

# 30 RUN THE RACE

One of the early martyrs of the church was Polycarp of Smyrna (A.D. 70-156). Because he was an elderly leader of the Christians there, Marcus Aurelius Verus thought he might cause all Christians to lose heart if he could make Polycarp give up his faith in public.

When Polycarp was brought before the crowds he was ordered to call Caesar his lord and offer a sacrifice to him. But that would have meant rejecting Jesus as the true Lord of all. So, Polycarp refused. The Roman governor continued to try to weaken Polycarp, but to no avail. When he demanded again that Polycarp swear by Caesar's fortune and condemn Christ, Polycarp said, "For 86 years I have been his servant, and he has never done me wrong; how can I blaspheme my king who saved me?"

Polycarp was killed because of his refusal to reject Jesus. Faith in Jesus Christ was of the greatest importance for Polycarp and many other Christians who also have been put to death because of their faith.

## 3 STATEMENTS

- From early times, some Christians have paid a high price for publicly confessing Jesus Christ as Lord.
- John contrasts the Lamb who brings salvation with two beasts that bring death and destruction.
- The writer of 1 Peter sought to help the readers stand fast in faith, hope, and love.

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*Source*

## JOHN'S VISION OF HOPE

*From early times, some Christians have paid a high price for publicly confessing Jesus Christ as Lord. It was during those early times that John, perhaps John the apostle, was on a rocky island in the Mediterranean Sea called Patmos. He was exiled there as punishment for being a follower of Jesus Christ. John saw a vision from God on Patmos that he put in writing. This is the last book of the Bible, The Revelation to John (usually just called Revelation).*

People have many ideas about the book of Revelation. Some people think it is a collection of predictions about the end of the world and they are not ready to deal with it. Some look to Revelation as a timetable. They carefully attempt to decode Revelation's picture language to find where we stand in the history of the world in order to be ready for what is to come. But the Bible is not a crystal ball or a timetable for the end. The Bible is for faith and life issues.

The faith and life issues in Revelation are the same issues faced by John on Patmos. He could not leave that barren island. He was in a prison without walls. In John's time, faith in Jesus was something new, and there were those who were violently opposed to it. Rumors spread about the followers of a crucified man. Christians were thought to be a group of people whose leader was executed as a revolutionary who opposed the Roman emperors. In some places Christians were tracked down by the government and forced to call the emperor "lord." But many refused and were killed. In other places property and means of making a living were taken away from those who called Jesus "Lord" instead of the emperor.

John's people were being persecuted for their faith in Jesus Christ. All of the things listed below happened to them. Rank them in order from "1" to "10." Have "1" represent that which is least threatening to you and "10" represent that which is most threatening.

- |               |                  |
|---------------|------------------|
| ___ jailed    | ___ hated        |
| ___ crucified | ___ burned alive |
| ___ ignored   | ___ humiliated   |
| ___ ridiculed | ___ beheaded     |
| ___ tortured  | ___ exiled       |

Christians have suffered these and other hardships down through the centuries. The world does not always take kindly to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The world has rulers of its own who, like Herod, do not want to share control with the child born in Bethlehem. The Christian faith becomes a great threat to these people because of its demand that Christ is Lord, not an individual ruler, government, or society.



## WORTHY IS THE LAMB

John's readers were under a great deal of persecution. They looked forward to their release after a battle between God and evil.

Read Revelation 5:1-4. Here John spoke of seeing a great scroll sealed with seven seals. This scroll contained God's plan for saving the world by destroying evil and rescuing God's chosen people. John said that he wept when he saw the scroll because no one was worthy to open it. If the scroll remained sealed then God's purposes would remain hidden and go unaccomplished.

That was the way it seemed for John's hearers. That is the way it still is for many people. They look at the world around them and see that it is suffering under great evil. They look to themselves and see that no one is able to engage in battle with evil and win. They look to God, but can see no plan or action on God's part.

But John's vision did not stop there. He spoke of one who could break the seals, one who was worthy, one who was powerful enough to do battle with evil.

1. According to verse 5, who is this one?

In the verses that follow, John further described this one who would do battle with evil. Read Revelation 5:6-14.

*From early times, some Christians have paid a high price for publicly confessing Jesus Christ as Lord.*



*John contrasts the Lamb who brings salvation with two beasts that bring death and destruction.*

2. How did John further describe this Savior?

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3. What is surprising to you about this Savior?

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4. Who is this one?

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That God's divine power should be made known in suffering and weakness does not seem to fit. People expect power and might to overthrow evil, but instead, God accomplishes salvation through a Lamb—Jesus Christ. Discuss how such a vision of God would have given encouragement to John's first hearers. Also discuss how these words give encouragement to you.

## TERRIBLE ARE THE BEASTS

*John contrasts the Lamb who brings salvation with two beasts that bring death and destruction.*

Read Revelation 13:1-10. John described one beast as a horrible monster arising from the sea. Satan, the dragon of Revelation 12, gives the beast its power.

1. In what ways is this beast the exact opposite of the Lamb?

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What John was describing was life in the end-times—the time between Christ's resurrection and the end of the world. During this time the beast does dominate world history. War has been declared on the people of the Lamb.

Power, wealth, and might insist on being worshiped.

2. Where do you see this beast in the world today?

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3. What attracts people to focus their lives on power?

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4. In what ways might you be tempted to worship the powerful beast instead of the "Lamb who was slain"?

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In Revelation 13:11-18, John described a second beast as arising on the land. In the same way as the beast from the sea, this land monster probably was symbolic of an actual power. Perhaps it referred to the local authorities who acted as willing helpers of the empire beast, the beast from the sea.

The "mark of the beast" perhaps reflected the practice of stamping a person's hand as a sign that he or she worshiped the emperor. Only those with that mark were allowed to work or trade legally.

Many people have tried to explain the significance of the number 666. One explanation is as follows. Greeks gave numerical value to each letter of their alphabet. By changing a person's name into these numbers and adding those numbers together, a single number can be assigned to a person. One idea about the identity of 666 is that the total of the name "God Caesar" equals 666. But no one has solved John's riddle for certain.

## SAINTS AND SOJOURNERS

The troubled saints of God are not left at the mercy of any beast. God has always kept the sure promise of salvation and encouragement.

The letter of 1 Peter was one such word of promise and encouragement for Christians who were suffering as a result of social discrimination and alienation. *The writer of 1 Peter sought*

*to help the readers stand fast in faith, hope, and love.* Christians were told that they did not receive their identity and the ability to resist evil from themselves, but from what God had already done for them. Read 1 Peter 1:1-2.

At verse 1, the writer addresses the letter to "exiles of the Dispersion." The term *exile* means "resident aliens"—those who live in a country and work there, but have limited legal and social rights. Another word that may be used here is *sojourner*—one who is traveling through a country but whose home is elsewhere. Discuss why the term *sojourner* is a good definition of a Christian.

1. The Christians are more than lonely sojourners far from home. How are these sojourner Christians identified in verse 2?

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2. How have the Christians been given this identity?

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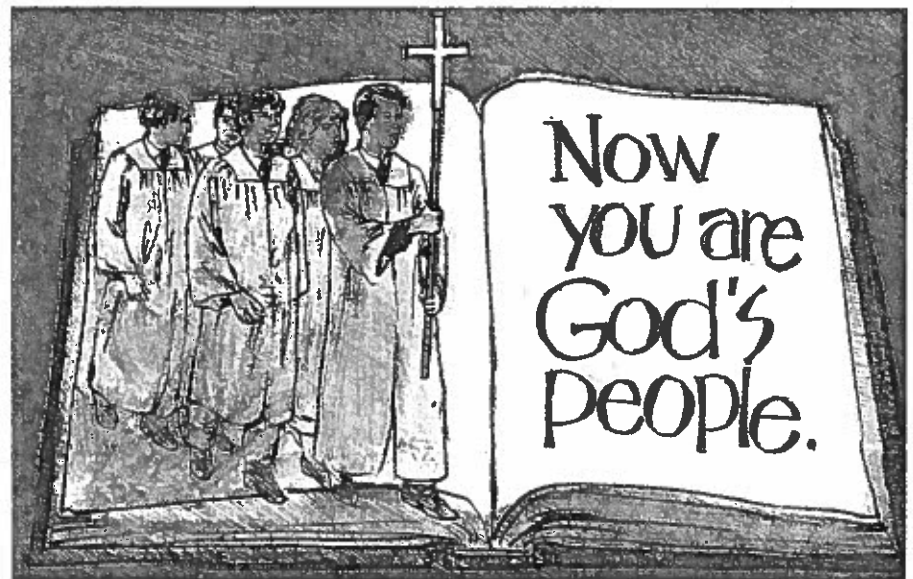
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3. How would this identity give hope to those who are being persecuted for being Christian?

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*The writer of 1 Peter sought to help the readers stand fast in faith, hope, and love.*



Read 1 Peter 1:1-18. As you read this passage you can hear echoes of a Baptism service. People are "chosen and elected" by the *Father*, "sanctified" by the *Holy Spirit*, and are "obedient" to *Jesus Christ*.

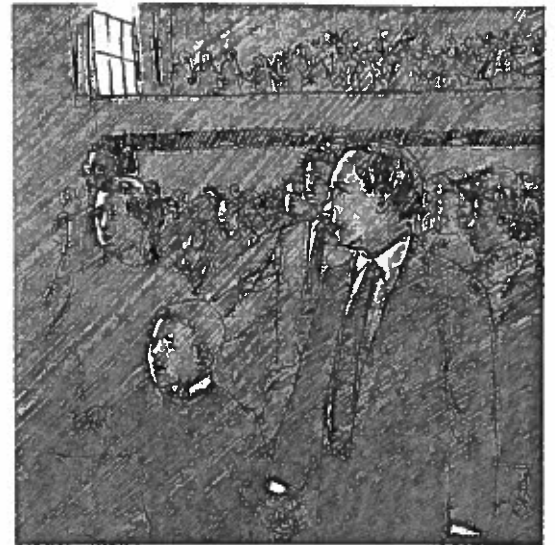
Readers of 1 Peter were reminded that God had made a decision about them. God was the one who had already acted in Jesus Christ on their behalf. God had made them members of a community through Baptism. It is in Baptism that Christians can find hope in the midst of suffering. Nothing can take God's people away from God. The writer of 1 Peter assured the people of God's faithfulness. God's salvation was for those who remained faithful to their baptismal covenant.

## Shaping life

### RESOURCES FOR LIVING IN FAITH

Christians can endure in faith and service with the help of God. You have heard the call for faithfulness from Revelation and 1 Peter. When being a Christian becomes difficult, you are called to be steadfast and mature. How will you do it? What are the resources you may draw upon? On a separate sheet of paper, write how each of the items below can help you grow strong in faith.

- Regular worship of God with your congregation
- The stories of martyrs
- Bible study with others
- Prayer
- The sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper
- A support group of others like you who face similar challenges
- Your pastor
- The lives of other Christians in your community.



## FURTHER

## opportunities

### Mishna minutes

The First Letter of Peter is a great statement of hope, assurance, and identity. It is a good book for young Christians today who feel pressured to conform to the ways of society.

During the week, read one chapter each day. Take time as you read it. Let the writer's words sink in slowly. Some passages may be difficult to understand. Do not get bogged down with them. Other passages will speak to you very clearly—focus on those.

In the early church, Christians memorized large passages of Scripture. When they were troubled, all they had to do was remember the Word of God. Commit to memory one passage from each chapter in 1 Peter. You may want to memorize the following passages.

Day 1	1 Peter 1:8-9
Day 2	1 Peter 2:9-10
Day 3	1 Peter 3:8-9
Day 4	1 Peter 4:12-14
Day 5	1 Peter 5:6-11
Day 6	1 Peter 2:4-5



# FOCUS

## ON THE BOOK OF REVELATION

0Y9G6UZOM8Q05Q8QZ061ZUST60  
001YQ0MX1ZQ02M7X7500TQFG00

You probably guessed that the letters and numbers above are written in code. People send messages written in code when they do not want others to understand messages they are sending.

The Book of Revelation was written in a sort of code. The writer did not use a number and letter code, but word pictures were used to disguise the real meaning of the message. Only those who belonged to John's community could understand what he was talking about. To outsiders, especially to the enemies of the Christians, this writing seemed only to be a work of strange fiction. Unfortunately, the meaning of some of John's word pictures have been lost even from Christians today. We can only guess at what they might have meant.

That John was forced to use his word-picture code to spread his message shows that his community was under a great deal of persecution. There were people being killed for their faith. John's strange code book gave the Christians hope. John's book got the message through that in the great struggle between good and evil, God rules and God will eventually win through the Lamb of God—Jesus Christ.

You may use the chart below to decode the message.

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N (Letter)  
M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z (Code)

O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z (Letter)  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 A B (Code)

### Activity 1

With the help of your pastor or other resource person, look through the calendar of Lesser Festivals and Commemorations (LBW pages 10-12). Names that are followed by a red "R" are usually martyrs. Notice that many days are set aside as times to remember these saints who suffered for the faith. Select one or more of these martyrs and learn about them. Create some kind of tribute to one martyr by drawing or painting a picture, writing a poem or song, sculpting a statue, or creating a dance.

### Activity 2

Ask your teacher or pastor for a copy of the service that will be used in your rite of confirmation. Within that service locate the promises you will make. Write a list of ways in which you can begin now to live your baptismal faith according to the promises you will make.

### Activity 3

List some ways that you can encourage others in their relationship with Jesus Christ. You may do this by sharing your own faith through words and through loving actions. Make a commitment to share your faith with at least one person this week.