

Exploring the Word of God

The General Epistles:

James, 1 & 2 Peter



Michael D. Morrison



GRACE COMMUNION
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Living and Sharing the Gospel

**Exploring the Word of God:
The General Epistles: James, 1 & 2 Peter**

By Michael D. Morrison

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Table of Contents

[James 5:14 and Healing](#)

[Real Wealth Lasts Forever: 1 Peter 1](#)

[Special Roles for Special People: 1 Peter 2](#)

[Setting a Good Example: 1 Peter 3](#)

[Plan for Spiritual Success: 2 Peter 1](#)

[About the Authors](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

[Grace Communion Seminary](#)

Introduction: This project began in the mid 1990s. The first volume of *Exploring the Word of God* was published in 1995. We were not able to print any more volumes, but we continued to study and write articles about Scripture. We have gathered these articles and are publishing them as e-books. We hope you find these studies useful and encouraging.

The commentary will probably not be completed.

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James 5:14 and Healing

By Paul Kroll

A passage from the Old Testament, Psalm 103:3, says the Lord “forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases” (NIV 1984 edition in this article). We know God forgives *all* of our sins. Is it not logical, then, to expect that he will heal *every* disease, sickness or infirmity that we might have, when we ask in faith for such healing?

We understand the great desire of those who are ill or infirm to receive healing. We do not want to dishearten ill persons from placing their faith in Jesus as the one who can heal all our diseases and infirmities. We can claim the right to ask help from God with any of our needs. The apostle Paul wrote: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” (Philippians 4:6). We can certainly pray for our healing, and ask others to do so as well on our behalf. We know God hears our requests and answers our prayers according to his merciful will and purpose in our lives. We do not believe or teach a “no miracles gospel.”

Yet, while the biblical teaching is that a person can receive divine healing from God, we cannot say it is certain and absolute in any specific case. This depends on God’s will and purpose. (Please see the article [“Healing,”](#) by Joseph Tkach, which answers specific questions about healing, anointing and medical assistance.)

Let’s begin to understand the question of “divine healing” by emphasizing an important principle of correct biblical interpretation. We do not want to build an article of faith on a single verse, or even a few verses – especially if they have not been analyzed in terms of the context of the passage and the book in which they appear. Rather, we are on much safer ground when we

interpret passages on a given matter within the context of God's overall revelation, which can be gleaned from the general witness of the Bible as a whole. Also, on such matters as healing we need to see what the Christian experience through time has been.

What does the Bible as a whole and our experience teach about divine healing? Our experience and the many biblical examples and principles that bear on the subject show that not every sick or infirm person has been healed by divine healing. Even as you are reading this, there are many faithful Christians around the world who are sick and who have asked God for his healing, but who have not been healed.

Scripture also contradicts the idea of automatic divine healing. The Bible records numerous cases where righteous people were ill and were not healed. For example, Isaac and Jacob were blind in their later years. Elisha died of an illness. Timothy is spoken of as having "frequent illnesses" (1 Timothy 5:23). Paul said of one of his co-workers in the gospel, "I left Trophimus sick in Miletus" (2 Timothy 4:19). The apostle Paul himself suffered an infirmity that was not healed (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). The continuance (rather than healing) of Paul's illness or infirmity had a purpose – God's strength could operate in him through his weakness. The same may be true for many other Christians today.

Hebrews 9:27 tells us that human beings are appointed or "destined to die once." This proves that there is going to be a time when healing does not occur in a person's life. Hence, it is a mistake to assume that James 5:14 gives us an absolute promise of healing. If that were so, it would contradict the most irrevocable fact of human life: every person eventually dies.

Therefore, to believe that God always heals every disease and infirmity of every true Christian – especially when it is assumed he must do so immediately and dramatically – contradicts both the Bible's example and our

own experience. It also causes people who believe in automatic healing, but who remain ill, to suffer unnecessary guilt by concluding that the reason they are not healed is because they are doing something wrong, or sinning.

How, then, should we understand James 5:14 in the light of what the Bible shows us about healing, and what Christian experience demonstrates? First, we need to be informed by the understanding described above: *not* every faithful person who is ill is healed by God. Therefore, whatever the passage in question means, its promise must be limited by the reality of how, if and when God heals in a particular case.

Second, we need to look more closely at an important phrase in James 5:14: “And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well.” We should notice that there is a *condition* in this sentence in James 5:14 – “the prayer offered *in faith* will make the sick person well.” There must be faith involved in the healing. But the “faith” mentioned here must be something *more than or other than* the simple believing faith that the sick person and the one offering the prayer bring. That kind of belief or faith should be assumed. If a person did not believe God could heal, he or she would not ask for prayer, or offer prayers.

Why, then, is the person not healed? Faith that brings the results we seek involves more than our belief in a promise of God, in this case the promise that God heals. In the New Testament, the Greek noun *pistis* and the verb *pisteuo*, translated by such words as “believer,” “faithful” and “believing,” speak to the essence of what it means to be a Christian.

The faith of the Christian believer has to do not so much in believing that some specified outcome must occur in our lives, but with trusting a Person – Jesus Christ our Savior. Faith is the attitude of having complete trust in Christ, of relying on him alone for *everything*, especially our salvation. Thus, when we “believe,” become “believers,” “have faith” or “pray in faith,” we

are committing ourselves decisively and completely to the *will* of our Savior. This means that believing faith ultimately rests on and in whatever the Father, Christ and the Holy Spirit decide to do in a given situation involving our lives – including saving us from illness.

John 5:14 tells us that the “prayer of faith” is based on our quiet resting in the will or decision of God. The passage says: “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to *his will*, he hears us” (italics added). A prayer for healing can result in a healing only if it is God’s *will* to do it in a given situation. Our faith is to put our trust completely into the hands of our Savior for whatever is to be the outcome in terms of divine healing, all of which must work out according to God’s purpose.

If we go further in the context of James 5:14, we see the author referring to the example of Elijah. James writes: “Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops” (5:17-18).

It might appear that Elijah decided on his own that it would not rain for 3½ years, and then that it would rain after this time. After all, he believed – had faith – that God was creator and sustainer of all things, and that he hears our prayers. The reasoning would be that Elijah simply offered a prayer to God for the drought and the subsequent rain to occur. They happened because he prayed believing prayers “in faith,” thinking that these were good ideas the Lord would approve. Thus, he would back up Elijah’s prayer with power.

That is not the way things happened. The story of Elijah to which James refers is in 1 Kings 17:1-18:45. The story begins without any background discussion as to why Elijah thought there would be a period of time of drought followed by rain – or why he thought God would perform such

miracles. The rest of the story, however, gives us clues as to the basis of Elijah's faithful prayer.

We see that the word of the Lord comes to Elijah, and he is told to go to a widow's house in Zarephath, Sidon. The widow would supply him with food. This is when the miracle of the jug of oil and jar of flour occurred. Neither the oil nor flour was used up during the time of the drought and famine.

Why did this miracle occur? Because it was "*in keeping with* the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah" (17:15, italics ours). For example, in the third year of the drought, God spoke to Elijah in preparation for rain to come upon the land. The Lord said to him: "Go and present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the land" (18:1). Eventually, the rain came, as God said it would (18:44-45).

So we see that the miracles came about by the prior *will* of God, which was delivered and communicated by the Lord to Elijah. The faithful prayer of Elijah was based on his steady belief that the will of God in this *specific situation* would result in a drought and later in rain. Why? Because Elijah had been told by God what his will was. But God does not speak to us directly to tell us he will heal us in the specific circumstances we are praying about. We have only a general promise of God's overall intent – that he is Healer of disease.

1 Kings 17 tells us that it was God's will to send the rain. But James 5:18 seems to imply – on the surface – that it was Elijah's believing prayer offered in faith that caused it. Was it because of the word of the Lord (1 Kings) or Elijah's prayer (James 5) that made it rain? Is there a contradiction?

The answer is that it was the *prior* will of God for the drought to occur and 3½ years later for the rain to come. Elijah believed the power and purpose of God to make these events happen, and he prayed in faith according to the Lord's will. That's the key. Ultimately, what makes any

miracle happen or not happen is the will of God, not our belief or faith that it must happen. In the matter of divine healing, God determines if, when or how healing will occur. We can only pray in faith that whatever God's will is, that it will be done in our lives. Further, we know by faith, that *if* God wills our healing to occur, it will *absolutely* happen. That is what James 5:14 stresses when it encourages the sick person to pray in faith.

Based on what the witness of the Bible tells us about the meaning of faith and praying in faith, we can confidently follow James 5:14 and pray in faith for our healing. Then, trusting in God, we leave the result in God's hands, asking for his peace and spiritual joy to sustain us in the meantime – and for his will to be done. We thank God that through the indwelling Holy Spirit we can have the faith to accept whatever God's will in our lives may be – and that we may, therefore, always pray in faith. We are fully confident that when God wills to do something, it will be done. We trust in him, not in the physical circumstances.

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[back to table of contents](#)

Real Wealth Lasts Forever

1 Peter 1

The apostle Peter wrote a letter to several churches in areas that are now part of Turkey. He greets them as “God’s elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood” (1 Peter 1:1-2).

In this introduction, Peter mentions that the readers are strangers in the world. They are spiritually different than the people who surround them, and they may be ethnically different, too. If they feel socially isolated and insecure, Peter’s words will help: God chose them long ago. They are not an accident, and they can feel secure in knowing that God has a plan for them.

God has foreknowledge of everyone in one sense, but for reasons we do not fully understand, he chooses some for a special relationship. This choosing is done through the Holy Spirit, and the purpose is that we obey Jesus Christ and are cleansed by his sacrifice.

An eternal inheritance

Peter begins with a doxology: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!” The reason for this praise? “In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (verse 3). God’s grace has given us a new start in life — a life with confidence in the future, because the resurrection of Jesus has given us evidence that we will also be resurrected into glory through him.

Our new birth also gives us “an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade” (verse 4). Because of persecution, the readers could not count on an inheritance in this world, but Peter promises them an even better inheritance

— preserved in a safe place: “This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time” (verses 4-5). God protects us, and we will inherit his glory when our salvation comes (verse 9 describes salvation as something we are already in the process of receiving).

“In all this you greatly rejoice,” Peter says, “though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials” (verse 6). As strangers in the world, we have trials and persecutions, but we can rejoice in knowing that God has something far better already prepared for us. Even if we enjoy many blessings in this life, we should focus our hopes on spiritual realities rather than the approval of society around us.

Why does God allow these trials? “These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith — of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire — may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed” (verse 7). Even the best gold eventually perishes, because it will have no value to us after we die. But the value of faith continues forever, and it brings better rewards, so it is worth much more than gold.

Trials can demonstrate that our faith is genuine — that we put more stock in the future life than we do in the present. This kind of faith will bring us praise, glory and honor when Christ returns. Though we may be despised now because of our faith in him, we will have eternal honor because of that same faith.

We have not seen Jesus personally, but we love him and believe in him. This faith fills us “with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for [we] are receiving the end result of [our] faith, the salvation of [our] souls” (verses 8-9). Our difficulties are not worth comparing with the indescribable joy that Christ is giving us.

This message of salvation was not a recent invention — it was predicted

in the Old Testament, and “the prophets...spoke of the grace that was to come to you” (verse 10). However, the prophets did not understand how it would all happen, and they “searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow” (verse 11). They knew that glory would come only after sufferings, but they did not know when it would be.

“It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things” (verse 12). Some of the prophecies were for the prophets’ own day, but some were for the time of Christ, and the prophets realized that they were writing important messages for a future generation. And since Christ has been revealed, the prophecies can now be understood more clearly.

Peter is explaining that the gospel message is of tremendous value. If we think we are poor, we are mistaken, for the message is precious, and our faith is better than gold, and the promises will never perish.

Holy life

Since we have such a great reward, Peter exhorts us: “Set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming” (verse 13). God has already shown us grace, but he has even more for us when Christ returns. We should set our sights on that, not the things of this world.

“As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance” (verse 14). When we come to trust Christ, our behavior should change. When we have faith in the promises God has given us, the temporary pleasures of sin lose their appeal. As children of God, we

imitate our heavenly Father: “But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy’” (verses 15-16, quoting Leviticus 11:44). Our ethics are based on the character of God himself.

“Since you call on a Father who judges each person’s work impartially, live out your time as strangers here in reverent fear” (verse 17). We should respect and honor our Father, not the changing standards around us. Why?

“For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect” (verses 18-19). The values of this world will pass away, but we were purchased with something of much greater value: the blood of Christ.

When we realize what a sacrifice Jesus made for us, we will also begin to understand what a tremendous reward awaits us, for Jesus didn’t pay his huge price just for a small benefit. When we see the price that was paid, we will value the result even more, and that encourages us to live holy lives.

“Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God” (verses 22-23). Our new life is based on permanence, not temporary pleasures. So we obey the truth, and follow Christ’s way of life — love.

Why? Because “all people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever” (verses 24-25, quoting Isaiah 40:6-8). Things of this world are temporary, but the things of God last forever, and we live for eternity. We see our identity and importance from that perspective, not the

temporary values of this world.

Things to think about

Do I feel like a stranger in this world, or do I feel right at home? (verse 1)

When I have trials, do I have joy in the promises of God? (verse 6)

What “evil desires” have I grown out of? Which ones do I still struggle with? (verse 14)

Do I have “reverent fear” for God as the Judge? (verse 17)

Does Peter mean that we can purify ourselves by obedience? (verse 22)

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[back to table of contents](#)

Special Roles for Special People

1 Peter 2

Peter has just reminded his readers that humans have only a fleeting glory, but “the word of the Lord stands forever” (1 Peter 1:25). Since only spiritual values last forever, Peter advises us to put away old ways and seek something new:

“Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good” (2:1-3). We should abandon our old approach to life, and seek from God the strength to live a different way.

Peter said that we have been born again (1:23), and he now builds on that metaphor by saying we should desire spiritual nourishment as eagerly as babies desire milk. Now that we have begun our experience with God, we should want to become more mature.

A special people

Where do we get our spiritual nourishment? We get it by going to Christ: “As you come to him, the living Stone — rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him...” (verse 4). Peter got this metaphor from Jesus himself, and in verse 7 he quotes Isaiah 8:14, as Jesus did (Matthew 21:42).

Peter adds to the metaphor. Since Jesus is the living Stone, believers are “like living stones...being built into a spiritual house” (1 Peter 2:5). But he quickly switches to another metaphor, saying that the believers are becoming “a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (verse 5). This supports the doctrine of the “priesthood of all believers.” Every Christian has access to God through Christ, our mediator.

Peter now gives biblical support for the concept of Christ as a living

stone. In verse 6 he quotes Isaiah 28:16: “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.” Jesus is the cornerstone, and those who trust in him will never be condemned (Romans 8:1).

To believers, “this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, ‘the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone’” (1 Peter 2:7, quoting Psalm 118:22). Although God chose Jesus as the cornerstone, most people rejected him.

Peter also quotes Isaiah 8:14: “A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.” Christ continues to be a cause of offense, a Savior who is rejected — and it should be no surprise that some people reject and persecute his followers.

The people who reject Christ “stumble because they disobey the message — which is also what they were destined for” (1 Peter 2:8). Just as the readers were chosen for obedience (1:2), God also planned for some to disobey. But their resistance is not necessarily permanent — Peter holds out hope in 2:12 that some will be converted. Words such as “destined” do not always indicate eternal results.

In contrast, believers “are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (verse 9). Peter gives to the church titles that God once gave Israel (Exodus 19:6) — the highest titles existing in that society. We are chosen to praise God. This refers to worship, but in context, it most likely refers also to evangelism. The God who rescues us from darkness offers the same rescue to others.

“Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Peter 2:10, quoting Hosea 2:23). Just as we received mercy, others can as well.

How then should we live?

Since we are a special people, with a special role, we are also called to have a different way of life. Peter gives another exhortation, reminding readers of their social status: “Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul” (verse 11). Sinful desires are an enemy of spiritual health, but they can be resisted.

One goal of good behavior is to put the gospel in a good light: “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us” (verse 12; see also Titus 2:8; 1 Timothy 6:1). Whether for good or for bad, the message is often judged by the behavior of the messengers.

As part of good behavior, Christ wants us to be law-abiding citizens: “Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right” (1 Peter 2:13-14; cf. Romans 13:1-7). Peter is giving general advice, not an absolute rule. If rulers command a sin, we should not obey.

“For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people” (verse 15). God wants us to respond to persecution with good behavior, not rebellion. Let our faith be seen as harmless.

We are free in Christ, “but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God’s slaves” (verse 16). Grace is not permission to be selfish (Galatians 5:13). We are not slaves of society and are not obligated to follow its customs. Rather, we should obey God, and he wants us to “show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor” (verse 17).

Advice to slaves

Just as Peter advised citizens to submit to government officials, he also advised slaves: “Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh” (verse 18).

Peter does not want anyone to think that the gospel is a disguise for slave rebellion. Centuries later, however, the opposite need arose. As societies change, Christians need to discern when to adapt and when to resist.

“For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God” (verses 19-20). God takes note of our suffering, and he will compensate us for it.

Unjust suffering is nothing new, and should not be too much of a surprise. “To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ‘He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.’ [Isaiah 53:9] When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly” (1 Peter 2:21-23).

Jesus shows us that if we suffer unjustly, we should not retaliate or make threats. Rather, we are to trust in God. However, the example Jesus set is also that when *other* people are suffering, we try to do something about it.

Peter then digresses with comments about Jesus, quoting phrases from Isaiah 53:4-6: “‘He himself bore our sins’ in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; ‘by his wounds you have been healed.’ For ‘you were like sheep going astray,’ but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (1 Peter 2:24-25).

Our sins were placed on Jesus, and our mortal wounds were healed by his unjust suffering. The purpose was that we would turn away from sin and live

in a right way. Once we were cut off from God by our sins. But due to his mercy, we have been restored. That was the healing that we needed most of all.

Things to think about

What steps am I taking to pursue spiritual growth? (verse 1)

In what ways do I declare God's praises? (verse 9)

Is the "respect" we show in our culture different from the "respect" shown in the Roman Empire? (verse 13)

How is modern employment different from ancient slavery? Does it make a difference in the way that I submit? (verse 18)

If suffering is commendable, should we try to avoid it? (verse 20)

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[back to table of contents](#)

Setting a Good Example

1 Peter 3

In chapter 2 Peter advised readers to have such good behavior that unbelievers will have nothing bad to say about the gospel. To set a good example, Christians should submit to civil authorities, and slaves should submit to their masters. In both cases, Peter uses terms that are appropriate to the first century, such as emperor and slaves. He now continues this theme by addressing wives and husbands.

Exhortation for wives

“Wives, in the same way submit yourselves to your own husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives” (1 Peter 3:1-2).



When Peter says “in the same way,” he means that women are to submit just as men should, each to the appropriate authorities. Citizens submit to government offices, slaves to their masters and wives to their husbands. However, this does not always mean obedience. If a husband told a wife to sin, she should not obey. Peter is speaking generally, not making an absolute rule.

The point is that women should set a good example. When husbands see that Christianity causes wives to be cooperative rather than rebellious, they will be more willing to listen to the gospel, and eventually follow their wives into the faith.

Peter’s next advice is also found in non-Christian writings: “Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewelry or fine clothes. Rather, it should be that of your

inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit” (verses 3-4). Peter does not require women to wear ugly clothes and have unkempt hair, nor to avoid jewelry. Rather, he is saying that women should not see external things as their source of beauty. Real beauty is in a person’s attitude, for it is “of great worth in God’s sight.”

Peter supports this point with biblical examples: “For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to adorn themselves” (verse 5). They had inner beauty whether or not they had external beauty and jewelry, as some no doubt did. “They submitted themselves to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master” (verse 6; see Genesis 18:12).

Abraham sometimes obeyed Sarah (Genesis 16:2; 21:12), but Peter is here focusing on Sarah as an example for women. Peter tells the women, “You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear” (1 Peter 3:6). If husbands demand that wives worship Zeus, wives should do what is right, and not submit to fear.

Advice for husbands

Peter gives less space to the responsibility of husbands, but what he says was unusual advice in that culture: “Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives” (verse 7). In the same way as what? In context, it is submission.

Peter encourages husbands to treat their wives “with respect as the weaker partner.” In that society, women were almost always weaker. Men were often 15 years older than their wives, more educated and more experienced. Women often married in their early teens, dropped out of school and stayed at home.

Although men in that Greco-Roman culture rarely treated women with respect, Peter tells husbands to respect their wives, not be condescending.

Why? Because they are equal when it comes to salvation — they are “heirs with you of the gracious gift of life.” Their value to God should make a difference in the attitude that husbands have toward them. Peter adds another reason that husbands should respect their wives: “so that nothing will hinder your prayers” (verse 7). The way we treat others affects our prayers.

Responding to evil

In verse 8, Peter gives a general appeal to all the believers: “All of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing” (verses 8-9).

If someone treats us wrong, we are to respond by doing good, not by getting revenge. God set the example for us by doing good to us even though we had done evil to him. Peter supports this advice by quoting Psalm 34:12-16: “Whoever would love life and see good days must keep their tongue from evil and their lips from deceitful speech. They must turn from evil and do good; they must seek peace and pursue it” (1 Peter 3:10-11).

Peter has already pointed out that Jesus did not retaliate with threats against his persecutors (2:22-23); here he repeats the need for us to keep our words and our actions in control. Peter asks, “Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?” (3:13). Unfortunately, some people persecute those who do good, so Peter adds, “But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed” (verse 14). Persecution itself is not a blessing, but God rewards those who suffer unjustly.

“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (verse 15). This verse — often quoted in evangelism training — is in a context of how we respond to persecution. When we are persecuted, we should not be ashamed of our faith, but be ready

to explain it. The Greek word for “answer” is *apologia*, the word used for a defense in a court of law.

Though we may be treated roughly, we are to reply without anger: “But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander” (verses 15-16). Peter does not want Christians to give the enemy any excuse for their hatred. A gentle answer may reduce their anger by showing them that the gospel is not dangerous.

Peter summarizes by saying, “For it is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil” (verse 17). If God brings us to a point of suffering for following Christ, then it is better to suffer unjustly than to give the persecutors evidence against us.

The example of Jesus

Peter again turns to Jesus as the supreme example of suffering without retaliation. This leads to a digression. “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit” (verse 18). We should be willing to suffer for doing good, because Christ suffered for us. Peter notes that although people killed Jesus’ body, they could not kill the Spirit (cf. Matthew 10:28).

Peter comments about Noah’s ark: “In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also” (verses 20-21). People were saved by the ark, not the water. The water of baptism symbolizes death — we symbolically go into death and rise out of it. Baptism saves us not by “the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God” (verse 21). Baptism symbolizes cleansing, but only spiritual cleansing saves us, for salvation requires that our sins be forgiven.

As a third picture, Peter says that baptism saves us “by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” Christ’s resurrection is the power of life after death (see 1 Peter 1:3, 21). We are saved through a spiritual union with Christ, and baptism symbolizes that we have joined him in his crucifixion and resurrection (cf. Romans 6:3-4). The resurrection did not merely restore Jesus to human life — it gave him great glory. He “has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand — with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him” (1 Peter 3:22). For aliens and strangers in Asia Minor who were being harassed for their faith in Christ, it is good news to know that he has been exalted into glory, for those who follow him into suffering will also follow him into glory!

Things to think about

Will non-Christian husbands be impressed by “purity and reverence”?
(verse 1)

Should wives obey if their husbands want them to wear gold jewelry and fine clothes? (verse 3)

In what way does poor behavior hinder our prayers? (verse 7)

Am I prepared to suffer for my faith? (verse 14)

Am I prepared to give an answer for my faith? (verse 15)

Are there any exceptions to the saying, “It is better to suffer than to cause suffering”? (verse 17)

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[back to table of contents](#)

Plan for Spiritual Success

2 Peter 1

The second letter of Peter is written “to those who through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours” (verse 1). This could apply to Christians anywhere, so Peter’s letter is called a general epistle (sometimes called a catholic epistle, after the Greek word *katholikos*, meaning general), because it was not written to a specific church.

We are familiar with Paul’s teaching that we receive righteousness by faith in Christ. Peter has turned this around to say that we receive faith through the righteousness of Christ. Because Christ is good, he has made it possible for us to have the faith that we need to accept him. We have a relationship with God only because of his mercy.

Peter then greets the readers: “Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord” (verse 2). Peace comes from knowing God, as he is revealed to us in Jesus.

Making sure

Peter begins the next verse by saying, “His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life.” All of salvation is a gift, through knowing Christ —“through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness” (verse 3).

Through God’s glory and goodness, Peter says, “he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires” (verse 4). The gift of salvation not only shows the goodness of God, it also shows his glory — it shows that he is worthy of worship.

What aspects of the divine nature may we participate in? Love, joy,

peace, goodness, holiness and eternal life. Salvation involves not just future life, but also power in the present to escape the sinful desires that used to control us. This self-control is not a requirement for salvation, but a benefit of salvation. In Christ we are freed from sin so we can walk in his righteousness.

Since God has given us his power, Peter advises us to “make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love” (verses 5-7). These do not necessarily come in this sequence, of course — we grow in all of these areas at the same time without ever reaching perfection in any.

Then Peter gives us this promise: “For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (verse 8). Yes, if we are growing spiritually, the knowledge that God gives us will not go to waste. He teaches us and strengthens us so that it will make a difference in our lives.

“But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins” (verse 9). If we aren’t trying to improve, then we will be unproductive. The knowledge of God’s grace and mercy should cause us to want spiritual growth and to want to please the one who saves us.

Since God has saved us and given us spiritual strength, Peter exhorts us: “Make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (verses 10-11). Peter does not say what will happen if we fail — he simply exhorts us to be

diligent. Our effort will be richly rewarded.

Peter knows our weaknesses and the need for frequent reminders. Yet, he does not want his exhortation to come across as an insult, so he comments: “I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body” (verses 12-13).

Paul also uses the metaphor of a tent as a body (2 Corinthians 5:110); the idea is that a person’s physical body is a temporary housing for a spiritual life. The body will be resurrected (1 Corinthians 15) and God will give us an eternal home (1 Corinthians 15:53; 2 Corinthians 5:1). Peter doesn’t tell us as much as we’d like to know on this topic (nor does Paul), because he has a different purpose: exhorting Christian growth.

He uses the metaphor of tent to describe his own death: “I know that I will soon put it [the tent] aside, as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things” (2 Peter 1:14-15). As Peter sees that his time of departure draws near (tradition says that Nero had him killed in A.D. 64), he puts his exhortations into writing so that we will have a regular reminder that our Savior wants us to continue to grow.

The basis of authority

Peter also reminds the readers of his basis of authority: “For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty” (verse 16). We didn’t just make up the stories in an elaborate hoax, he says. Nor are they myths (like Aesop’s fables) designed to teach truth through imaginative events. No, these things about Jesus really happened — we were there, and we saw it.

He then uses the Transfiguration as an example: “He [Jesus] received

honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased’ [Matthew 17:5]. We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain” (2 Peter 1:17-18).

Out of all the stories that Peter could have told, why did he pick the Transfiguration, rather than the resurrection or ascension? Perhaps this was the most eye-opening event for Peter — when he heard a distinct voice from God himself. The Transfiguration shows that Jesus had divine glory even before his resurrection; and the glory that Peter saw then made it easier for him to understand and believe Jesus when he promised to return in power and glory.

Peter seems to refer to the Second Coming in the next verses, too: “We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts” (verse 19). Peter points us to the Old Testament prophecies of the Day of the Lord, and we need to live with the knowledge that the day of reward will come.

The prophecies are trustworthy not just because we have seen many of them fulfilled — they are reliable because God caused them to be written. “Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (verses 20-21).

The prophets did not make up their stories, either, and they didn’t always understand how the predictions would be fulfilled. But the prophecies came from God as the Holy Spirit caused them to be written. This does not mean that God dictated the exact spelling of every word, or the precise choice of every word. But the meaning came from God, and the message can be

trusted.

Things to think about

How does spiritual strength come from knowledge about Christ? (verse 3)

What aspects of the divine nature do I desire the most? (verse 4)

Do my imperfections make me try harder, or make me quit trying?

Am I annoyed when preachers remind me of things I already know?
(verse 12).

What story in the Gospels do I find most compelling? (verse 17)

How well did the prophets understand their own prophecies? (verse 20)

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[back to table of contents](#)

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What Does the Bible Say About Women in Church Leadership?

Paul Kroll wrote the chapter on James 5:14. He was an employee of

Grace Communion International at the time; he is now retired.

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[back to table of contents](#)

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[back to table of contents](#)



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[back to table of contents](#)

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