

## Reflecting on the First Epistle of Peter

Pastor Sutter has recently finished verse-by-verse exposition of this Letter by Peter. Yet, it seems to me we should think about it some more, because Peter makes explicit in a tight, compact way what is too easily missed when we look at the text in bits and pieces spread out over months. I'm referring to Peter's statements in this Letter regarding what Christianity is all about. To miss what Peter says here could be hazardous to our spiritual health, indeed, to our relationship to God.

Since the days of D.L. Moody, and especially since the Billy Graham crusades, we in America have turned Christianity into a "decision religion." It looks like this: The Gospel is proclaimed. We make a decision to trust Christ for forgiveness of sins and eternal life. And that settles it! We may then live the rest of our lives assured that when we die we'll be in heaven and not in hell. The only real responsibility that we have – if we can even call it that – is to attend church on Sundays. That's the shape Christianity has taken in our nation. I suspect that Peter would weep at this. So should we.

In Acts 12:17 (approximately A.D. 43/44), Peter turned leadership of the early Jerusalem church over to James, and then he sneaked out of Jerusalem in order to save his life. But Peter continued to teach and minister to Jewish and Gentile believers in the region to the north of Israel in what is called Asia Minor – away from the reach of Herod. He apparently travelled widely, even to Rome. His 1 Peter letter was probably written just prior to the terrible persecution brought by Nero (A.D. 64), in part to prepare believers for what was coming. But Peter had another, more important purpose in mind, as we shall see.

Peter knew the Old Testament Scriptures, as indeed all Jews at the time did. But because he was uniquely gifted as an Apostle, Peter had special insight regarding the meaning of those Scriptures for the church. He thus was able to grasp that the message of the Old Testament was failure. God's beloved people, whom He had specially chosen, failed to live as they were instructed to, failed to honor God as they ought to have, and they failed to serve God as they were commanded to. And for that failure, God punished them. Horribly. Peter was aware that the Church had come into relationship with a dangerous God. Here's what Peter knew . . .

The episode in Leviticus 10, verses 1 to 5 is scary yet exceedingly important. We fail to grasp its significance because we easily fault Nadab and Abihu; we say they got what they deserved for disobeying instructions. But think about it! Those two were recipients of God's love and grace. They were under the blood of the Passover lamb. They were delivered from Egypt. They were invited into God's presence at Sinai, and specially again here at the Tabernacle. Yet, they were instantly incinerated because they failed to honor a holy God. What? God is gracious, yes; He sovereignly elected this people and in love granted them great privileges, but He is also dangerous *to His own people*. God was initiating a new project of cosmic significance to save His beloved human creatures, but the servants He uses to do that must have clean hands and a pure heart. Submission to the authority of God, expressed by obedience to His instruction, is not an option; *it is commanded!* God *demand*s that we honor Him.

In Jeremiah 32, verses 1 to 5 are dreadful. The prophet spoke terrifying words to Judah. Their God, Jehovah, was going to turn His people over to the cruel Babylonians. Judah's army was actually mightier than that of Nebuchadnezzar, but that was irrelevant. God was in control, and because of Judah's idolatries and wickednesses, because of their failures, God was giving His people over to their Gentile enemy. The nation would go into Exile, dispersed among the heathen nations. That lesson: Don't play games with God!

In Ezekiel 9, Israel's God did something hideous to His own people. He had them slain because of their idolatries. Only those who grieved over Judah's sins were spared the slaughter. No pity. No compassion. Elderly, women, children – all had to be put to death. God was filled with wrath at His own people! That lesson: Great privileges bring great responsibilities, which are neglected at one's peril.

In Malachi 2, God is totally disgusted with the people of Israel. They had failed to honor Him as He deserved. "I will send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings [Note this!]. Yes, I have already cursed them, because you have not set your heart to honor Me. . . you will be carried off . . . I have caused you to be despised and humiliated before all the people because you have not followed My ways." The lesson: God will eventually judge all people, but *He first judges His own*.

Peter also understood Scripture's Davidic narrative. David was a man after God's own heart. And God loved David. David sinned. But he repented, and God forgave him. David received grace. Nevertheless David suffered terrible consequences from that sin the rest of his life. Peter also was aware of Miriam's grumbling against Moses (Numbers 12). Miriam loved God, and God surely loved Miriam. Yet God punished her for grumbling by having to be cast out from the presence of God, and she was restored only because of Moses' intercession on her behalf.

But (and this is big!) Peter also had vivid recollection of what happened in Acts 5. Ananias and Sapphira were believers, recipients of God's grace. Yet, because of what most of us today would call a trivial sin, God instantly put them to death. How could Peter forget that? He surely grasped the significance of what happened that day. That incident had reprised all those dreadful warnings Peter would have been aware of in the O.T. Scriptures. I believe that that incident with Ananias and Sapphira is the necessary key to understanding Peter's First Epistle. In view of that fearful incident, Peter took pen in hand to write this Letter to the Church. It's a letter of warning.

**"strangers in the world"** (1:1). Peter opens with a bang. "Strangers!" He'll pursue this further in Chapter 2. Already, Peter is warning us to be wary of getting entangled with the world. To be holy necessarily means being separate and detached from the world's beliefs, values, priorities and loves. We're to live not on a higher plane, but on a *different* plane, one that conforms to or derives from the Word of God. The world lives according to the ideals, purposes and values of Satan and of fallen, sinful humanity. We live in the world, necessarily, but it's to be strange to us. We're to be like the internally displaced persons in many war-torn countries today, living in the land yet apart from it, or like missionaries working in a foreign land among totally different people in a foreign society.

**"chosen . . . for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood"** (1:2). Two things come together right here: forgiveness of sins, available because of the atonement Christ obtained for us at the cross, AND obedience to Christ's teachings and commands. They are inextricably linked together. Obedience isn't an option. It's part of being "saved." Peter isn't worried about straying into the sphere of "works salvation." He understands Scripture. A believer in God, one who loves, honors, fears, worships and trusts God, obeys Him. It's a non-negotiable component of being in Christ.

**"These [sufferings, trials] have come so that your faith . . . may be proved genuine"** (1:7). What's key here isn't the issue of persecution or other losses we may suffer, but *the testing*. We don't all necessarily experience grievous trials, but God expects us all to demonstrate ("proved") our faith. Trials are just one way of testing. A purpose of life, for everyone, is to be tested. How do we respond to God's testing? Does Peter imply here that it's possible for someone to have faith that is not genuine. I don't think so. His point is simply, God tests our faith so that it is shown to be genuine and results in praise to Christ. What is faith, by the way? It's trust/obedience. It's not mental assent or some cognitive or intellectual process. It's a trust that affects our entire person so that we love Christ totally and we want nothing more in life than to obey Him, to see Him honored and exalted. This is the faith that God wants our lives to demonstrate.

**"But just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy'"** (1:15). He writes, "Prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled," and then this, "Be holy." Peter means that we're to intentionally, purposefully seek to know how to live holy—and then do it. Peter here fully understands the meaning of salvation: we're to reflect the perfect character of God. We're saved to live godly lives, meaning we're just like God in our character, in our person.

**"Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in fear"** (1:17). This verse is key to Peter's message, it's why he wrote this letter. We've already discussed the word, "strangers." Let's consider now the rest of this critically important verse. Peter is writing to believers, yet he says that God judges us. If we suppose that because we're trusting in Christ for eternal life we're safe from judgment, we're mistaken. Paul warns repeatedly that our works for Christ will be evaluated at the *bema* judgment, and Peter here says the very same thing. We're saved to serve God in the way He has revealed we're to serve, not to live happily ever after. "Decision religion" is idolatrous religion. Privileges granted *always* have responsibilities attached. The "impartially" here means *every* believer is accountable for what they did with the privileges given them. The phrase, "live your lives" means we aren't to just do something for an hour once a week. Nor two hours. What Peter has in mind is our entire life is to be devoted to fulfilling God's revealed will. And the totally compelling part of this verse is, Peter writes, "in fear." He doesn't mean "reverently" as most commentators suggest. He means being scared. God is dangerous. We should be scared of Him, so much so that we dare not neglect His will. Yes, God is good, and He is loving. But He is also demanding. The writer of Hebrews reminds us, believers, that "God is a consuming fire." Peter surely has this in mind in writing this warning, that God holds us,

believers in Christ, recipients of His superlative grace, accountable for how we live. Most of us, tragically, fail to grasp how being a believer is to radically change our lives. It *must* change us.

**“grow up in your salvation”** (2:2). Here’s a truth that’s missed in most churches. We’re to grow in spiritual maturity, in godliness, all thru life. Evangelicals preach, “Trust Christ for the forgiveness of sins,” so much that believers in the pews wrongly assume that that’s it. That’s what salvation is, just trusting Christ. No! We’re justified by faith *so that* we then can live a life of obedience and pursuing holiness, for which God holds us accountable. We too easily miss this. Almost all of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is written to those whom God has called to faith *so that* they serve God and live righteously. Let’s say it this way: Almost all of Scripture is written for our sanctification. It’s our sanctification for which God holds us accountable. Yes, the Spirit empowers us, yet our sanctification depends on our effort, on our willingness and desire to be holy, without which the growth that God expects doesn’t occur.

**“declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light . . . live as servants of God”** (2:9, 16). We’re to be evangelizing the lost all around us and all around the world. That’s our calling. It’s the service God wants. Why? Because doing that glorifies God who rescues His beloved human creatures held captive by the evil forces of darkness. Much of this Epistle expounds on what kind of life we who have been saved out of darkness are to live. We don’t need to discuss that here, but my readers should reflect deeply on it in order to live out these instructions.

**“in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord”** (3:15). In the Bible, the “heart” isn’t the organ that pumps blood. It’s the seat of everything that makes us human, our minds, our affections, our will, our desires, our judgments, our reasoning, everything. Peter here is saying we’re to understand that Christ is God. That’s what “LORD” means. He’s the One who took Israel out of Egypt. He’s the One who gave them victory over the Canaanites. He’s the One who dwelt in the Holy of Holies. He’s also the One who threw Israel off the land into Exile. He’s the “consuming fire” who is to be feared. We’re to submit to Him in love. Peter continues this thought in Chapter 4, “we live our earthly life not for evil human desires but for the will of God” (4:2).

**“it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God”** (4:17). This verse is almost universally misunderstood, even by very capable commentators. It does NOT refer to persecution and suffering by believers as being a judgment, as is generally supposed. NO WAY!! The judgment Peter refers to here is a warning connected to verse 15. We, believers, are not to pursue ungodly lives, because if we do, we can expect God’s judgment. Think Nadab and Abihu. Think Miriam. Think David. Think Ananias and Sapphira. Count on it! If we, who have received Christ, who have had forgiveness of sins, who have the hope of resurrection to eternal life, live a life that’s not in the will of God, we can expect God’s judgment. This is another way of stating 1:17. God holds us accountable.

**“Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand”** (5:6). The essential character trait for a godly life is humility. We need it in order to submit to God, trusting that God’s wisdom regarding how to live is best. The proud person cannot and will not obey God’s Word; the proud person won’t even try to know what God’s will is, but if known, it is ignored or explained away. We also easily err in supposing that all Peter’s admonitions must be for the professionals of the church, or for church leaders; but this command compellingly indicates that what Peter is writing is for us all, for *every* believer.

**“I have written to you . . . that this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it”** (5:12). Peter now concludes. This verse is not merely an epilogue to the Letter. It’s far more than that. It’s Peter’s Spirit-led testimony what true grace consists of. We often speak glibly of grace without realizing what true grace is. Peter has just told us: True grace is two-fold, it’s what gets us into salvation, AND it’s what instructs us how to live out this life in the way that pleases God, even if that might include suffering loss, for example due to persecution. With this verse, Peter summarizes the Letter he just wrote. The purpose of life, and by grace salvation, is to glorify God, and we do that willingly, lovingly, zealously – or not at all.

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Dear Reader, what Peter has written isn’t just to encourage believers who may be experiencing persecution such as in Iran, or North Korea, or countless other anti-theistic places. Rather, Peter has given us an overview of what it means to be a Christian. And it’s so radical, so alien to what we want, so alien to what we’re accustomed to, that we miss it. We’ve adopted instead what’s really a fantasy, namely, that if we’ve made a decision for Christ, that’s all we need to do; we’re on our way to glory. And we’re smugly content with this belief. We need to repent and make Peter’s Spirit-taught understanding of what it means to be a believer our life. Because otherwise . . . well, remember Nadab and Abihu, and Miriam, and David, and Ananias and Sapphira, and the Nation of Israel.