

Happy New Year, friends! It's great to be with you today. Welcome to our guests. We are so glad you are here, starting off the year right, in church, putting your relationship with God as the foundational building block for this new year. As we begin 2026, I want to set two core truths before you.

First, God has great plans for you this year! Jeremiah 29:11 says, “‘I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’” You may have ideas and plans and hopes for this year, but what God has planned is far greater than you can imagine.

Second, God has great projects for you this year. Ephesians 2:10 says, “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” God has a mission for you this year; he has assignments and tasks prepared for you.

We want 2026 to be a year when we are 100% available to God, and we have tools to help you with that! We have three ways to help you really grow in your relationship with God!

1. Scripture—We will read the New Testament and Psalms together as a church between now and Easter.
2. Men’s and women’s prayer groups that meet twice a month (men 1st and 3rd Tuesdays at 7 p.m.; women 2nd and 4th Tuesdays at 8 p.m.)
3. 1 Peter sermon series—For the next fourteen weeks, we are going to take a deep dive into one of the most dynamic, relevant, and challenging books in the entire New Testament. It will help us learn how to have a resilient faith in a world that doesn’t always feel like home. No matter where you are in your faith, this book has something deep and meaningful for you.

Today, we are going to kick off our study of 1 Peter by reading the introduction to the book. It's only two verses long, but as we'll see, not only is there incredibly valuable gold to be mined out of these verses, but also these verses will set the stage and lay the foundation for the study of the rest of the book.

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,

To God’s elect, exiles 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:

Grace and peace be yours in abundance. (1 Peter 1:1-2)

We are going to focus on three areas from these verses: the author who wrote 1 Peter, the Christians who first read it, and the incredible salvation offered to us.

The Author—Peter

The author specifically introduces himself as, “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ.” Fortunately for us, we know nearly as much about him as we know about anyone in the entire Bible, and we could not ask for a better person to tell us more about Jesus. Peter started following Jesus as soon as Jesus began his public ministry. In Luke 5 we learn that there was a day Jesus was teaching by the Sea of Galilee and people were crowding around him, so he asked a fisherman who had just finished fishing through the night, “Can I use your boat?” That fisherman was Peter. Peter agreed, so they put the boat out thirty or so feet from the shore, creating a natural amphitheater so everyone could hear, and all the people lined up along the banks. When he was done teaching and the people went home, he turned to Peter and said, “Why don’t you put down your nets and see if you have any luck.” “Simon (Peter) answered, ‘Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets’” (Luke 5:5). What Jesus said to him made no sense. It wasn’t the right time of day to be fishing, it wasn’t the right place to be fishing, “but because you say so, I will.” They caught so many fish their nets began to break. People in other boats had to come help them pull it all in. That day, Peter left the nets and the boats behind and set out on a mission to follow Jesus and become his disciple. “Jesus said to Simon, ‘Don’t be afraid; from now on you will fish for people’” (Luke 5:10). Peter would go on to lead thousands upon thousands of people to faith in Jesus.

Peter was not only a disciple, someone who followed Jesus, he was an apostle, someone given authority by Jesus, and he was seen as the leader of the apostles. He is the one who Jesus called out of the boat to walk with him on the water. Peter was one of the chosen three to witness Jesus raise a dead little girl back to life, he was one of the inner three who saw Jesus’ glory on the mountain of transfiguration, and when Jesus was praying on the night before he died and he wanted his very closest friends with him, Peter was there. For Jesus’ entire ministry, Peter was as close to Jesus as you could possibly get.

There was a time when Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do the people think I am?” They said, “Some say you are a prophet...like Jeremiah or Elijah.” But Jesus asked, “What about you, who do you say I am?” “Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God’” (Matthew 16:16). Not only does Jesus tell Peter he got it right, but he also gives Peter a new name. Like Abraham and Jacob got new names from God, Jesus gave Peter a new name. “Jesus replied, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church’” (Matthew 16:17-18). He was given the name Simon at birth, but Jesus gave him the name Peter, which means “rock.” Then Jesus said, “On this rock, not Peter, but the confession that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, I will build my church.” After giving Peter his new name, Jesus goes on to tell Peter, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 16:19). Like when you are given keys to a house or keys to an office building, it means you get to decide who comes in. Hold onto that for a moment.

Even though Peter was so close to Jesus and was honored in so many ways, at the very end, when Jesus was in his moment of greatest need, Peter denied Jesus not once, not twice, but three times. After Peter’s third denial, a rooster crowed. Then from a distance Jesus looked Peter in the eyes. Peter was covered in shame and regret and went outside and wept bitterly. But after Jesus rose from the dead, not only did Jesus appear to Peter on several occasions, but he also asked Peter three times, “Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?” Peter had renounced Jesus three times; Jesus graciously gave Peter three chances to repledge his devotion to him. Then Jesus told him, “You take care of my flock!” And Peter did. After Jesus ascended to heaven, it was Peter who stood up and preached the first gospel message. After he preached, 3,000 people were baptized that day. He became the leader of the early church.

Peter performed miracles in Jesus' name and the city of Jerusalem was being transformed, so much so that he and one of the other apostles were brought before all the Jewish leaders for questioning. After talking to them, "(The rules and the elders) saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, (and) they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13). "In Greek, the two adjectives translated "unschooled" and "ordinary" are "agrammatus" and "idiotes." The leaders basically said, "These guys don't know how to talk right and they are backwoods idiots." Peter and John didn't have degrees or credentials, but they had been with Jesus. That was the unmistakable hallmark of Peter's life.

Wouldn't you want something like that to be said about you? Wouldn't you want someone to say, "They may not be the brightest, the most talented, the most skilled, but it is undeniable that they have been with Jesus—just look at how their life has been transformed." How incredible is it that we get to read the letter this guy wrote to learn how we can become more like Jesus? Whenever I meet someone who knew my parents when they were younger, I am always so excited. I ask them every question imaginable—What were they like in school? Do you have any funny stories about them? What's your favorite memory? This individual is my portal to know them better. That's what Peter is like for us. We all want to know Jesus better. Peter was closer to him than anyone. He was with him from the time his ministry began, listened to all his sermons, witnessed all his miracles, was with him on the mountaintops. Peter knew failure and was forgiven and restored. As we read his words, we will get to know Jesus better!

There is one more important part of Peter's life that we want to know about, which is his role in opening the church to Gentiles—people who are not Jewish by birth. For basically 2,000 years, the people of God were the Jewish people. If you wanted to be in God's covenant community, you had to be Jewish—kosher diet, feasts and festivals, Sabbath-keeping, circumcision, the sacrificial system. The only way into the people of God was through Judaism because the Jewish people were God's people. But Jesus didn't come only for the Jewish people; he came for all people. Do you remember what Jesus told Peter after he made the good confession? "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 16:19). Peter would be the person to officially bring the Gentiles into the church, into the people of God. In Acts 10, God miraculously orchestrated events that led Peter to the house of a man named Cornelius, a Gentile in every sense of the word. When Peter arrived at Cornelius' house, he said "It's against our law for me to associate with people like you, but God has shown me he is up to something new, that there is coming a day when all people will be welcomed in!" "Then Peter began to speak: 'I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right'" (Acts 10:34-35). He preached the gospel to them, and the Gentiles were filled with the Holy Spirit; they were speaking in tongues and praising God! Peter and his Jewish companions were amazed. "Then Peter said, 'Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have'" (Acts 10:46b-47).

Peter was the only person who could have done this, because Jesus gave him the keys to the kingdom; he got to be the one to open the door. But get this: when the Jewish believers found out Peter baptized Gentiles, they were outraged. "How could you?" The separation and hostility was so great. But Peter said, "Hey, God baptized them first. They already had the Holy Spirit, so I had to baptize them." Paul will be called the apostle to the Gentiles, but Peter opened the door for the Gentiles. The reason that is so significant is because of who this letter is written to.

The Recipients—The Early Church

Peter wrote to the early church, more specifically to the early church in what is modern day Turkey. Let's pull up on a map the region to which Peter addresses his letter: Pontus, Galatian, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bythinia.

I've had the chance to visit these areas. It's an absolutely beautiful part of the world. When you visit Cappadocia, you can see how they build their homes into the cliff walls. Some of the earliest known churches in the world that still exist and haven't been torn down are churches that met in those cliffs. These Christians were not living in the major power centers of the Roman Empire. They were largely rural and provincial. They could be easily ignored or overlooked economically or politically, but not spiritually.

Peter was writing to Christians in this area and he calls them, "exiles" or "foreigners." What we know about history around this time, in the early 60s AD, is that Christians were beginning to feel like strangers, that this world was not their home. That wasn't because the world suddenly changed; it was because they changed. They gave their lives to Jesus, their worldview and their value systems were turned upside down, and they began to be ostracized from society. Persecution would eventually turn into being thrown into prison and thrown to the lions, but that wouldn't happen for a few more decades. At this point, they were excluded from social functions, blackballed from promotions and places of influence, marginalized economically, slandered as evildoers, harassed legally. Faith in Jesus Christ brought the forgiveness of sins, a relationship with God, and the promise of eternal life, but it also brought them a lot of difficulties. Peter writes this book to help them build a resilient faith, a faith that can stand the test of a fire. Peter's letter isn't abstract theology but a survival guide for real people in the real world, struggling with real problems, and trying to stay faithful along the way.

That's happened throughout history. Last year I read through an account of William Carey, the father of the modern missionary movement. In the late 1700s he left England and moved to India, where he spent the rest of his life telling people about Jesus. It took years for Indians to convert, and when they did, it was not celebrated. Friends and family members would hurl cow-dung at them, beat them, throw them into prison, and dispossess them of their personal property.

Opposition to faith has happened throughout history, and it happens in ways today, too. Abraham Kuyper, Lesslie Newbigin, and Tim Keller have all written about the way in which the culture responds to Christianity, giving three distinct categories: positive world, neutral world, and negative world. In positive world, Christianity is celebrated and faith brings opportunities. In neutral world, faith is inconsequential; it doesn't matter one way or the other what you believe. In negative world, faith solicits opposition. They were living in a negative world environment. This is so powerful and relevant for us, because a few generations ago in America, we lived in a positive world society. A generation or two ago, we were in a neutral world society. This generation, we've found ourselves in a negative world society. If you are in Hollywood, they will celebrate every crazy belief under the sky—every belief except the belief that Jesus is God's Son and that what he said is true. Universities always celebrate the value of diversity of thought, so they promote and elevate people who believe all sorts of things—except orthodox Christianity. That's the one belief that will keep you from tenure. Some families in this church have felt this at home, because you believe in Jesus and believe what he taught about truth and sexuality and marriage, so your family wants little or nothing to do with you.

Christians in the world today have to learn how to live in a negative world environment, where our faith faces opposition. This study will help us with that and prepare us to live a life with resilient faith!

We've focused on the author, Peter, and on the recipients, the early church. Let's close by looking at the incredible salvation offered to us. Peter writes his letter specifically to those "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: Grace and peace be yours in abundance" (1 Peter 1:2). There are three ways our salvation and the end result it brings about were accomplished.

How Our Salvation Was Brought About

By the decision of the Father

The Scriptures teaches us that we are in the family of God not because we are clever or intelligent or morally superior to anyone else, but because of God's plan. He is the one who chose us. There is a family in our church who knew a child in our community who was in the foster care system. They fell in love with this kid and came up with a plan to adopt him and bring him into their family. Out of deep, committed, costly love, they chose to give this child a forever home. That is like what God had done for us. The heavenly Father saw us, loved us, came up with the plan to bring us into his family, and then invited us in. Every one of us, at some time or another, has felt the sting of being unwanted. Passed over for the team. Passed over for a relationship. Passed over by the admissions department. Passed over for a promotion. Rejection hurts. But to know that the God of the universe knows us, loves us, and chooses us, brings greater confidence and strength than anything else in this world.

By the sanctifying work of the Spirit

The way we officially become a part of God's family is through the sanctifying work of the Spirit. The word "sanctifying" is used over a thousand times in the Bible. The most common way it's used is to describe objects that were once ordinary and then were set apart for a special purpose to belong to God and be used for him. A table, a lampstand, a curtain were simply ordinary objects, but when they were going to be used in the temple, they would be sanctified, they would be set apart, no longer used for common purposes, but now belonging to God, used to bring him glory. That's what the Bible says has happened to us. We were once living our lives in common ways—doing what everyone else was doing, living our lives the way we wanted to live them. But when we joined God's family, we were set apart. Now we belong to God, and our lives belong to him. Our lives now have a heavenly, eternal purpose—to bring him praise, to advance his kingdom, to love and serve other people in Jesus' name.

By the blood of Jesus

How does the Spirit make us holy and set us apart to belong to God? By the blood of Jesus. Because we were all sinners, because we were guilty, condemned, indebted and unclean, God couldn't just bring us into his family. The debt for our sin had to first be paid; the stain of our sin had to be washed away. That's what Jesus did when he died on the cross for our sins. Colossians 2:13-14 says, "God forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross." The record of our debt was a mile long, including every mistake and every error, detailing the price we owed. God took the record of our

debt, wadded it up, and put it in the hand of his son. When Jesus was nailed to the cross, our debt was canceled. He paid the price!

But it wasn't only that our debt needed to be paid. Our souls needed to be cleansed. We've all had stains on our clothes we couldn't get out. Sin causes a stain on our souls, and there is nothing we can do to wash it clean. But 1 John 1:7 says, "The blood of Jesus, God's Son, purifies us from all sin." Jesus made the salvation that God the Father planned possible by dying on the cross for our sins, and then the Spirit comes and applies that salvation to our lives. Each person of the Trinity is intimately and intricately involved in our salvation.

This is theology that makes the heart sing! This is truth on fire. If you want to ground your new year in the right way, sink your roots down into the soil of God's trinitarian love and salvation. This is as good as it gets.

The last thing we learn in these opening verses is that our salvation leads to obedience to Jesus Christ. Jesus is not just the savior who delivers us from sin; he is our Lord, who becomes the leader of our lives. Believing in Jesus means trusting him and following him. At the start of a new year, this is really what every worthy resolution is about—obeying Jesus. You want a stronger marriage? Obey Jesus, he'll show you the path of sacrificial love. You want to be a better parent? Obey Jesus, he'll give you wisdom, insight, and priorities that will transform your household. You want to get healthier physically or financially or relationally? Obey Jesus, he is the author of life. He wrote the manual, and we flourish when we live according to his design.

Let's be people like Peter who said, "Because you say so, I will."