

THE LETTERS OF PETER

There is no doubt who wrote the next two letters. Peter was one of the three apostles closest to Jesus. Although he had his bad moments, he was always a fearless preacher. Once the church had been founded, and the apostle Paul began his journeys to teach the Gentiles, Peter saw his own work as being with the Jews. Paul writes of the agreement they reached:

“... he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles” (Galatians 2:8).

It is not surprising, then, to read that, like James, Peter sends his letters to *“the elect exiles of the dispersion”* (1 Peter 1:1). He particularly addresses his correspondence to the Jewish Christians living in the territory we now call Turkey.

Peter's First Letter

The Apostle bids his readers rejoice in the hope of salvation that God had given them through the sacrifice of his Son. But he warns they must expect their faith in God to be tested through trials, just as gold is melted down and purified in a furnace. Its true worth would become apparent only at the return of Christ.

He recalls the many Bible studies Jesus had given on the subject of the Old Testament prophecies about himself, predicting both his suffering and his resurrection to glory. Now the good news about Jesus had come to his readers, and they had been born again, not by human agency, but through the living word of God. As Christian babies, they needed spiritual milk, so that they would grow up unto salvation.

Peter's letter is full of quotations from the Old Testament, applying them to the believers. He calls them living stones, chipped and smoothed for assembly in God's Temple, of which Jesus, as the Psalmist wrote in Psalm 118:22, is the

cornerstone. They are God's people, to whom he has shown mercy, just as Hosea prophesied. They are pilgrims, like Abraham, aliens in society, but still obliged to keep the law, and honour the emperor. Slaves must put up with harsh treatment, even when they do nothing wrong, just as Jesus did before his captors. Wives should avoid expensive clothes and hair-dos, and adorn themselves with a humble spirit, submitting to their husbands. All of them should all be kind and forgiving, copying the example of Christ.

Finally, Peter anticipates the calamity that would fall on the Jewish State in AD 70. He tells his readers to prepare to face suffering and insults for their faith in Jesus, like their brothers in other lands. He closes with a greeting from *“she who is in Babylon”* (1 Peter 5:13), along with **Mark**, *“my son”*, which leaves us wondering, for Babylon is far away in Iraq. Maybe he uses the name of the Old Testament enemy of Israel as a cipher for Rome, about to persecute the Christians? And is Mark the John Mark we already know from Jerusalem? We can only guess.

Peter's Second Letter

Peter writes again to the same readership (see 2 Peter 3:1), not this time to prepare them for persecution, but to warn them against evil men infiltrating the church and leading innocent believers astray.

He opens his first chapter with a beautiful string of virtues to aim for – faith, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, etc., culminating in love, the most desirable quality of all (2 Peter 1:5-8). We need to practice these, he says, like a pianist pounding away on her piano, so that we make our entrance into God's kingdom sure.

Peter is expecting to die soon (he reminds us Jesus had warned him he would be martyred for his faith), and he wants his last message

to be remembered by the next generation. He insists the gospel he had taught was not myths and fables, but based on solid eyewitness evidence of the glory of Christ, and backed up by the inspired teaching of the Old Testament prophets – an important point today, when Humanists sneer at the Bible.

The second chapter picks out examples from the Old Testament of evil men who eventually met their day of judgment – Noah's generation swept away by the Flood, the men of Sodom and Gomorrah, and Balaam the soothsayer who tried to thwart God's blessing of Israel. Similarly, he infers, evil men who have now entered the Church, seeking for money and power over others, will meet their doom.

Peter's last chapter is important. He looks ahead, and sees a time when, because of a long delay, people will begin to question the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus. We can see just that attitude today! But he explains that the delay is only in our minds, not in God's. God waits patiently, putting off the Day of Judgement on our evil society in case one or two more might respond to the gospel and repent and be saved from eternal death. But eventually that patience will expire, and our world will be shaken to its foundations in a fiery judgment that will bring in the new age of his Kingdom. So we must be patient, too, he says, and keep ourselves unspotted from the world, ready to meet our judge.

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