

FIRST PETER

Lesson 1

Introduction to First Peter

1 Peter 1:1

The Epistle of First Peter is simple to understand and very practical in content. Its simplicity does not rob it of its deep spiritual truths, nor does its practicality slight doctrinal substance. This book teaches doctrine but intimately relates doctrine to life. Theory precedes practice and doctrine precedes application. Practically minded Christians should not disparage doctrine or theory, for what we believe as Christians affects how we live. Theory is indispensable. Yet we would have to say that in emphasis First Peter is more practical than theoretical.

As one reads through this powerful but practical letter, he cannot help but be impressed with the commands on living out the Christian life: gird up your minds for action (1:13); keep sober in spirit (1:13); fix your hope on grace (1:13); do not be conformed to former lusts (1:14); be holy (1:15); conduct yourselves in fear (1:17); fervently love one another from the heart (1:22); long for the pure milk of the Word (2:2); submit yourselves to every human institution (2:13); honor all men (2:17); love the brotherhood (2:17); fear God (1:17); honor the king (2:17); servants, be submissive to your masters (2:18); wives, be submissive to your own husbands (3:1); husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way (3:7); let all be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit (3:8); do not fear (3:14); do not be troubled (3:14); sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts (3:15); arm yourselves (4:1); be of sound judgment (4:7); be sober (4:7); do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal (4:12); keep on rejoicing (4:13); by no means let any of you suffer as a murderer or thief, or evil-doer, or a troublesome meddler (4:17); let him not feel ashamed (4:16); let him glorify God (4:16); let those entrust their souls to a faithful creator (4:19); shepherd the flock (5:2); be subject to your elders (5:5); clothe yourself with humility (5:5); be of sober spirit (5:8); be on the alert (5:8); resist him—the devil (5:9).

THE THEME

The theme of First Peter is “suffering which brings glory to God.” The word “suffering” or its cognates appears 16 times, and the word “glory” and its cognates, appears 16 times. These Christians were suffering for the cause of Christ, and they had to learn that perseverance in suffering brings glory to God.

It is also interesting to note that the words “revelation,” “faith,” and “precious” occur five times each. The word “hope” occurs four times. Peter has often been called “The Apostle of Hope.”

THE AUTHOR

The author is Peter. All the internal and external evidence indicates that Peter was the author. There is no book of the Old Testament or New Testament, which has more

credibility for its author than does First Peter. The letter was universally recognized as a work of the Apostle Peter in the early church.

Peter's Hebrew name was Simon. After his conversion, Christ named him Cephas (Aramaic) which is translated Peter in the Greek. The name "Peter" means "a detached but large fragment of rock." After the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, Peter became the Rock-man.

When we think of Peter, we usually characterize him as impulsive, vacillating, selfish, hasty in action and quick to recoil. He denied his Lord and wept over it in repentance. He drew his knife and cut off a man's ear to protect his Lord. He had to be rebuked by the Apostle Paul for legalism. However, Peter was a great leader and had a strong loyalty to Christ his Lord. When he wrote this epistle he was an older man, perhaps in his late seventies or early eighties, and he was expecting to die. "*knowing that the laying aside of my earthly dwelling is imminent, as also our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me*" (2 Pet. 1:14). We see in First Peter that he had a changed manner. This letter is filled with tenderness and compassion for Christians who were suffering greatly.

"And after you have suffered for a little, the God of all grace who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you" (1 Pet. 5:10).

The tenderness and gentleness of Peter can be seen in the way he used the word "precious." The "proof of your faith being much more precious than gold" (1:7); "the precious blood of the lamb" (1:19); (Christ) "precious corner stone" (2:6); "the precious value is in you who believe" (2:7).

Peter had suffered much as a Christian and he was able to enter into the sufferings of other Christians. He knew he would die a martyr's death and tradition tells us he was crucified head downward during the persecution under Nero sometime around 68 AD.

We can only comfort others in suffering when we ourselves have suffered.

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort; who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God" (2 Cor. 1:3-4).

The epistle is written in very good Koine Greek, and some have argued that Peter, an uneducated fisherman, could not have written it. There is evidence that Silvanus was Peter's amanuensis (recording secretary) and he put Peter's concepts into good Greek, even correcting his diction. "Through Silvanus, our faithful brother (for so I regard him), I have written to you briefly" (1 Pet. 5:12).

THE ADDRESSEES

The Apostle Peter was obviously writing to Christians because they are said to be chosen by God (1:2). They lived in the five Roman provinces of Asia Minor—Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.

Who were these Christians? They are said to be "aliens, scattered throughout" the five provinces. The word "scattered" is literally *diaspras*, which means the dispersed. This

was a Jewish technical term which referred to Jews who for whatever reasons lived outside of Palestine. This gives us a hint that Peter was writing to Hebrew Christians, but he must have also been referring to Gentiles who were converted to Christ because he says things that probably were not true of Jews, only Gentiles. For instance, he tells the addressees that they were not to “be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance” (1:14). This group was also said not to be once the people of God (2:10), and this could not be a Jew but a Gentile, for Jews thought of themselves as the people of God. These addressees were also guilty of pagan orgies and idolatry before their conversion to Christ (4:3). First Peter, therefore, was probably an encyclical letter written to both Jews and Gentiles who were then in Christ. Why then would the Gentiles be called “the dispersed” which is obviously used of Israelites in other places (John 7:35; James 1:1)? Gentiles who trusted in Christ were grafted into God’s promises to Israel. Therefore, the Gentiles were spiritual Israel even though they did not have one drop of Abraham’s blood in their veins. “*And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God*” (Gal. 6:16).

The word *diaspora* comes from the noun *diaspeiro*. *Dia* means “through” and *speiro* means “to sow” or “to scatter seed.” These Christians, Jews and Gentiles, were sown by God in these provinces to disseminate the gospel story. By application we can conclude that God has providentially put each Christian where he is, to tell his town, city, province or country about Jesus Christ and His way of salvation.

These Christians are also called “aliens.” In First Peter 2:11, Peter again refers to them as “aliens and strangers.” The Greek word here is *parepidemois*, which is made up of three words: *para*, which means “alongside of,” *epi*, which means “upon,” and *demos*, which refers to people of a heathen city. These Christians were aliens who had settled down alongside the unsaved. God places Christians where He wants them that they might be witnesses by life and lips. When placed alongside the unsaved world, we as Christians are going to suffer and this suffering makes us long for our heavenly home.

“All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own” (Heb. 11:13, 14).

THE TIME OF WRITING

Most scholars place the date of the writing of First Peter around 65 AD. This epistle shows that the author had acquaintance not only with the earlier epistles, such as James, 1 Thessalonians and Romans, but also with Colossians, Ephesians and Philippians (Col. 3:22 cf. 1 Pet. 2:18; Eph. 1:1-3 cf. 1 Pet. 1:1-3; Eph. 5:22-24 cf. 1 Pet. 3:1-6; Phil. 4:19-20 cf. 1 Pet 5:10-11). Peter acknowledged that he had knowledge of Paul’s writings and they were hard to understand.

“and regard the patience of our Lord to be salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction” (2 Pet. 3:15-16).

Therefore, First Peter was written after the Prison Epistles were written.

Also most scholars feel the persecution these Christians were undergoing took place under Nero, who lived and reigned around 65 AD.

THE PLACE OF WRITING

Peter wrote this letter while he was in Babylon (5:13). Some scholars have thought this Babylon was a city in Egypt. Others think it a figurative or symbolic name for Rome, but Rome was not called Babylon at this early date. This is traditionally the Roman Catholic view, so as to prove that Peter was the first pope.

It is probably best to take this Babylon as the famous wicked city of Babylon on the Euphrates which was still in existence in 65 AD. In fact, Babylon did not cease to exist as a city until the second century AD. Furthermore, we know at this time that a large colony of Jews lived in or around ancient Babylon. These Jews had undergone a severe persecution under Claudius, and at the time of this writing, bloody Nero was on the throne. It is reasonable, therefore, to assume that some of these Jews became Christians and mixed with the saved Gentiles to form a local church in Babylon.

THE PURPOSE FOR WRITING

The first purpose for writing the Christians in Asia Minor was to encourage them as they were passing through persecution for Christ's sake. They were suffering and they needed encouragement, comfort and hope. "I have written to you briefly, exhorting and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it" (1 Pet. 5:12). The word "exhorting" here literally means, "to cheer up," "encourage" or "comfort." First Peter then is a book designed to cheer up, encourage and comfort Christians who are hurting because of suffering.

The second purpose for writing First Peter was to instruct Christians as to how they should live while passing through suffering. They should "greatly rejoice."

"In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials" (1 Pet. 1:6).

They should not fear or be intimidated or troubled but should set apart Christ in their hearts and be able to defend their faith to those who questioned it.

"But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. And do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled, but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to every one who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence" (1 Pet. 3:14, 15).

They should keep on rejoicing.

"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but

to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation” (1 Pet. 4:12, 13).

And they are to glorify God in suffering. *“but if anyone suffers as a Christian let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God” (1 Pet. 4:16).*

THE CHARACTER OF THE PERSECUTION

These persecutions were “various trials” because of a sound Christian testimony (1:6) and those perpetrating them could only be silenced by good works on the part of Christians. *“For such is the will of God that by doing right you might silence the ignorance of foolish men” (1 Pet. 2:15).* In other words, they were to “kill their persecutors with kindness.”

These persecutions came because the Christians lived holy lives, separating themselves from the licentiousness and amusements of the unsaved pagans.

“For the time already past is sufficient for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousels, drinking parties and abominable idolatries. And in all this, they are surprised that you do not run with them into the same excess of dissipation, and they malign you” (1 Pet. 4:3-4).

This persecution was not in the form of martyrdoms, imprisonments, confiscations or demands of emperor worship, but they were persecutions in the nature of slander, malicious gossip and calumnious attacks. Christians were called “evil doers” (2:12); they were “insulted” (3:9); they were “slandered” (3:16); they were “maligned” (4:4); and “reviled for the name of Christ” (4:14).

These persecutions probably included pressure from the government of Rome. These Christians stood on convictions and this naturally would have rubbed Rome the wrong way. Perhaps they accused Christians of being disloyal to the state.

“Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human institution whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right” (1 Pet. 2:13-14).

This book was written some 32 years after Christianity had its beginnings on the Day of Pentecost. Originally Christianity was viewed by Rome as a part of Judaism which had the status of *religio licita* (a legal religion recognized by the state). However, by 65 AD, Christianity was viewed by Rome as an illegal cult, a breakaway from Judaism. By this time, Christians were coming into open conflict with Rome.

These persecutions came because Christians were living righteous lives, and their lives were convicting to the unsaved. “But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed” (1 Pet. 3:14).

These persecutions came because these Christians were dedicated to Christ. “But if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God” (1 Pet. 4:16). It is clearly stated in the Bible that all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted (2 Tim. 3:12).

These persecutions may have been Satanically directed so as to get Christians discouraged enough to deny the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

“Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him., firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world” (1 Pet. 5:8-9).

A Christian might say, “Well, I can see how they suffered in the first century but they don’t suffer the way I do today. Look at the corruption in government. crime is taking over. There is the threat of nuclear war.” Actually, times were just as bad in 65 AD. for Christians as they are today in the modern world. Tacitus, the Roman historian, said of his day:

In entering upon this period of history, rich in disaster, gloomy with wars, rent with seditions, savage in its very hours of peace. Four emperors perished by the sword; there were three civil wars, many wars, with foreigners, some were fought at the same time in Rome. Rome wasted in fires. Its oldest temples burned. Its own capital set in flame by Roman hands. There was defilement of sacred rites. Adultery in high places. The sea crowded with exiles; island rocks were drenched with blood by murder. Yet, while there was frenzy in Rome (nobility of wealth, the refusal of office) everything was a crime and virtue was the surest way to ruin.

EMPHASIS FOR THE VICTORY WHILE SUFFERING

The election and calling of God (1:2,14, 15; 2:9, 20-21; 3:8- 9; 5:10, 13), the truth that every Christian has been sovereignly chosen and called to salvation by God’s grace gives great confidence and assurance in the midst of suffering.

The soon coming of Jesus Christ (1:3; 6, 13, 21; 2:12; 3:15; 4:7, 13; 5:1, 4), a realization that Christ will return to receive His church makes the suffering Christian take note of his accountability to Christ and long for His return.

CONCLUSION

The Bible tells us that the Christian only has to suffer in this life but the next life is heavenly bliss for him. However, it also tells us that the non-Christian will suffer in this life and also in the next life with eternal anguish. Why will a person suffer the pangs of eternal damnation? Only because he refuses to believe that Jesus is his Lord who died for him.

Where are you? Are you saved? Are you prepared to die? Are you ready to suffer for all eternity? You can be saved. All you have to do is believe that Jesus Christ died for your sins and bow to him as your Lord, giving Him the right to rule in your life. When you to this, heaven’s eternal bliss, where there is no more sin or suffering, will be yours.