

New Testament Literature: 1 Peter

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Session 31

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Abstract

In Lecture 31 of New Testament Literature, Dr. Dave Mathewson provides a comprehensive overview of the First Letter of Peter, focusing on its message of encouragement to dispersed Gentile Christians facing local and sporadic social ostracism in Asia Minor. He explains how Peter applies Old Testament covenant language—such as a chosen race, royal priesthood, and holy temple—to redefine the church's spiritual identity and call believers to holy, non-retaliatory community living. Addressing the challenging passage in 1 Peter 3:18–22, Mathewson argues that Christ's proclamation to the 'spirits in prison' signifies His triumphant resurrection victory over cosmic spiritual powers rather than an offer of second-chance salvation. Comparing the church to Noah's family, the lecture reassures a suffering minority that because Christ has vanquished the ultimate spiritual forces behind their trials, they can endure earthly hostility without fear.

Outline

I. Introduction and Contextual Setting of 1 Peter

- A. Course Announcements and Upcoming Final Examinations
- B. Overview of the General Letters (James, 1–2 Peter, 1–3 John)
- C. Author and Recipient Dynamics
 - 1. Letter attributed to Peter writing from "Babylon" (code word for Rome)
 - 2. Written to Christian exiles dispersed across Roman provinces (Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, Bithynia)
 - 3. Gentile Christian audience designated with Old Testament covenant terms
- D. Nature of the Persecution
 - 1. Absence of official, empire-wide Roman government persecution in the 1st century
 - 2. Presence of local, sporadic social ostracism, ridicule, and pressure from pagan neighbors

II. Primary Purpose and Core Themes

- A. Encouragement and Instruction in the Midst of Suffering

1. Frequency of suffering vocabulary in 1 Peter (12 verb instances, 4 noun instances)

2. Active Christian conduct versus passive endurance

B. Structural Division of the Letter

1. Chapters 1–3: Maintaining holy conduct and establishing a pure community

2. Chapters 4–5: Persevering without retaliation, following the example of Christ (the Isaiah 53 Suffering Servant)

C. Interweaving of Exposition (Theological Indicative) and Exhortation (Ethical Imperative)

III. Ecclesiology: The Church as the Rebuilt Spiritual Temple

A. Old Testament Language Applied to Transcultural Church

1. Chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation, God's special possession

B. Fulfillment of Old Testament Temple Promises

1. Christ as the precious cornerstone and living stone

2. Believers as living stones built into a spiritual house

3. The church as the true dwelling place of God's presence, replacing physical structure expectations

C. Practical and Social Implications

1. Moral motivation for purity and holiness in a hostile culture

2. Social identity and belonging for marginalized exiles

IV. Exegesis of 1 Peter 3:18–22: Christ's Preaching to the Spirits in Prison

A. The Difficulties and Traditional Misinterpretations

1. Questions regarding timing, location, content, and recipients

2. Evaluation of the "descent into hell" / second chance for salvation view

3. Evaluation of the preaching-through-Noah view

B. Chronology and Meaning of the Proclamation

1. Occurred at Christ's resurrection ("made alive in the Spirit")

2. Proclamation of victory and judgment, not gospel invitation

C. Identification of the "Spirits in Prison"

1. Background in Genesis 6:1–4 (sons of God / fallen angelic beings)

2. Development in Jewish second-temple tradition (1 Enoch, 2 Peter 2, Jude 6)

3. Cosmic confrontation and defeat of hostile spiritual powers in heavenly realms

V. Theological Application and Conclusion

A. Comparison with Noah and the Flood

1. Noah's family as a faithful minority saved through water in a hostile society

2. Church as a suffering minority assured of divine deliverance

B. Ultimate Reassurance for Believers

1. Real threat lies behind human persecutors in cosmic authorities
2. Defeat of cosmic forces by Christ removes all cause for fear
3. Calls Christians to confident witness and non-retaliatory holy living