WIERSBE

And to our sons-in-law

DAVID JACOBSEN

and

DAVID JOHNSON

It's great to have you

in the family!

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THE BIG IDEA

An Introduction to *Be Hopeful*
by Ken Baugh

During a British conference on comparative religion, experts had gathered from around the world to debate those things that made the Christian faith unique. Slowly, the experts began eliminating one possibility at a time. Some thought it was the incarnation that made Christianity unique, but as they discussed this, it became evident that there are other religions that claim gods appearing in human form. Some suggested that the resurrection is the only unique element to Christianity, yet as they studied they found accounts in other religions of people returning from the dead. As time passed, the debates grew more heated.

C. S. Lewis, whom many believe to have been one of the greatest Christian thinkers in the twentieth century, strolled in. Lewis had heard the shouting from down the hall, and as he entered the room he asked, “What’s all the rumpus about?” His colleagues told him of their discussions as to what made Christianity unique from the other world religions. Lewis responded, “Oh, that’s easy, it’s grace.” And after further discussion they finally all agreed.

Grace sets the Christian faith apart from every other world religion. What is grace? Simply put, grace is God’s unmerited favor. You cannot earn grace; you cannot do anything to deserve grace. It is simply God

doing something for you with no strings attached. God's grace is solely motivated by love: deep, abiding, unconditional, sacrificial love. Phillip Yancey puts it this way:

The notion of God's love coming to us free of charge, no strings attached, seems to go against every instinct of humanity. The Buddhist eight-fold path, the Hindu doctrine of *karma*, the Jewish Covenant, and Muslim's code of law, each of these offers a way to earn approval. Only Christianity dares to make God's love unconditional (*What's So Amazing About Grace*, 45).

But just because grace is free does not mean that it is cheap. Grace may not cost you and me anything, but it cost Jesus His life. Jesus came to earth over two thousand years ago. As God in human flesh, He lived the perfect life and then died on a cross to pay the price for your sin and mine. We deserved to hang on that cross, not Jesus. It was our sin that separated us from a holy and righteous God, our sin that made us guilty and deserving of spending eternity in hell. But because Jesus loves you and me so much, He had mercy on us and took the death sentence upon Himself that we so rightly deserved. That's grace. And because of God's grace there is hope both for today and the rest of eternity. Living in this hope is the Big Idea throughout the letter of 1 Peter.

Of all the disciples, I believe that Peter understood the grace of God the most because Peter denied knowing Jesus not once, not twice, but three times. Peter thought he loved Jesus enough to die for Him, but when that love was tested and Peter was accused of being one of Jesus' disciples, he failed and denied knowing Him. Jesus had warned Peter that this would happen: "Today—yes, tonight—before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times.' But Peter insisted emphatically, 'Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you'" (Mark 14:29–31 NIV).

Even though Peter did love Jesus, and even though he intended to stand firm in the face of persecution, he denied his Lord just as Jesus said he would. But in the midst of Peter's great failure, he experienced the amazing grace of God. There is an interesting detail found only in Luke's account of Peter's betrayal of Jesus. It's found in Luke 22:61 (NIV): "The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter." What do you think was in that look? What if you had been in Jesus' sandals; how would you have looked at Peter? Would it have been a look of hurt or anger? Would you have given Peter the evil eye and said, "Peter how could you? How could you do this to me?" All of these would be natural responses, and if Jesus had looked at Peter that way, who would have blamed Him?

But here's the interesting thing: None of these natural responses were in the look that Jesus gave to Peter. The Greek word for "looked" in this verse carries the idea of interest, love, or concern. Jesus didn't look at Peter with disdain but with grace. It was like Jesus was saying: "Peter, I love you, and I'm concerned about you, because I know how broken you are going to feel now that you have rejected me." Peter denied his Lord, but later Peter experienced God's grace.

For the last few years, I have participated in leading a tour to the Holy Land. One of my favorite spots on our tour is Mensa Christi, where Jesus restored Peter and commissioned him to full-time ministry. It is a powerful experience to sit there on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and listen to the water as it laps on the sand, feeling the sun on your face, knowing that at this very spot, some two thousand years ago, Peter experienced the amazing grace of God as Jesus restored him three times for each of his three denials. That day changed Peter's life forever from a hardened blue-collar fisherman into an ambassador of God's grace. And I believe as Peter penned the words of this first letter bearing his name, his intent inspired by the Holy Spirit was for every disciple who reads these words to experience the hope that comes through God's grace. As such, I believe

that every follower of Jesus Christ can live every moment of every day with hope if they remember three important truths.

Truth 1: This earth is not my home; my home is in heaven. Peter reminds us over and over again throughout this letter that we are “strangers in the world” (1 Peter 1:1 NIV), that this life is not all there is. There is so much more to come, and when we receive God’s grace of forgiveness for sin through Jesus’ death on the cross, we can be assured of a home in heaven. Jesus took six days to create the world (Ex. 31:17; Col. 1:16–17), and there are some beautiful and amazing places in it, but imagine what heaven is going to be like! When I remember how amazing eternal life in the Father’s presence is going to be, it enables me to endure whatever may come my way in this life.

Truth 2: God uses adversity in this life to strengthen my faith. Peter reminds us that we will suffer “grief in all kinds of trials” (1 Peter 1:6 NIV), yet we can still have hope, because God never wastes a hurt. He uses them all in a supernatural way to strengthen our faith, which is more important to God than the purest gold (1:7). In fact, the writer of Hebrews emphasizes the value of our faith: “Without faith, it’s impossible to please God” (Heb. 11:6). Nothing that happens in your life happens without God’s consent. He is not the author of evil, but He allows evil in our lives, and then He supernaturally uses the suffering that comes from evil to shape us into men and women who bring Him glory.

The people to whom Peter wrote this letter were believers experiencing severe persecution under the reign of Roman Emperor Nero. Nero was a total psycho and afflicted these believers with horrendous acts of evil. Nero put women and children into the Coliseum for sport to be torn apart by lions. He impaled believers on stakes and burned them as human torches to light up his decadent evening parties. In fact, not long after Peter wrote his second letter, Nero had him crucified upside down. And yet, even in the face of great persecution, Peter encouraged

his readers to stand firm in their hope in Christ, knowing their faith was being purified and bringing great honor and glory to God. Let us maintain the same perspective in the midst of our own adversity.

Truth 3: The end of all things is near. Because the end is near, Peter admonishes us to live each day being intentional about our witness to unbelievers (1 Peter 3:15–16) and our love toward believers (4:8–10). My friend, you are going to live for eternity, not in this world but in heaven. Therefore, everything you do in this life will echo throughout eternity, bringing God glory and storing up for you treasure in heaven (Matt. 6:19–20).

These truths that Peter reminds us of throughout this letter should act as a powerful source of hope every day of your life. You have so much to be grateful for through God's grace of forgiveness and the hope this establishes for you for the rest of eternity. In light of all of God's amazing grace, how can we do anything but praise and worship Him? My prayer for you as you read through this commentary is that you will remember these three important truths and carry with you every day the hope of God's presence, knowing that He is preparing a wonderful place for you in heaven.

Dr. Wiersbe's commentaries have been a source of guidance and strength to me over the many years that I have been a pastor. His unique style is not overly academic, but theologically sound. He explains the deep truths of Scripture in a way that everyone can understand and apply. Whether you're a Bible scholar or a brand-new believer in Christ, you will benefit, as I have, from Warren's insights. With your Bible in one hand and Dr. Wiersbe's commentary in the other, you will be able to accurately unpack the deep truths of God's Word and learn how to apply them to your life.

Drink deeply, my friend, of the truths of God's Word, for in them you will find Jesus Christ, and there is freedom, peace, assurance, and joy.

—Ken Baugh
Pastor of Coast Hills Community Church
Aliso Viejo, California

A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR

If you know something about suffering and persecution, then 1 Peter has a message for you: “Be hopeful!”

Peter wrote this letter to Christians who were going through various trials. The apostle knew that a severe “fiery trial” was just around the corner, and he wanted to prepare believers for it. After all, what life does to us depends on what life finds in us.

For the most part, Christians in the Western world have enjoyed comfortable lives. Our brothers and sisters behind iron and bamboo curtains have suffered for their faith. Now there is every indication that the time is approaching when it will cost us to take a stand for Christ. The only “comfortable” Christian will be a “compromising” Christian, and his comfort will be costly.

But God’s message to us is, “Be hopeful! Suffering leads to glory! I can give you all the grace you need to honor Me when the going gets tough!”

The future is still as bright as the promises of God, so—*be hopeful!*

—Warren W. Wiersbe

A SUGGESTED OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF 1 PETER

Theme: God's grace and the Living Hope

Key verses: 1 Peter 1:3; 5:12

- I. God's Grace and Salvation (1 Peter 1:1—2:10)
 - A. Live in hope (1 Peter 1:1–12)
 - B. Live in holiness (1 Peter 1:13–21)
 - C. Live in harmony (1 Peter 1:22—2:10)
- II. God's Grace and Submission (1 Peter 2:11—3:12)
 - A. Submit to authorities (1 Peter 2:11–17)
 - B. Submit to masters (1 Peter 2:18–25)
 - C. Submit in the home (1 Peter 3:1–7)
 - D. Submit in the church (1 Peter 3:8–12)
- III. God's Grace and Suffering (1 Peter 3:13—5:11)
 - A. Make Jesus Christ Lord (1 Peter 3:13–22)
 - B. Have Christ's attitude (1 Peter 4:1–11)
 - C. Glorify Christ's name (1 Peter 4:12–19)
 - D. Look for Christ's return (1 Peter 5:1–6)
 - E. Depend on Christ's grace (1 Peter 5:7–14)

WHERE THERE'S CHRIST, THERE'S HOPE

(1 Peter 1:1; 5:12–14)

While there's life, there's hope!" That ancient Roman saying is still quoted today and, like most adages, it has an element of truth but no guarantee of certainty. It is not the fact of life that determines hope, but the faith of life. A Christian believer has a "living hope" (1 Peter 1:3 NASB) because his faith and hope are in God (1 Peter 1:21). This "living hope" is the major theme of Peter's first letter. He is saying to all believers, "Be hopeful!"

Before we study the details of this fascinating letter, let's get acquainted with the man who wrote it, the people to whom he sent it, and the particular situation that prompted him to write.

THE WRITER (1:1)

He identified himself as "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:1). Some liberals have questioned whether a common fisherman could have penned this letter, especially since Peter and John were both called "unlearned and ignorant men" (Acts 4:13). However, this phrase only means "laymen without formal schooling"; that is, they were not professional religious leaders. We must never underestimate the training Peter

had for three years with the Lord Jesus, nor should we minimize the work of the Holy Spirit in his life. Peter is a perfect illustration of the truth expressed in 1 Corinthians 1:26–31.

His given name was Simon, but Jesus changed it to Peter, which means “a stone” (John 1:35–42). The Aramaic equivalent of “Peter” is “Cephas,” so Peter was a man with three names. Nearly fifty times in the New Testament, he is called “Simon,” and often he is called “Simon Peter.” Perhaps the two names suggest a Christian’s two natures: an old nature (Simon) that is prone to fail, and a new nature (Peter) that can give victory. As Simon, he was only another human piece of clay, but Jesus Christ made a rock out of him!

Peter and Paul were the two leading apostles in the early church. Paul was assigned especially to minister to the Gentiles, and Peter to the Jews (Gal. 2:1–10). The Lord had commanded Peter to strengthen his brethren (Luke 22:32) and to tend the flock (John 21:15–17; also see 1 Peter 5:1–4), and the writing of this letter was a part of that ministry. Peter told his readers that this was a letter of encouragement and personal witness (1 Peter 5:12). Some writings are manufactured out of books, the way freshmen students write term papers, but this letter grew out of a life lived to the glory of God. A number of events in Peter’s life are woven into the fabric of this epistle.

This letter is also associated with Silas (Silvanus, 1 Peter 5:12). He was one of the “chief men” in the early church (Acts 15:22) and a prophet (Acts 15:32). This means that he communicated God’s messages to the congregations as he was directed by the Holy Spirit (see 1 Cor. 14). The apostles and prophets worked together to lay the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20), and, once that foundation was laid, they passed off the scene. There are no apostles and prophets *in the New Testament sense* in the church today.

It is interesting that Silas was associated with Peter’s ministry, because originally he went with Paul as a replacement for Barnabas (Acts 15:36–41).

Peter also mentioned John Mark (1 Peter 5:13) whose failure on the mission field helped to cause the rupture between Paul and Barnabas. Peter had led Mark to faith in Christ ("Mark, my son") and certainly would maintain a concern for him. No doubt one of the early assemblies met in John Mark's home in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12). In the end, Paul forgave and accepted Mark as a valued helper in the work (2 Tim. 4:11).

Peter indicated that he wrote this letter "at Babylon" (1 Peter 5:13) where there was an assembly of believers. There is no evidence either from church history or tradition that Peter ministered in ancient Babylon which, at that time, did have a large community of Jews. There was another town called "Babylon" in Egypt, but we have no proof that Peter ever visited it. "Babylon" is probably another name for the city of Rome, and we do have reason to believe that Peter ministered in Rome and was probably martyred there. Rome is called "Babylon" in Revelation 17:5 and 18:10. It was not unusual for persecuted believers during those days to write or speak in "code."

In saying this, however, we must not assign more to Peter than is due him. He did *not* found the church in Rome nor serve as its first bishop. It was Paul's policy not to minister where any other apostle had gone (Rom. 15:20); so Paul would not have ministered in Rome had Peter arrived there first. Peter probably arrived in Rome after Paul was released from his first imprisonment, about the year AD 62. First Peter was written about the year 63. Paul was martyred about 64, and perhaps that same year, or shortly after, Peter laid down his life for Christ.

THE RECIPIENTS (1:1)

Peter called them "strangers" (1 Peter 1:1), which means "resident aliens, sojourners." They are called "strangers and pilgrims" in 1 Peter 2:11. These people were citizens of heaven through faith in Christ (Phil. 3:20), and therefore were not permanent residents on earth. Like Abraham, they had

their eyes of faith centered on the future city of God (Heb. 11:8–16). They were in the world, but not of the world (John 17:16).

Because Christians are “strangers” in the world, they are considered to be “strange” in the eyes of the world (1 Peter 4:4). Christians have standards and values different from those of the world, and this gives opportunity both for witness and for warfare. We will discover in this epistle that some of the readers were experiencing suffering because of their different lifestyle.

These believers were a “scattered” people as well as a “strange” people. The word translated “scattered” (*diaspora*) was a technical term for the Jews who lived outside of Palestine. It is used this way in John 7:35 and James 1:1. However, Peter’s use of this word does not imply that he was writing only to Jewish Christians, because some statements in his letter suggest that some of his readers were converted out of Gentile paganism (1 Peter 1:14, 18; 2:9–10; 4:1–4). There was undoubtedly a mixture of both Jews and Gentiles in the churches that received this letter. We will notice a number of Old Testament references and allusions in these chapters.

These Christians were scattered in five different parts of the Roman Empire, all of them in northern Asia Minor (modern Turkey). The Holy Spirit did not permit Paul to minister in Bithynia (Acts 16:7), so he did not begin this work. There were Jews at Pentecost from Pontus and Cappadocia (Acts 2:9), and perhaps they carried the gospel to their neighboring province. Possibly Jewish believers who had been under Peter’s ministry in other places had migrated to towns in these provinces. People were “on the move” in those days, and dedicated believers shared the Word wherever they went (Acts 8:4).

The important thing for us to know about these “scattered strangers” is that they were going through a time of suffering and persecution. At least fifteen times in this letter Peter referred to suffering, and he used eight different Greek words to do so. Some of these Christians were suffering

because they were living godly lives and doing what was good and right (1 Peter 2:19–23; 3:14–18; 4:1–4, 15–19). Others were suffering reproach for the name of Christ (1 Peter 4:14) and being railed at by unsaved people (1 Peter 3:9–10). Peter wrote to encourage them to be good witnesses to their persecutors, and to remember that their suffering would lead to glory (1 Peter 1:6–7; 4:13–14; 5:10).

But Peter had another purpose in mind. He knew that a “fiery trial” was about to begin—official persecution from the Roman Empire (1 Peter 4:12). When the church began in Jerusalem, it was looked on as a “sect” of the traditional Jewish faith. The first Christians were Jews, and they met in the temple precincts. The Roman government took no official action against the Christians since the Jewish religion was accepted and approved. But when it became clear that Christianity was not a “sect” of Judaism, Rome had to take official steps.

Several events occurred that helped to precipitate this “fiery trial.” To begin with, Paul had defended the Christian faith before the official court in Rome (Phil. 1:12–24). He had been released but then was arrested again. This second defense failed, and he was martyred (2 Tim. 4:16–18). Second, the deranged emperor, Nero, blamed the fire of Rome (July AD 64) on the Christians, using them as a scapegoat. Peter was probably in Rome about that time and was slain by Nero, who had also killed Paul. Nero’s persecution of Christians was local at first, but it probably spread. At any rate, Peter wanted to prepare the churches.

We must not get the idea that all Christians in every part of the empire were going through the same trials to the same degree at the same time. It varied from place to place, though suffering and opposition were pretty general (1 Peter 5:9). Nero introduced official persecution of the church, and other emperors followed his example in later years. Peter’s letter must have been a tremendous help to Christians who suffered during the reigns of Trajan (98–117), Hadrian (117–138), and

Diocletian (284–305). Christians in the world today may yet learn the value of Peter’s letter when their own “fiery trials” of persecution begin. While I personally believe that the church will not go through *the* tribulation, I do believe that these latter days will bring much suffering and persecution to the people of God.

It is possible that Silas was the bearer of this letter to the believers in the provinces, and also the secretary who wrote the epistle.

THE MESSAGE (5:12)

First Peter is a letter of encouragement (1 Peter 5:12). We have noted that the theme of *suffering* runs throughout the letter, but so also does the theme of *glory* (see 1 Peter 1:7–8, 11, 21; 2:12; 4:11–16; 5:1, 4, 10–11). One of the encouragements that Peter gives suffering saints is the assurance that their suffering will one day be transformed into glory (1 Peter 1:6–7; 4:13–14; 5:10). This is possible only because the Savior suffered for us and then entered into His glory (1 Peter 1:11; 5:1). The sufferings of Christ are mentioned often in this letter (1 Peter 1:11; 3:18; 4:1, 13; 5:1).

Peter is preeminently the apostle of *hope*, as Paul is the apostle of *faith* and John of *love*. As believers, we have a “living hope” because we trust a living Christ (1 Peter 1:3). This hope enables us to keep our minds under control and “hope to the end” (1 Peter 1:13 NIV) when Jesus shall return. We must not be ashamed of our hope but be ready to explain and defend it (1 Peter 3:15). Like Sarah, Christian wives can hope in God (1 Peter 3:5, where “trusted” should be translated “hoped”). Since suffering brings glory, and because Jesus is coming again, we can indeed be hopeful!

But suffering does not *automatically* bring glory to God and blessing to God’s people. Some believers have fainted and fallen in times of trial and have brought shame to the name of Christ. It is only when we depend on the grace of God that we can glorify God in times of suffering. Peter also emphasized God’s grace in this letter. “I have written to you briefly,

encouraging you and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it" (1 Peter 5:12 NIV).

The word *grace* is used in every chapter of 1 Peter: 1:2, 10, 13; 2:19 ("thankworthy"), 20 ("acceptable"); 3:7; 4:10; 5:5, 10, 12. Grace is God's generous favor to undeserving sinners and needy saints. When we depend on God's grace, we can endure suffering and turn trials into triumphs. It is grace alone that saves us (Eph. 2:8–10). God's grace can give us strength in times of trial (2 Cor. 12:1–10). Grace enables us to serve God in spite of difficulties (1 Cor. 15:9–10). Whatever begins with God's grace will always lead to glory (Ps. 84:11; 1 Peter 5:10).

As we study 1 Peter, we will see how the three themes of suffering, grace, and glory unite to form an encouraging message for believers experiencing times of trial and persecution. These themes are summarized in 1 Peter 5:10, a verse we would do well to memorize.

The cynical editor and writer H. L. Mencken once defined hope as "a pathological belief in the occurrence of the impossible." But that definition does not agree with the New Testament meaning of the word. True Christian hope is more than "hope so." It is confident assurance of future glory and blessing.

An Old Testament believer called God "the hope of Israel" (Jer. 14:8). A New Testament believer affirms that Jesus Christ is his hope (1 Tim. 1:1; see Col. 1:27). The unsaved sinner is "without hope" (Eph. 2:12 NIV), and if he dies without Christ, he will be hopeless forever. The Italian poet Dante, in his *Divine Comedy*, put this inscription over the world of the dead: "Abandon all hope, you who enter here!"

This confident hope gives us the encouragement and enablement we need for daily living. It does not put us in a rocking chair where we complacently await the return of Jesus Christ. Instead, it puts us in the marketplace, on the battlefield, where we keep on going when the burdens are heavy and the battles are hard. Hope is not a sedative; it is a shot

of adrenaline, a blood transfusion. Like an anchor, our hope in Christ stabilizes us in the storms of life (Heb. 6:18–19), but unlike an anchor, our hope moves us forward, it does not hold us back.

It is not difficult to follow Peter's train of thought. Everything begins with salvation, our personal relationship to God through Jesus Christ. If we know Christ as Savior, then we have hope! If we have hope, then we can walk in holiness and in harmony. There should be no problem submitting to those around us in society, the home, and the church family. Salvation and submission are preparation for suffering; but if we focus on Christ, we can overcome, and God will transform suffering into glory.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Have you ever suffered for your Christian beliefs? If so, when?
2. Read 1 Peter 1:1 and 5:12–14. What do we know about the author of this book? (See also John 1:35–42; 21:15–17; Acts 4:13; and Gal. 2:1–10.)
3. What is significant about Peter calling his readers “strangers” and “scattered”? Why might he have called them that?
4. How are believers “strangers” today?
5. Do you think of yourself as a “stranger”? How do you think Peter expects that to affect the ways you think and act?
6. Peter wrote this letter from “Babylon,” by which he probably meant Rome. What do you think he meant by calling Rome “Babylon”? What is significant about his location?

7. Why did Peter write this letter?
8. Peter refers to suffering at least fifteen times in this letter. Quickly skim this letter to find out why the recipients were suffering.
9. How is God's grace related to suffering?
10. How are believers, worldwide, suffering today?
11. How can you appropriate God's grace for your present sufferings?