

The First Letter of Peter

Introduction to the Book:

1. The book lacks personal material, having no hint of a personal contact between Peter and the recipients of the letter as in the case of Paul's epistles. All that we know of these Christians is that they resided in the Roman provinces of Asia Minor (Turkey, the Romans viewed the area as the gateway to Asia and so named it Asia Minor).

Though Paul calls Peter "the apostle to the Jews (Gal. 2:7)," his role in opening the gospel beyond the confines of ethnic Jews and Jewish proselytes is clear in the Cornelius-conversion narrative (Acts 10) and the incident at Antioch (Gal. 2:11-13). Clearly, we should not read Paul as saying that Peter ministered exclusively to the Jews or Paul exclusively to the Gentiles.

2. The apostle wrote the letter from "Babylon (5:13)," a designation that is likely understood symbolically for Rome. Literal Babylon was largely uninhabited in the first century. There is no record of a church in the city, nor that Peter was in the region. "Babylon" is used in the New Testament symbolically for the city of Rome (Rev. 16:9, 17:5, 18:2 [17:9 refers to the seven hills that comprise the city]). The two cities are comparable because they were centers of world power, cultural decadence, and opposed God's people. Being in "Babylon," Peter apparently heard of the plight of the Christians in Asia Minor and wrote to them (we have no record that he labored in any church there, though we know that he spent time in Corinth, Greece).
3. The date of the writing of the letter is likely in the early 60's. We know that Peter was martyred in 64 AD under the reign of the demented Nero (54-68) in Rome. Nero was the first emperor to persecute the church beginning in the year of Peter's demise though Claudius, his predecessor, had previously expelled them from Rome in the early 40s. Peter seems to be writing in the context of increased hostilities, but not bloodshed. This would place the writing about 62 AD.
4. The Jewish character of the book is evident by the profusion of quotations and allusions from the Old Testament, though the churches likely comprised Gentiles as well. Most commentators understand these churches to be largely composed of the latter. Whatever the

composition, they are a people who understand the authority of the Hebrew Scriptures and the changes brought in the constituency of God's people in the coming of Christ. What is clear is that Peter's audience is described in terms drawn from an identity with Israel, the ancient people of God.

5. The persecution endured by the recipients of the letter seems to be that of discrimination and ridicule rather than anything physical; the instruction the author gives is about mental and emotional reaction to unjust treatment (2:1). It likely arose from the unwillingness of Christians to embrace their former lifestyle (i.e., social incompatibility).
6. The comfort that can come amid mistreatment is to remind oneself that Jesus is our great model in suffering. His example, which is often repeated in the epistle, should be instructive. Peter seems to be saying that the proper posture in uncertainty and difficulty is to live with moral integrity acting rightly.
7. The amount of space given to married women and slaves seems to indicate that there were women in the church without Christian husbands (3:1-6), and slaves without Christian masters.
8. The theme of the book seems to be comfort and conduct amid ridicule and abuse because of Christian profession (5:13, "Stand fast in it [grace]").
9. If a verse captures the essence of the letter, it is 4:19. "Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful creator in doing what is right."

Outline of the Book

- I. Introduction, 1:1-2
- II. The Possessions of the Believer in Christ, 1:3-12
- III. The Personal Conduct of Believers in Christ, 1:13–2:10
- IV. The Public Conduct of Believers in Christ, 2:11–5:11
- V. Conclusion, 5:12–14

Comments on the Book:

I. Introduction, 1:1-2

A. The author, 1:1a

It is interesting that in the second letter Peter wrote, he refers to himself as Simon Peter, here only Peter. Since the theme here has to do with suffering, and the second letter with false teachers, the use of his double name, the Hebraic name in II Peter, may have to do with his attempt to show the letter to be authentically from his hand.

Peter is found initially in Bethsaida, but, at some point, relocated to Capernaum, making a living plying the sea with the Zebedee family (father, James and John).

The claim to apostleship is that of the highest office in the church of God, a claim equal to that of OT prophets. However, the authority to write and be listened to is strengthened by the phrase “of Jesus Christ,” the only office in the Bible that appears with this phrase.

B. The recipients 1:1b-2a

1. The readers, v. 1.b

The original readers of the letter are described as “resident aliens.” The point seems to be that they are people that have become displaced for some reason. The most logical explanation is that they have become such, not because they are not members of the society or unknown to the people around them (newcomers having a different ethnicity and heritage), but because of the social consequences of their faith (which fits the theme of the book).

2. Their location, v. 1c

The recipients of the letter were scattered in churches located in four Roman provinces (two regions, Pontus and Bithynia, was viewed as one province by the Romans). The most logical explanation of the sequence of the Roman provinces is that of the route taken by the carrier of the letter to the churches, most likely Silvanus (5:12). Considerable research has demonstrated that the only two ports that could accommodate trans-Mediterranean shipping were Amisus (Samsun) in Pontus and Byzantium (Constantinople) in Bithynia. Silvanus landed in Amisus journeyed southern, then westward before turning to the North to end the journey.

What becomes clear is that the letter is a circular message to be read (and likely copied) in numerous churches, some having been founded by Paul on his earlier missionary journeys (most likely).



3. Their comfort, vv. 1d-2c

Comfort amid trials and sufferings come from reflecting not on the immediate circumstances but upon the grace, mercy, and greatness of our God. Thus, a clue to comfort in trials is to focus on what we have in Christ, not upon what we think we may be losing. No matter the extent of the loss, they do not compare!

The term “chosen” or elect is an adjective describing the “resident aliens.” Christians are people that have been chosen out by God to be His. This action of God took place in eternity past.

The basis or criteria of God’s election of these people is God’s foreknowledge. The term does not simply indicate knowledge of a person, but “a personal, loving, fatherly knowledge.” Divine love for us before our creation is why He chose us. Howard Marshall (*1 Peter*, 31) notes: “This does not mean that God chose them because He knew in advance that they would respond to his call, but simply that God took the initiative and chose them before they had done anything to deserve it.”

The means of the temporal expression of divine love is choosing us to be His is through “the sanctifying work of the Spirit.” Peter has alerted us to the theme of his letter. “To sanctify” means to set apart or for an end or goal (the goal being obedience to Christ). This suggests what we have here is that “sanctification” is being used for regeneration or salvation. By obedience (faith, trust) we become attached to Christ. The sequence is important.

From the very beginning God has given us His Spirit whose current function is to promote moral godliness and rectitude. We are a people called to holiness of conduct. Paul in II Thessalonians 2:13 uses a similar phrase (“... God chose you as the first fruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth”).

The purpose of God’s action for us is stated as two-fold. First, God’s purpose is to bring us into conformity to His son, Jesus Christ. Second, God’s purpose for these “alien residents” is to work in them to induce daily obedience.

The “sprinkling with His blood” is a difficult phrase to understand. Since the order of divine actions is being set forth, it likely does not refer to the divine act of forgiveness since Peter places it after the sanctifying work of the Spirit. Clearly the reference is to an OT ritual, and the most likely context is the purification ritual after cleansing from leprosy (sprinkling a person with blood only occurred on two other occasions, the inauguration of the Mosaic Covenant at Sinai and priestly ordination; neither seems to fit the context here). Sprinkling of a leper speaks on cleansing from defilement and restoration to the community. Thus, the consequence of divine salvation for the recipient is devotion to God and continual restoration to God in fellowship. Sprinkling would be then a reminder of cleansing.

Here is the definition of a Christian in a nutshell. It is one who has been chosen of God based on His discriminatory love and fatherly care through the ministry of God’s Spirit resulting in our devotion to God and cleansing from sin’s defiling effects.

The fact about the recipients: “chosen aliens”
The means of God’s choice:
 The Father’s love (foreknowledge)
 The Spirit’s regeneration (sanctification)
The end: obedience to Christ (see Acts 6:7 for a similar
 expression of faith/trust in Christ)
The result: cleansing through Christ’s sacrifice

What should not be missed in the introduction is Peter’s emphasis on the trinity of God, three persons: God the chooser; conformity to the Son the, cleanser; and the Spirit the motivator/sanctifier.

C. The blessing, v. 2d

The salutation is a prayer that grace and peace would abound. Grace speaks of the free and unmerited disclosure of the love of God; peace is the consequence of the experience of it. This is clearly what these distressed people need.

II. The Possessions of the Believer in Christ, 1:3-12

Peter’s point in the letter seems to be that endurance in trials is a product of one’s focus. If you focus on your loss, the pain will seem unending; if you focus on what you have in Christ, it will lighten the burden considerably. Thinking of the grace and kindness of God lifts burdens!

In many ways this is a typical first century letter in structure. Beginning with a greeting (vv. 1-2), followed by a statement of blessing (vv. 3-12), a pattern found in II Cor. 1:3 and Eph. 1:3, Paul’s letters, for example.

A. Our present possessions, vv. 3-5

This is a praise section. The apostle lists the things that we should joyfully recognize that God has granted to us.

1. The blessing of salvation, a living hope, v. 3

This hope is a gift (“he gave us,” “caused us to be born again”) and it is assured by Christ’s resurrection. Because Christ conquered death, as evidenced by His resurrection, we have a living hope! His resurrection demonstrates that He has conquered death for us! Hope is one of the most characteristic words in I Peter (1:3, 13, 21; 3:5, 15); he uses it as a synonym for faith (3:5, 15). Looking forward to what God has for us in the future gives balance and relief in today’s fears, toils, and tears.

Wuest's translation of the verse is wonderful: *"Let the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ be eulogized, who impelled by His abundant mercy begat us anew so that we have a lively hope, this lively hope having been made actual through the intermediate instrumentality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ out from among those who are dead."*

2. The blessing of secure inheritance, v. 4a

This hope cannot be lost or diminished; in fact, it is reserved for us (literally, "it is garrisoned about"). For the OT saint, the fruition of hope was the Promised Land, Canaan; for the NT saint, it is heaven. Canaan was a shadowed picture of a promise fulfilled to us in heaven.

Three adjectives describe our inheritance:

- a. It is imperishable (not subject to decay, not subject to diminishment).
- b. It is holy or pure (not subject to the staining power of sin containing nothing unworthy of God's complete approval).
- c. It cannot be lost or forfeited (the verb is a perfect passive in tense meaning that God has done this for us).

3. The blessing of security, vv. 4b-5

This hope, this inheritance, is reserved in heaven for us. Heaven cannot be assaulted and its treasures carried away by a tyrant for God alone guards it for us.

a. The statement, v. 4b

The verb tense is a present participle ("being kept") meaning that God is constantly watching over us with a view to making sure we obtain His inheritance (v. 1).

b. The means, v. 5a

The objective means of our surety of inheritance is God's power; the subjective means of God's constant protection is our faith in Him, our clinging to Him.

c. The end, v. 5b

God is guarding our inheritance, preserving its existence, until He gives it to each of us when He returns to establish the new heavens and earth (the garden that was defaced in Gen. 3).

The "last day" is at the end of time as we know it.

B. The reality of present circumstances: trials, vv. 6-9

1. The fact, v. 6

“Though” alerts us to the other side of all our lives, suffering. It suggests the emotional pain of grief, not physical pain.

“If necessary” indicates that a purpose lies behind our suffering; it has not merely happened since being part of the divine will for us (though we may never understand it). “For a little while” suggests that it will not always be the case for us. Peter does not describe the nature of the trials; it is purposely kept vague though it has to do with emotional grief.

2. The fruit: character development, v. 7

Peter explains the “if necessary” of the previous verse by citing the purpose of suffering. There is no joy in suffering itself and we should not derive some morbid pleasure in it. However, comfort can be ours in it when we acknowledge the hand from which it comes and the consequence of it; it is character building like nothing else.

a. The benefit, v. 7a

Trials demonstrate the genuineness of our confession of Christ; it shows what we truly value. The faith of these people is not in doubt (v. 5); trials demonstrate what is already a reality.

The word “trial” can also be translated by the term “temptation.” The origin and motive distinguish the way to translate the common noun. Trials come from God with a view to our spiritual benefit (James 1:2-12); temptation comes from the devil with a view to our destruction (James 1:13-16).

b. An illustration, v. 7b

Just as gold is refined by fire, the impurities removed through heating the metal, so trials refine us. Gold is a precious metal and subject to deterioration; faith is far more precious and permanent (lesser-to-greater comparison). Like gold, faith is impure; trials serve as a refining process in both cases.

c. The end, v. 7c

Imagine the unimaginable. The product of faithful endurance through trials, with the result of its fruit in spiritual maturity, will result in the praise of God when Christ returns for His people in the Last Day (the context is one of encouragement to endure trials as being from God for our good). Again, the purpose of trials may not be known until God praises us!

3. The current perspective, vv. 8-9

a Delight in God, v. 8

Note the words that describe the delight: “love,” “believe,” “rejoice,” and “joy.” Here is faith expressed, “... having not seen Him you love Him.” Peter is saying that we not only find solace in difficulty in our future hope, but also in our daily relationship with Christ. Both foci should be important to us, neither have to do with life-management outcomes.

b. Surety in God, v. 9

The reason for these attitudes is that trials function to bring us to the realization of the blessings of our salvation. The purifying consequence of trials causes us to look beyond the temporal to the experience of our redemption and the wonder of life in Christ.

Thoughts:

1. You and I are “scattered, resident aliens” in this world. Redemption through Christ has led to dual citizenship; we are citizens here and in a new place as well. We are citizens of an earthly state, the United States, and of heaven. We do not quite belong here, but we have not arrived there as yet. Does this not explain a lot about our lives?
2. A Christian is a person upon whom God has planned to bring into His presence before time began and He will accomplish His desire through the ministry of the Spirit in sanctifying us, causing us to obey Christ.
3. The means of finding a degree of comfort in the fears, disappointments, and pains of life is not to look inward to our own resources or outward to the resources of others, but to look up to the resources of God. Instead of thinking of lost privileges, such as those of health, think of all that Christ has done for you that can never be taken away,
4. Remember the best of the works of our hands will come to an end someday, but God’s work has no end. In fact, our earthly end is a glorious beginning. Does that not help you to get through the day?
5. God has something wonderful planned for you. The gift of God, the inheritance of God, is eternal life. God has planned from eternity to give it to you and has promised to keep you safe until it becomes yours. Does that not make you rejoice in Him for His grace and kindness?
6. I hear a lot of Christians these days speak of discouragement over the resent divisions in our country. We do not know what God has planned for us, but comfort is in trust, not knowledge. It seems that our real fear is the loss of privilege that is ours as a gift from God and we are not entitled to have such; they are a temporal gift. Neither our comfort nor

our trust is in what we have, but the person we have come to know (better put: who knows us and loves us) and who is our true focus.

7. If we lost everything that we have come to cherish, we would not lose the love of God through Christ. What we have is temporal, who we have is eternal. May our focus in these days not be on our comforts, but upon our God. Our fortunes may fade; God's will be otherwise, but our joy, song, and comfort is in a God who has treasures prepared for us in a place where they can never be diminished.