

# NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

## *Lesson 70*

### 1 Peter – Part One

#### **I. BACKGROUND**

Remember Peter? It has been a while since we have discussed him! He was the impetuous fisherman from Galilee that Christ called as an apostle early in His ministry. Simon Peter was the “rock” who started out 100% for Christ, except when he was denying Jesus to save his own skin! Jesus called Peter to follow, and Peter answered by leaving the fishing boats and becoming a fisher of men. It was Peter who often spoke out for the twelve; it was Peter who first declared Jesus the Son of God (Matt. 16). It was Peter who proudly told Jesus he would never betray the Lord. Yet, it was Peter who panicked when accused of being associated with the Lord. Three times, Peter denied Jesus before the cock crowed. Even though Jesus told Peter beforehand that such would happen, Peter was broken over his sin.

After the resurrection, Jesus appeared to Peter. Jesus took time to heal Peter’s heart from the pain and guilt of the denials. Before his ascension, Jesus challenged Peter three times to “Take care of my sheep” if Peter truly “loved” Jesus. Jesus also explained to Peter that Peter would ultimately not deny Jesus, but instead would die a martyr’s death with his hands stretched out when Peter was older.

Before that death, which history teaches us was by crucifixion,<sup>1</sup> Peter spent his time feeding Jesus’ sheep. Peter was infused with the Holy Spirit on Pentecost and delivered the powerful sermon explaining the deity of Jesus and saving work on Calvary before a stunned crowd of Jews, thousands of which joined the church on that first day! (Acts 2)

During early Acts, we read of Peter preaching from Jerusalem day and night. Peter was imprisoned and released miraculously. Peter was feeding the church and providing the leadership for which Jesus had asked. We

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<sup>1</sup> Clement, the Pastor/Bishop of the church in Rome from 88-97 A.D. wrote of Peter’s martyrdom at Rome apparently during the same period of Nero’s persecutions as Paul. Other church histories reference the same point. Eusebius’s church history (written around 325) writes, “It is, therefore, recorded that Paul was beheaded in Rome itself, and that Peter was likewise crucified under Nero. This account of Peter and Paul is substantiated by the fact that their names are preserved in the cemeteries of that place even to the present day (Ecclesiastical History 2:25.5). An early apocryphal work called “The Acts of Peter” (written around 150-200 A.D.) relates that Peter requested crucifixion upside down because he did not deserve to die in the manner of Jesus.

also saw references to Peter's work in the church in the writings of Paul. In Galatians, we read of Peter's interaction with Paul at the church in Antioch (Gal. 2:11ff). Similarly, we read in the Corinthian correspondence that Peter worked within that church as well.

This brings us to the letter of 1 Peter. It is one of two letters in the New Testament by Peter (the other, appropriately called 2 Peter!). Peter was apparently not as prolific of a letter writer as Paul. In fact, no one in the New Testament wrote as Paul did. It was Paul who really brought the "letter form" as a force to be used in the church. Peter writes his letters later in his ministry, after Peter had multiple interactions with Paul. Was Peter inspired to use this tool for the church after seeing the way God had mightily used it with Paul? We do not know. But, we have Peter's two letters, and in the second letter, Peter acknowledges reading some of Paul's letters (2 Peter 3:15-16).

Some scholars *question* whether Peter actually wrote the letter. The reasons given vary, but basically fall into several areas: the Greek is too good to come from the pen of a Jewish, Galilean fisherman; the Greek version of the Old Testament (the "Septuagint") is used instead of the Hebrew; the letter is too dependent on Paul's teachings and theology; there is no specific reference to unique knowledge of events in Jesus' life; and, the persecutions referenced did not happen until after Peter's death.

I find these arguments less than compelling! There are stronger arguments in favor of Peter's authorship that deserve discussion. But first, let's look a bit closer at those offered against Petrine authorship. Is the Greek too good for a Galilean fisherman? If we remember that Peter most likely used a secretary to take down the letter, then the quality of the Greek is not surprising. Furthermore, Peter is 30 years after his fisherman days. He has traveled and preached in a Greek speaking world using Greek, as his message was polished and delivered in countless forums. We should expect his Greek to be good as he communicates the same message in written words. We should also remember that even though Peter was a fisherman in his early days, it is highly likely that he used Greek in every day speech as well as Aramaic. As for using the Septuagint, we saw in Paul an ability to use the Septuagint or the Hebrew Old Testament depending upon the audience or the passage. We should not be surprised as Peter is writing to those outside Jerusalem that he would use the "version" of the Bible with which they are most familiar. In fact, though I typically use the N.I.V. version myself, there are times where I teach in forums where another version of the Bible is used, and I will use the version of my audience rather than my usual choice.

Is the letter too dependent upon Paul's doctrines and theology? This argument always makes me chuckle. Consider: Peter and Paul had considerable interaction. Peter and Paul were martyred in the same city (Rome) around the same time. Peter read and knew Paul's writings. Peter and Paul discussed theology and doctrine (Gal. 2). Ultimately, the same God and Holy Spirit produced the theology of Paul, Peter, and the church.

Is the lack of specific references to Jesus' life events conclusive proof Peter didn't write the book? Not in my book! Think about it. If you were writing a fake book claiming that Peter wrote it, wouldn't you feel compelled to put in some life events so people would continue in the false belief Peter actually wrote it? Only Peter would not feel compelled to put in such events. That being said, we find language and expressions that echo the gospels and the words of Christ. These are set forward by a number of scholars in a number of articles and books.<sup>2</sup>

As to the suffering and persecutions, reading Acts and Paul's letters show that the persecutions of the churches came in waves that could make a book as 1 Peter relevant at any time period, not just after Peter's death. In fact, the sufferings Nero levied against the church after the burning of Rome could precipitate such writings by Peter. Even though the book was not written to Roman Christians, that does not mean that enemies of the church did not use Nero's condemnation of Christians as a pretext for persecutions in other parts of the Empire.

The letter itself claims Peter as author, church history is clear in its attribution of this letter to Peter, and the letter itself is consistent with Peter's teachings we have in Acts. In Acts 4:10-11, Peter references Jesus as the stone the builders rejected quoting Psalm 118:22. Peter does the same thing in 1 Peter 2:7-8. Similarly, in Acts 5:30, Peter speaks of Christ's death on a "tree" (literally "wood" in the Greek). Peter uses the same word in 1 Peter 2:24, while most other writers speak of Jesus' death as on a cross rather than a "tree" or "wood."

As we look at the letter, we will see that Peter most likely wrote it from Rome. We believe it was likely written in the 60's, the decade of Peter's death. The major theme in the letter is suffering (mentioned 16 times). The letter has the uniqueness of a continuous chain of imperatives. Over and over in the letter, the command form of Greek is used to deliver the

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<sup>2</sup> See E.G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter*, p. 28; Robert H. Gundry, "Verba Christi' in 1 Peter" NTS 13:336-350.

message (“Be self-controlled” 1:13; “be holy” 1:15; etc.). Some scholars consider this an informal writing style much more akin to a sermon (Another indication to me of Peter’s authorship!). We will use this outline in looking at the letter:<sup>3</sup>

1. Introduction (1:1-2)
2. The character of salvation: Preservation (1:3-12)
3. The claims of salvation: Holiness (1:13-2:10)
4. The conduct of the saved (2:11-3:12)
5. The confidence of the saved (3:13-4:11)
6. The counsel for the saved (applied to suffering) (4:12-5:11)
7. Concluding salutations (5:12-14).

## II. THE TEXT

### A. *Introduction (1:1-2)*

Peter starts his letter in typical form for the first century. Peter identifies himself as “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ” and addresses the letter to “God’s elect.” But, Peter does not stop there. Peter explains that the recipients are not only God’s elect, but also “strangers in the world, scattered throughout 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, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance.”

Peter echoes here a number of key Biblical doctrines. Here we clearly see the doctrine that God has chosen his elect through foreknowledge for a purpose of obedience. The church was never elected by God to continue in the destructive death spiral of sin and depravity. God has elected us for purity. The blood of Jesus cleanses us eternally. And, the Holy Spirit works in our lives daily bringing us into greater holiness and sanctification.

Another doctrine set out in these introductory verses centers on the trinity. Peter recognizes the work of God the Father (electing the church on his foreknowledge), God the Spirit (working sanctification in the church), and God the Son (whom we obey and through whose blood we are cleansed).

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<sup>3</sup> Borrowed loosely from Merrill Tenney’s *Introduction to the New Testament*.

*B. The character of salvation: Preservation (1:3-12)*

Peter moves past the introduction and starts his letter with a bang. Peter begins praising God, the “Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” This is the recognition Peter first vocalized during the days of Jesus’ ministry. In Matthew 16, we read where Jesus asks his apostles, “Who do you say I am?” Peter answered then, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Mt. 16:15-16). This is the rock hard fact that God built his church upon (Mt. 16:17-18).

Peter says in God’s great mercy we have a “new birth” (echoing Jesus’ teaching to Nicodemus in John 3) “into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.” Peter witnessed firsthand the resurrected Jesus. Peter preached the resurrected Jesus from Pentecost through the day of Peter’s death. This same Peter earlier pulled Jesus aside (again in Matthew 16 we read the account) and rebuked Jesus for teaching this very thing. Jesus told Peter and the apostles “he [Jesus] must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.” And, “Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ‘Never, Lord!’ he said. ‘This shall never happen to you!’” (Mt 16:21-22). Peter must have replayed this scene in his mind countless times as he fathomed the depths and riches of God’s love and plan.

Peter saw the inheritance we have in Christ as one that would not perish, spoil, or fade. It had not done so for Peter. From the 30 or so years since the ascension of Christ, the inheritance grew stronger day by day. It was not fading. Peter’s faith in this fact was a shield that protected him and protects the church during times of suffering and turmoil. Knowing what we have in Jesus sustains us in times of difficulty and grief. We grow through the problems. More than gold is purified by fire, we are purified by the struggles we go through as we see Christ sustaining us.

Peter speaks of us as loving and believing in Jesus even though we have not had the honor or blessing of actually seeing Jesus in person in the flesh. No doubt Jesus’ words to his disciples when Thomas was given proof of the resurrection echoed in Peter’s mind: “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (Jn 20:29). Peter knows that in our believing, we have the joy that comes from our salvation in Jesus.

Peter takes a moment as he references this salvation to remind his readers that the salvation in Christ was prophesied throughout the Old Testament. The prophets “searched intently and with the greatest care” as they tried to understand exactly when and how the Messiah would come in redemption. The prophets served not themselves in these endeavors, but us. The grace and answer that came incarnate in Jesus and the salvation that came by his death were prophesied for our benefit to teach us and point us to Jesus as Messiah.

C. *The claims of salvation: Holiness (1:13-2:10)*

Because of this salvation in Jesus prophesied long ago, Peter calls us to action. He calls us to holiness. We are to prepare our “minds for action.” How? With self-control and by setting our confidence on what we have when Jesus returns and takes us into eternity. We are enlightened about what is to come, so we should not live as though we were ignorant. Knowing our eternity in Christ calls us into the same holiness as Jesus. Living according to evil desires is contrary to what we know to be true.

We have not gotten our inheritance because God took some gold and bought us back from the curse of sin. God took the very life and blood of Christ, “a lamb without blemish or defect” as the debt of sin (1 Pet. 1:18-19). This was never an afterthought by God. God chose Christ as our payment for sin before the very beginning of the world. Through Jesus alone we have our redemption. When we hear the message of this deliverance and respond to it, we find in our lives an obedience that purifies us. We grow in our love for each other, sincerely and from the heart. It is a different life we lead. We are reborn into a life of love that will last for eternity itself. This is confirmed by the very word of God that also lasts for eternity (1:22-25).

Knowing this, Peter challenges the church to rid itself of malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander. Being born again, we should be craving spiritual milk. We have tasted the goodness of God, and we should grow up strong nourished by this tremendous salvation (2:1-3).

We find this as we are built into a holy and spiritual house upon the foundation of Christ. Jesus is a stone rejected by the builders that has formed the entire basis and foundation for our existence. We are

not the ones stumbling over Jesus the Rock; we are those who are built upon him. We are chosen for God's purposes. As God's priests, as a holy nation, we sing out the praises of our God in the midst of a dark world where we used to live. We live in darkness no more but in the praise of his wonderful light.

Our enlightenment, our rebirth, our foundation, and our life in Christ – these things make us different. We are set out for a life that endures suffering with the calm confidence of our deliverer and our future. In love and care, we minister to each other and the world, confident in our Savior.

### **III. POINTS FOR HOME**

1. God is at work
2. To save and to purify.
3. Let's live our faith.
4. Let's grow strong in the Lord.