

**Peter's Vision
Of Christ's Purpose
in First Peter**

by

Phillip A. Ross



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Dedicated to
Pastor Rodney Lord
Valley Harvest Church
Marietta, Ohio

toward Christian unity

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INTRODUCTION

The text that lies before you provides an excursion into Peter's heart and his understanding of God in Christ seen through his first letter to the "elect exiles of the dispersion" (1 Peter 1:1). Of course it also comes from me and my perspective in the Twenty-First Century, long after Peter lived.

The methodology of this book, like all my books, is interactive. It is neither scholarship nor exegesis, neither historical fiction or eisegesis. The methodology is to engage the text faithfully and interactively. It is an effort to catch Peter's vision and read it back into the text in a way that interacts with Peter's context in order to shed light on our contemporary context in the hope that we can hear the message afresh. It is not so much an effort to explain the text as it is to see it in the light of Christ.

Can people read the Bible and understand the intent? Of course. How can I claim to know what was in Peter's heart as he wrote this letter? Because to some extent I share his heart in Christ. Because I know what Christ has done to my heart through regeneration, I know to some extent the central concerns in Peter's heart. Nonetheless, I am not infallible—not even close. So, I ask you to put on your own ears to hear and eyes to see so that you can identify and avoid my errors of both omission and commission in this work. Will there be errors? Of course, look for them and please let me know when you find something that concerns you.

I intend to raise more questions than I will answer as I shake loose some of our most fundamental but inadequate assumptions. My hope and intention is to provide a perspective from which to see Peter's letter in the light of Christ, to see Peter's letter from a Twenty-First Century perspective and in a way that honors God's intent. Sure, Peter was writing in his context, but God intended His words for Christians in every context. My mission is not mere discovery, but mining—digging deep into this mineral rich mountain. My mission is to take the ore that Peter has provided and refine it for use today. And I need you to pray for this

effort and for this mission. It cannot be completed without you. If *you* don't understand what I'm trying to get at after you have read this book, then I will have failed. My intention is not to convince you of the rightness of what I'm saying, but to reveal the present applicability of what God was saying to us through Peter. Curiosity is a great help toward understanding. So, my job is to ignite your curiosity about what Peter was saying, not to satisfy you, but to stir you up (2 Peter 1:13).

I have found that reading Peter's letters through the eyes of faithfulness to God's trinitarian character (by assuming the reality of the Trinity) opens the text up in some fresh ways. The simple discipline of remembering that God's character is trinitarian opens up our minds to consider other perspectives and shades of meaning in the text that might otherwise be overlooked.

The Christian Trinity is absolutely unique in the history of the world, and that uniqueness provides a kind of Rosetta Stone for biblical interpretation and understanding. It is likely that my readers will not yet understand what I mean by this reference to the Trinity, and that is regrettable. I wish reality were more simple and that essential truths could be boiled down to bite-size nuggets for rapid consumption. But that is not the way that God created the world, nor the way that He reveals Himself. To see God we need to look at the whole, not simply at the bits and pieces.

While it is my intention to provide enough understanding of the hermeneutic of presuppositional trinitarianism¹ in the text to suggest the richness and depth of meaning that it unlocks, those who want to dig deeper into my methodology should consult my other books.

Reading Peter's letters is quite different than reading Paul's. Paul was a scholar who was trained in biblical academics, which involves focusing on specific meanings—definitions and implications. It usually means looking at something with a microscope in order to clarify what sometimes appears to be minutia. In contrast, Peter, who came to Christ as an uneducated fisherman (though he most certainly did not remain so), turns the microscope around (so to speak) to make it function as a telescope, and points it to God's future.

So, while Paul was often focused on the inner, personal realities of faithfulness, Peter was focused on the grand scheme of Christ's mission in the world. Where Paul was focused on particulars, Peter was focused on universals. While understanding Paul involves the personal experience of the Holy Spirit through regeneration, understanding Peter builds on regeneration and takes in the whole sweep of human history

1 This is what I call my methodology. It is simply the assumption of the reality of the doctrine of the Trinity as an essential characteristic of God and His world.

and casts a vision of the future in the light of Christ. For Peter the Old Testament was all the history he knew. He had, nor did he need, any other history book. As such, reading Peter without more than a passing familiarity with the Old Testament will surely lead you astray.

Paul came to Christ as a biblical scholar with a deep theological understanding of the Old Testament, and used his understanding as a backdrop for his explorations into the meaning of Christian faithfulness. Paul was plugging Christ into his understanding of the Old Testament.

But Peter came to Christ as a fisherman. Peter did not bring a full-blown understanding of Old Testament theology to Christ, as did Paul. Rather, Peter brought his ordinary understanding and experience of God's Messiah from the Old Testament and built upon it. In Paul's writing we find history brought to faithfulness, while in Peter's writings we find faithfulness brought to history, yet Peter was not looking backward. He was looking forward. His was a vision of hope toward the accomplishment of the purpose of God. Paul was focused microscopically, while Peter was focused macroscopically. So, while reading Paul clarifies the details of faithfulness, reading Peter magnifies the vastness of Christ's mission to the world.

These few introductory remarks are here to provide a alert: fasten your seatbelt and get ready to have your vistas expanded, at least that's what Peter has done for me. Reading Peter with trinitarian eyes brings the light of Christ to shine as a beacon for the world. Peter set the light of Christ as a lighthouse on a rocky shore to guide travelers, to point the way forward. And while Peter lit the lamp eons ago, it not only still shines today, but it shines more brightly today than it did when Peter lit it, and it promises to shine even brighter in the future.

This book is not a typical commentary on First Peter because it is more than mere exegesis. Peter's letters are like icebergs from God, in the sense that the actual text is above the waterline but the bulk, weight and significance of Peter's meaning lies below the waterline, submerged in the assumptions of context and subtext. What we exegetically find is completely true and can be trusted, of course. The part of the iceberg that we can see is real, solid and it can be measured in a variety of ways. But the greater weight and significance of the iceberg cannot be seen by the exegetical eye alone. Various instruments are required to see what is below the waterline. What is below is more impalpable, more imprecise, yet more real and more consequential as well.

My efforts here are to examine what can be seen of Peter's iceberg that is above the waterline, and to suggest the greater meaning that is below. It is not that the part of the iceberg that is below the waterline is

determined by what is above, but that what is above is determined by what is below. The greater part cannot be seen exegetically. Critical analysis must give way to faithful incorporation and internalization. Understanding the Bible requires, not simply scientific objectivity but submissive and passionate subjectivity.

We must not be content to take truth from Scripture, we must also read truth into it. *Troth* is an old word that is part truth and part trust, and means fidelity. To get the most out of Scripture we must come to it covenantally, with agreement. To do otherwise is to read it with only one eye—myopically. My hope is not to simply read Scripture open-eyed, but to come to it with both eyes open. May the Lord God in Christ be our guide.

Phillip A. Ross
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Marietta, Ohio

1. SPRINKLED

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are elect exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: May grace and peace be multiplied to you.
—1 Peter 1:1-2 (ESV)

Peter begins by identifying himself. It was customary at that time to first indicate who the letter was coming from and who it was going to. This letter is thought to have been written around A.D. 60-68, during the decade preceding the Fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. This is an important detail because it provides the context, which involved the persecution of the church and the military build up of Roman troops prior to one of the most horrific sieges ever fought in terms of destructiveness and loss of life. Josephus claimed that 1,100,000 people were killed during the siege, most of whom were Jewish, and that 97,000 were captured and enslaved.²

This is important because, while mostly Jews died, Christian persecution increased by both the Romans and the Jewish establishment as the final destruction neared. The church had been growing, and it was thought to have threatened both the Romans and the Jews. And it did, though not militarily or politically. The church threatened the stability of the establishment inasmuch as the establishment was founded on and promoted sin—which it did. Sin and corruption were rampant. The Jerusalem establishment at that time was spiritually Jewish but politically Roman. Consequently, Christians were at odds in one way or another with just about everyone in Jerusalem. The Roman state was Pagan and the Jewish church was apostate. The apostasy of the Jews was nothing new. The Old Testament prophets had railed against it again and again.

2 Josephus, Flavius. *The Wars of the Jews*, VI.9.3, public domain.

So, the fact that the Temple establishment had fallen into apostasy again is no great revelation. Nonetheless, as the social tensions mounted in and around Jerusalem, so did the persecution of Christians.

This persecution was not like the later Roman persecutions when Christians were fed to the lions and killed for sport. Rather, this persecution began as all persecution does: with feelings of ill-will and distrust toward some group. The leading edge of persecution is always social and economic. It always begins with social discrimination against the suspect group and leads to housing and employment problems because people don't want to work with or live near the suspect group. That was Peter's situation, and the situation of Christians at the time.

ELECT

Peter identified himself as an apostle (*apostolos*). That means that he was a delegate, an ambassador or commissioner for Christ. The apostles were the leaders of the church. There has always been a lot of discussion and disagreement in the Christian community about whether Christian leaders are appointed or elected. Both arguments have some merit. So, why not choose both. Appointed leaders should also be recognized by those they lead, which means that they should also be elected. And elected leaders should be recognized by other leaders, which means that they should also be appointed. *Appointed* here means chosen by the other leaders because only they have the authority to appoint. And *elected* means approval by those they lead because only they have the authority to elect.

Peter went on to identify the people to whom he was writing: "To those who are elect exiles of the dispersion" (v. 1). The *Authorized Version* translated the phrase: "to the strangers scattered throughout." Note that he was not writing to people in Jerusalem. Jerusalem prior to its destruction was the context in which he wrote. However, at that time Peter did not know that Jerusalem would be destroyed in A.D. 70.

He knew that the church was under persecution, and in all likelihood people were leaving Jerusalem in anticipation of political upheaval and war. Not only had Jesus mentioned such a potential scenario (Matthew 24, etc.), but Paul had been a wanted man for decades. And Paul had also warned people that the proverbial writing was on the wall. It didn't take a political genius to see that Roman troops and siege provisions were amassing.

So Peter was also writing to Christians in other areas, to those who had left Jerusalem during the decade preceding Jerusalem's fall, and to all who would eventually be a part of the Christian dispersion. Don't undervalue the importance of this exile, because it plays a key role in

the growth and evangelism of the church during this time. But neither do we want to brand it with the glowing overtones of historic importance by turning it into a museum skit of platitudinous pomp and face paint.

When we overvalue historic events we are tempted to turn them into theater, into shallow, artificial, dramatic events and miss or misconstrue how things actually happened. The situation would have been much like 1938 in Germany. Many Jews left, if they could. They knew that they were being persecuted as Hitler's machine began closing its grip on them. The pressure began with social devaluation and discrimination regarding jobs and housing. And while many Jews left, for a variety of reasons many couldn't leave.

DISPERSION

Again, who was Peter writing to? To those who had already left, for sure. But to call them "elect exiles of the dispersion" (v. 1) requires a point of view that would have been from the future, after people became aware that enough people had left Jerusalem to call it an exile and suggest that it was a diaspora, in the likeness of the exiles and dispersions of former times. People in Jerusalem knew that it had been destroyed and Jews enslaved twice before. The destructions of Jerusalem and the Temple were staples of Jewish history. We need to acknowledge that the phrase may have been a later interpretation and emendation of Peter's actual words by a copyist. This however does not mean that Peter did not communicate the idea in some form, only that someone else may have tried to clarify it after Peter's death in A.D. 67. We can't say for sure about that. But we can say that the *English Standard Version* translation is most certainly a modern embellishment.

The *Authorized Version* is probably closer to Peter's sense of the situation, "to the strangers scattered throughout...." Peter was writing to people who had left their longstanding homes in and around Jerusalem. And they would have been strangers in their new nations and neighborhoods, but Peter was not writing to people who were strangers to him. Again the word choice is unfortunate.

PILGRIMS

The Greek word *parepidēmos* is only used three times in the New Testament, and is not the usual word for *elect* (*eklektos*). Some versions translate it as *sojourners*, suggesting people residing in a foreign land, people who have a unity or an identity that is not shared with those with whom they live. Peter used the word to refer to the people of God, and to the fact that his Christian friends were at the same time

both united and divided, that they had a common unity, common bonds, but were living in dispersion, not in a central location or even a common neighborhood.

Peter was writing to God's people, who had previously been geographically united but who were now, and for the foreseeable future, geographically dispersed. To call them the church in exile is inaccurate because it suggests that God's plan was to bring them all back to Israel someday, which was an Old Testament pattern of thinking. Israel had been destroyed before, and rebuilt. But that was not what God was doing with the church. God's plan was not to bring all Christians back to Israel, but to Christianize the nations, to send Christians out and plant them where they went. God was simultaneously bringing the people of God into the kingdom of God, and was bringing the kingdom of God to the earth, to the Gentiles.

Peter, an elected leader of the church, was writing to those who had elected him—the church, but who were now residing in foreign lands. The phrasing suggests Peter's leadership and authority, and that through this letter he was continuing to exert that leadership and authority.

He then named the countries or regions where these people had gone: Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. All were in modern Turkey. Peter was writing to those who had migrated westward from Jerusalem. The direction of the migration would prove to be an important detail because of the foundational relationship between Christianity and Western Civilization.

Verse 2 provides an explanation of how this scattering of the people of God fit into God's larger plan, and provided assurance that things were unfolding exactly as God had planned, so that God's people could rest assured that God was still in control. Those who had left Jerusalem were running for their lives, escaping persecution and impending war. They had experienced the beginnings of the persecutions against them by the Jews and by the Romans. They knew the determination of the Jews who had been hounding Paul, who had a bounty on his head (Acts 25:3). And they knew the power and ruthlessness of Rome, who's empire controlled and defined most of the civilized world at the time.

WESTWARD

It is significant that God's people did not run eastward, away from the Roman Empire, but ran westward, toward it and into it. They seem to have chosen to live in civilization rather than apart from it. This was an important choice in that God's intent was to bring His kingdom to human civilization, rather than to have His people escape from it.

This happened “according to the foreknowledge of God the Father” (v. 2). This dispersion of God’s people was not a surprise to God. Rather, said Peter, *it was all unfolding as part of God’s plan*. Peter suggested that God knew what would happen. There has been much discussion in the church about God’s foreknowledge, and it has led to much speculation. We can better contain the speculation by considering the root meaning of the Greek word (*prognōsis*). The word has simply been transliterated into English and is used primarily in medical settings. A medical prognosis is the determination or diagnosis of an illness. God, as the chief physician, had chosen to save humanity and on the basis of His prognosis issued a purification order to be carried out by the Spirit through a blood sprinkling of the saints upon the nations.

And we also know from Paul’s writings that the destruction of Jerusalem was a necessary part of God’s plan to bring the gospel to the Gentiles, and eventually to the whole world. Peter was implying that the dispersion of God’s people westward was no accident, but was central to God’s plan. Therefore, those who had been displaced from their homes in Palestine could take solace that they were on the leading edge of God’s plan, that they were still in the will of God, that their dispersion served God’s greater purpose.

TRINITY

We should also notice that Peter’s reference to God the Father indicated that he was to some degree aware of what we call the Trinity. It was not common practice for Jews to refer to God as Father. But Peter was undoubtedly following the teaching of Jesus, who had taught His people to pray, *Our Father*, who art in heaven. Jesus often spoke of God as Father.

Is it really legitimate to suggest so much from such an apparently insignificant reference? Aren’t I reading the doctrine of the Trinity into Peter’s words? Yes, it is legitimate. And yes, to some degree I am reading the doctrine of the Trinity into Peter’s words. And the reason that I’m reading the Trinity into Peter’s words is because I share Peter’s trinitarian perspective, and because I see His use of the doctrine of the Trinity. I share Peter’s trinitarian perspective by grace through faith. I understand Peter’s faith because I share it. And I understand the extent to which our common Christian faith, which is itself trinitarian, effects everything. So, I am confident about my understanding of Peter and of his trinitarian perspective.

Peter continued to explain what God was accomplishing through the dispersion of His people westward. It was part of the expansion of God’s kingdom “in the sanctification of the Spirit” (v. 2). The *Author-*

ized Version reads “through sanctification of the Spirit.” The Greek word *en* here literally means *by the instrumentality of*, and in this case he was talking about the instrumentality of the Spirit. The Spirit was the means or vehicle by which the dispersion of Christians out of Jerusalem was happening. The Spirit of God was causing and animating the dispersion.

SANCTIFICATION

So, it was not that those who had been dispersed had been separated from the Spirit, though they had been separated from some of their family and friends. Rather, said Peter, they had been carried away by the Spirit or in the Spirit. Actually it was the Spirit who had carried them away! This meant that, rather than being separated from the Spirit, they were actually in the will of the Spirit. And they could find much hope and comfort in this fact. Peter wanted them to celebrate this hope and comfort.

But it wasn't that this dispersion simply happened in or because of the Spirit, but that it was itself a kind of sanctification of God's people by the Spirit. Remember that the word *sanctify* means separated for a particular use or purpose. The Greek does not contain the words “of the” but has only one word—*spirit*. So, the two words—*sanctify* (*hagiasmos*) and *spirit* (*pneuma*)—translated “through the sanctification of the Spirit” could also be translated as “through spiritual sanctification.”

Why do I make this point? Only because God doesn't grow or change. God doesn't undergo sanctification or growth, we do. The sanctification belongs to the people, not to the Spirit. The Spirit was sanctifying (separating) the people through the dispersion.

Because we understand that the Spirit is also God by the reality of the Trinity, we determine that the sanctification that Peter referred to was the sanctification of God's people. The dispersion of God's people was happening because it was the very means of their own sanctification.

We must also understand this trinitarianly and note that the sanctification served both the sanctification of the particular individuals involved and also the sanctification of the corporate body of believers as a whole—the church. Not only can individuals be sanctified, or grow in grace, but God's church as a whole is also sanctified as it grows in grace as a corporate body. In fact, these two aspects of sanctification are intimately related because of the trinitarian character of God's people.

Peter continued by mentioning that this was also happening “for obedience to Jesus Christ” (v. 2). Or as the *Authorized Version*

rendered it “unto (*eis*) obedience.” We note that obedience is central to God’s purpose and to our sanctification, both individually and corporately. God’s purpose unfolds through compliance or submission to His Spirit, who provides both direction and power for the accomplishment of His will.

SPRINKLING

Finally, Peter concluded that this was all happening, not only “for obedience to Jesus Christ” but “for sprinkling with his blood” (v. 2). The sprinkling of the blood of the sacrifice was an Old Testament liturgical practice that was used as a method, an instrument and a reminder of God’s blessings (Leviticus 8:30, Hebrews 11:28, etc.). Being sprinkled by the blood of Christ was an allusion to the cleansing of sin and for the dispensation of God’s blessings.

Paul wrote of this: “Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (Hebrews 10:19-22).

However, Peter’s mention of the sprinkled blood of Jesus Christ was not merely a reference to the cleansing of sin, but it carried the suggestion that the dispersed people of God were themselves the sprinkling of Christ’s blood upon the nations. They were themselves like droplets of sprinkled blood that were in the process of being sprinkled upon the Roman Empire, or upon human civilization.

The implication was that just as the sprinkling of blood liturgically was a symbol of purification from sin, a symbol of sanctification in grace, so the dispersion itself was, not merely a symbol, but the very means of purification from sin and sanctification of the Gentiles, of the Roman Empire and of the world at large—not immediately, of course, but over time. God’s people, who had themselves been sprinkled with the blood of Christ for the purification of sin, were themselves the sprinkling on the nations, on the world. They were in the process of carrying the purifying blood of Christ to the nations, which was God’s great mission to the world.

INCREASE

Peter then closed the salutation section of his letter with a benediction: “May grace and peace be multiplied to you” (v. 2). The Greek word (*plēthunō*) doesn’t literally mean multiplication, but suggests an abundant increase. The root of the word is like the English word *pleth-*

ora, which means an extreme excess. Peter was praying that God would grant an abundant increase of grace and peace for those who had been scattered westward.

The order of the words is important because it suggests that peace comes from grace, as if peace is a fruit of God's grace. But it doesn't work the other way around. God's grace is not the fruit of peace. While these two things go together peace is established on God's grace, but God's grace is not established on peace. The house must rest upon the foundation, not the foundation upon the house. Working for peace apart from God's grace cannot bring peace because peace issues out of God's grace. Thus, if people want peace they should "seek first the kingdom of God" (Matthew 6:33), and peace will be added as one of the many things that issues from God's grace.

Peter was also praying that God's grace would establish both peace in the hearts of those who had been dispersed, but also that the persecution that had been experienced in Jerusalem would stop. Remember that neither Peter nor those who had fled knew that Jerusalem would be destroyed in A.D. 70. Neither did they know the history of the early church, or of the Roman persecutions that were ahead of them. None of those things had happened yet.

But the fact of the difficulties that lay ahead of the church, or the ongoing history of the accomplishment of God's purpose and plan to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth, did not and has not dulled the effectiveness or power of Peter's benedictory prayer. Though the multiplication of grace and peace has not yet manifest completely in the four corners of the earth does not mean that significant progress toward this end has not been accomplished. Indeed, much progress has been made.

There is more reason to anticipate the completion of God's plan today than ever before, not only because of the extent of the expansion of Christianity in the world, but because to this day we can continue to proclaim with truth and integrity that God has kept His promise over all the intervening years.

God continues to keep His promises, and the dispersion of Christians into Western Civilization and from there to the whole world that had begun in Peter's day was the leading edge of God's movement to save the world.

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