

# 1 & 2 PETER



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**F**irst and Second Peter are usually assigned to the hinterlands of biblical exposition, viewed by many along the lines of “strange little stepbrothers” to the more well known letters of Paul (and those ascribed to him), the Gospels, and Acts. This is unfortunate in that these two short letters are replete with theological gold.

In this section introductory matters will be discussed and only then will we turn to Peter’s message. First, “Peter,” the putative author of these two books, the apostle, was, according to most New Testament scholars, not their author after all. There are significant reasons to arrive at this conclusion and they have all been hashed out endlessly over the past 150 years or so. It must simply suffice to say here, for our purposes, that the style, language, and content of these letters point to a period of time well after that of the apostles. Indeed, 1 Peter probably stems from around the end of the first century and 2 Peter even

later, to around 150 C.E. Persons interested in investigating the how and why of these conclusions are encouraged to read Raymond Brown's stunningly brilliant *An Introduction to the New Testament*, published by Doubleday and Co. in 1997.

In spite of the fact that Peter the apostle, the man who journeyed with Jesus along the dusty roads of Galilee, is not the author of these materials, throughout this short exposition the author will still be referred to by that name simply because it is easier to say "Peter" than it is to refer constantly to "the author," or "the writer of this text," or similar denotations.

But if Peter wasn't the author, who was? Most exegetes would answer that question by saying "an unknown, anonymous Christian who spoke a message to his contemporaries that, were Peter present, he himself would deliver." But, some may object, isn't that deceptive? According to the practices and standards of first century Greco-Roman-

Jewish society, the answer is “not at all; in fact, speaking or writing in the name of a famous teacher or preacher or statesman was quite common.”

Students were taught the art of imitation during their school years. If they mastered their teacher’s style, they could, and would, compose entire works in that figure’s name and no one would have viewed such a text as either deceptive or inappropriate. It was simply expected. Hence, when early Christians, at the middle of the first century and at the end, read materials written in the name of Paul or Peter or John, they simply accepted them based on their content, not on their “authorship.”

Or to put it another way; authorship was not as important in early Christianity as ideas were. Thus, preachers and teachers would imitate the earliest apostles and speak “in their voice” to their contemporaries. Later, of course, this would cause massive problems, since a letter purporting to be from Paul might be from one of his opponents.

But in the earliest days of the new community, it was quite common.

### *Peter's Message*

Though at first glance it might appear as though 1 and 2 Peter were completely dissimilar in their message and purpose, the contrary is actually the case. First Peter has been called by many a “baptismal liturgy” and may well have served as a “primer” for believers who were about to, or had just been, baptized. Second Peter, on the other hand, concerns itself primarily with the pressing question of the coming of Christ in glory, the second coming, and its delay. Hence, as 1 Peter looks at the Christian life from its beginning point, 2 Peter looks at the Christian life in its conclusion, or end point (in this life, at any rate). Taken together, then, these two books serve as brackets which “surround” the life of the Christian. How should one begin the Christian life, live it, and end it? Those

considerably significant subjects are addressed in these brief texts!

Let me, then, illustrate these points from the books themselves. Peter launches, in the first epistle, straight into praise of God for the hope he has given believers (1:3), and then he gets to the core of the matter when he observes:

<sup>13</sup> Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. <sup>14</sup> As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, <sup>15</sup> but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, <sup>16</sup> since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." <sup>17</sup> And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, <sup>18</sup> knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver

or gold, <sup>19</sup> but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. (1 Peter 1:13-19 ESV)

The call to holiness stems from Leviticus, specifically from that portion of the book named by most scholars the “Holiness Code.” That code’s purpose is to encourage both priests and all the congregation of the people of Israel to embrace ceremonial and ethical purity. Peter’s implication by using it, then, is to urge Christians to the same high level of purity expected of an ideal Israel arrayed around God’s holy presence.

Everything in the letter is aimed at fleshing out the call to faithful hope, or hopeful faith. Peter outlines the proper behavior of believers in several steps. First, they are to make up their minds to act in accordance with the hope they have been given. Second, they are to live lives of holiness (as the quotation above from the Holiness Code in Leviticus implies). Third, they are to behave with reverence. Fourth, they are, most importantly, to recognize the high

cost of their salvation. It was not purchased with trivialities and should not be lived out trivially. This call to fourfold observance fits perfectly with a baptismal liturgy and is the primary reason scholars assert that the purpose of Peter was to encourage the newly baptized to remain faithful to the (sometimes) bitter end.

Peter continues the theme when he writes:

<sup>1</sup> So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. <sup>2</sup> Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation— <sup>3</sup> if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. (1 Peter 2:1-3 ESV)

Peter urges them to take off their old lives and set them aside, just as at the end of a long day they set aside their work clothes and replace them with comfortable garments for leisure. And grow each day in your faith so that you can become mature Christians, he urges.



But lest we assume that Peter has nothing “controversial” to say to modern believers, we need simply read what he sets down in chapter 3:

<sup>1</sup> Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, <sup>2</sup> when they see your respectful and pure conduct. <sup>3</sup> Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear— <sup>4</sup> but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious. <sup>5</sup> For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their own husbands, <sup>6</sup> as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. And you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening. (1 Peter 3:1-6 ESV)

Of course the context of this passage is a first-century patriarchal

society, so it would not have seemed to them unusual or controversial at all. It is only so to us because our views of women and men and their inter-relationships is decidedly different. Hence, it is neither proper nor helpful to 1) change what Peter writes to adapt it to our society, nor 2) to pretend that he says something else so as to make him acceptable. We must let Peter be Peter and learn from him the underlying theological truth that he affirms, which is that women are extraordinarily influential, or can be, as instruments of the gospel. They were not then, nor are they now, second class theological citizens. Indeed, Peter, as had Paul before him, broke down the social barriers common in the world of Judaism. Paul's "there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, bond nor free..." (Gal 3:28) is echoed here as well and traces of the openness toward the spiritual equality of women found in early Christianity—though stifled through the centuries—can still be seen.

With these truths (and others) in mind, Peter begins to draw his baptismal letter of encouragement to a close with a series of exhortations, such as:

<sup>7</sup> The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. <sup>8</sup> Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. <sup>9</sup> Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. <sup>10</sup> As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: <sup>11</sup> whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. <sup>12</sup> Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. <sup>13</sup> But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is

revealed. <sup>14</sup> If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. <sup>15</sup> But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. <sup>16</sup> Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. (1 Peter 4:7-16 ESV)

These exhortations are aimed at helping the letter's readers understand that the very nature of faith is sometimes suffering and that if, and when, such a fate befalls them, they are to remain faithful nonetheless and not turn away from the power of salvation. Peter may well have had the recent persecution of Christians by Nero in mind when he penned the last sentence quoted above. Nero's persecution wouldn't be the last.

The Second Letter of Peter picks up this theme and carries it forward, to the end of days, which its author expected shortly. Or to say it perhaps a bit

differently, Second Peter encourages proper behavior in the “interim period” between the day of baptism and the day of resurrection.

Peter begins the second letter with this exhortation, brimming to overflowing with an eye to the last day:

<sup>5</sup> For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge,  
<sup>6</sup> and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, <sup>7</sup> and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. <sup>8</sup> For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup> For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. <sup>10</sup> Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. <sup>11</sup> For in this way there will

be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. (2 Peter 1:5-11 ESV)

To put it more bluntly, Peter insists, you brothers ought to live every moment ready to enter the eternal kingdom. From baptism we look ever forward to the consummation. Our longing for the presence of God and the state of final blessedness constantly pulls against our equally powerful longing to remain in the here and now with those whom we love. Nonetheless, none should be unaware of that ultimate destiny and somehow or other we are obliged to let that concern outweigh all others.

Once Peter has their attention looking forward he also then urges them to glance sideways and avoid the false teachers that were then filling the world and attempting to deceive even the chosen priesthood (2 Peter 2). And finally, he urges them, again, to look forward, to the end of days, soon to come, when

they would receive the fullness of their redemption (2 Peter 3). Notice how pointedly he puts it:

<sup>4</sup> They will say, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation." <sup>5</sup> For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, <sup>6</sup> and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. <sup>7</sup> But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly. <sup>8</sup> But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. <sup>9</sup> The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. <sup>10</sup> But the day of the Lord

will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.<sup>11</sup> Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness,<sup>12</sup> waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! (2 Peter 3:4-12 ESV)

Second Peter, then, looks to the past, the present, and the future, not in a linear fashion, but in concentric circles, as it were, so that the reader (and more importantly, the believer) might see the whole picture of God's salvific action.

### ***Peter and the Church***

First and Second Peter do not figure prominently in the Revised Common Lectionary. In all, only the following



brief passages are incorporated: 1 Peter 1:3-9; 1:17-23, 2:1-10; 2:19-25; 3:8-22; 4:1-8; 4:12-5:11; 2 Peter 1:13-21; 3:8-15. This of course means that the bulk of these letters are ignored and probably not read by many even over the course of the 3 year lectionary cycle. Consequently, much of value is overlooked and even lost. Still, they fare better than 2 and 3 John and Jude, which are not represented at all.

But perhaps another way to come to appreciate the virtual indifference 1 and 2 Peter are victims of is to consider the last time that you heard a sermon from either of these books, or attended a Bible study devoted to their contents. Yet, I would suggest, these books are worth much consideration and it is hoped that this short introduction will whet reader's appetites in that direction.



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