

New Testament Survey for Beginners: Part 21 – 1 Peter

Anyone who knows anything of Peter remembers how quick he was to speak, though he frequently lacked an adequate understanding of the circumstances about which he spoke – how unreservedly bold he was to act, only to learn that stopping to think about it first might have been a better course to take – and how confident he continued to be in spite of all these repeated lapses until at last, humbled in the dust and emptied of his bravado, he found it difficult even to confess his love for the Lord. Peter loved (agape) Jesus dearly, but became too grieved for a time to acknowledge it openly. In John 21, when on that same shoreline Peter was called of Jesus for a second time, this disciple was so ashamed of himself that, having denied Him three times, now all he could say for another three times is that he had affection (phileo) for Him.

Peter was indeed a man marred by outstanding flaws and personal failings, and of course that is precisely the reason why the rest of us can identify so easily with him. In spite of his shortcomings, however, he repented of his sins and was forgiven. We see in him the sanctifying grace of God which made him one of the most powerful and effective leaders in the early Church. Reference is often made to his lack of education, but there was universal education in Israel at that time, something akin to our secondary education, and the two letters in the New Testament which bear his name express in a most articulate manner a very profound comprehension of biblical revelation.

The First Epistle of Peter was written to converted Jews and Gentiles throughout several provinces of Asia Minor, what is today called Turkey. These believers suffered considerably for their faith in Christ. It was not so much the persecution from government sources they were subjected to, however, as the slander and abuse of their neighbours, the enmity and ostracism of fanatical Jews and hostile pagans. Peter wanted to inspire the courage of his readers and to give them hope. These churches were also plagued with internal problems, including worldliness and the hardship of greedy, autocratic elders. He addressed these matters as well. The letter is said to have come from Babylon, though that may be a pseudonym for Rome (see Revelation 17), a place where the apostle is known to have spent a good measure of his time and energy.

The first chapter begins with a strong affirmation of the Trinity (vv.1,2), and proceeds with praises to God for the hope He has given His people through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and for the inheritance it seals to them forever (vv.3-5). This hope may be mixed with hardships along the way, yet the purpose of these trials is that those who call upon the Lord might have a faith which proves genuine and is found at last to glory in Christ (vv.6-9). God's saving grace with its new covenant benefits had been predicted by the prophets of old, is the experience of all who trust in Christ, and is something which even angels desire to look into (vv.10-12).

Believer, we live in a time today of cancel culture, of critical race theory and transgenderism. Those who parade these ideologies do not necessarily believe in them, no, but they are the very wealthy who see themselves as the elite, who have their own agenda with money and influence to support it, who want to stir up division, to introduce socialism and destroy the middle class, and they see that as a means of gaining more power and profit for themselves. Their real enemy, as they see it, is the Church because Christianity stands for faith in God, the ten commandments, caring for one another, the stability of the family, individual responsibility, a strong work-ethic and free enterprise – all the things that the self-appointed elite wish to stamp out. Are we prepared to endure their persecution? Do we know what it is that we have and cannot lose in Christ? Do we grasp our hope as an anchor of the soul and call upon the Lord for the comfort and strength we need to resist temptation in the days ahead? If so, then let us, too, heed Peter's call to holiness (vv.13-21) and to brotherly love (vv.22-25).

The second chapter continues with a call to all who are born again to grow up and seek greater maturity in Christ. Christ is our foundation, rejected by the world but precious to all who believe, so let us proclaim His praises as we have been set apart to do (vv.1-10). Let us see ourselves as sojourners on pilgrimage in a foreign land, as bondservants of God who submit to local authorities for the Lord's sake (vv.11-17). To those who are servants, employees, or people subject to the will of others for whatever reason, let them be submissive with due respect – accepting even harsh treatment, if needs be – knowing that such patience is commendable to God. Our example in this regard is no less than that of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself who committed Himself to Him who judges righteously (vv.18-25).

The same theme of submission is picked up in the third chapter, but this time it is about the submission of a wife to her own husband, pointing out how such behaviour can be fruitful in winning an unbelieving husband to Christ. What is particularly noteworthy here is that a woman is not only to look like a woman on the outside, dressing modestly and according to the local custom of her surrounding culture (see 1 Corinthians 9:19-22), but let her also appear before others as she should be on the inside, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit which is so precious in the sight of God. Likewise, let a husband treat his wife with understanding, acknowledging that they are heirs together of the grace of life – which is to say they are equal as heirs, but with different and complementary roles (vv.1-7).

The Lord has not called His people to an easy life, but to a faithful life, to a life that is innocent of all wrongdoing despite the hardships along the way (vv.8-22). A life so committed to Christ moves even unbelievers when they see it to ask about the hope that these Christians have, and what a powerful witness that is! The most controversial part of this last section of the chapter – and also a most encouraging part – is found in 3:19,20. It is about the Lord Jesus going and preaching “to the spirits in prison” in Noah’s day. There can be little doubt that this is about Jesus being the Preacher, though Noah was His instrument, to deliver the message that those dead in sin needed so desperately to hear. It is still true today that Christ Himself under the ministry of the Holy Spirit is the One preaching whenever the Word of God is faithfully proclaimed, drawing sinners to Himself as He does so, whether they be many or few who are saved.

The fourth chapter brings out how important it is for those who have been made alive in Christ that they no longer conduct themselves as they once did when they were dead in sin. The world may not understand that, but unbelievers, too, will one day have to give account of themselves to their Creator (vv.1-6). Life in this present time is coming to an end, so let all who wait upon the Lord be watchful in prayer, fervent in love and hospitable to one another, and let each exercise his gifts as a good steward of the grace of God and to His glory (vv.7-11). Do not think it strange, believer, or be ashamed of the fiery trials which may come upon you, but rejoice, rather, in that you are made a partaker of Christ’s sufferings. How much worse will it be for the wicked and unbelieving at the judgment which awaits them (vv.12-19)!

Dear Christian, do you get caught up with the things you see and think you understand? Are you depressed by the things you hear and fearful of those rumours of impending doom? It is important that we keep ourselves focused on Christ and the living hope to which we have been born again through His death and resurrection. The very idea that we are called to rejoice and glorify God in such a fallen world as this, and in these spiritually barren times especially, may seem entirely out of place to some, but it is precisely this – our pondering the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ – that will constrain us to rejoice, prepare us to suffer for His sake, and move us to commit ourselves to our faithful Creator.

In the fifth chapter, finally, the elders are addressed and instructed to shepherd the flock under their care. It is an awesome responsibility that they have, watching out for the spiritual wellbeing of others, serving them as overseers, as protectors and guides, not taking advantage of their own position or power as office-bearers to lord it over them (vv.1-4). This is much needed counsel to be heard and practised by teaching and ruling elders today as well. As it was with the Chief Shepherd Himself, let each elder see his role, not as one to be ministered unto but to minister, and to acknowledge that whatever sufficiency he has to be of benefit to others is from God.

Younger people are instructed to submit to the elders, similarly, and all are called to clothe themselves with humility (vv.5-11). This was a lesson that Peter, too, had to learn, the fact that God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble, and with that to cast all one's cares upon the Lord, knowing that He cares for all who do. Let all who call upon the Lord resist the devil, be steadfast in faith, and let them endure suffering with every assurance that by this means the Lord is strengthening them. To God be the glory!

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