

THE FIRST LETTER OF PETER

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Schedule and logistics

There are five scheduled sessions (September 23-October 21) with the possibility of a sixth session (October 28) to overview the letter and to propose a study focus for the new year (2021).

Eric will host the event and at 5:30 pm he will mute all except Olav who will lead the discussion. Olav will say a short opening prayer before we start reading the Bible.

Context, purpose and authorship of the letter

Written from Babylon (probably Rome) to exiles scattered through Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia (effectively the whole of modern Turkey). The Apostle Peter's authorship is relatively uncontroversial (chapter 1, v.1), though the date of writing is less straightforward, probably between 61 and 64 AD, immediately preceding Nero's persecution of Christians. The purpose of the letter is given in chapter 5, v. 12: "Stand fast in the grace of God" (Zondervan TNIV Study Bible).

Confirmatory evidence of authorship.

The letter reflects the history and terminology of the Gospel of Mark and Acts, particularly Peter's speeches. Its themes and concepts reflect Peter's experiences and his associations. However, the letter is written in good, literary Greek which has caused some to question whether Peter, the fisherman, could possibly have written it. Chapter 5, v.12 is a possible answer to the question in that Silas was recorded as being helpful in letter writing in Acts chapter 15.

Some preliminary commentary to which we may return as we read

- (i) The prophecies of salvation (chapter 1, v.10-12). When Peter writes about 'the grace that was to come to you' he is describing what the Old Testament prophets had said from a Christian perspective.
- (ii) In relation to slaves and masters (chapter 2, v.18-20). Peter is primarily concerned with slaves working in the homes of pagan masters (by contrast with Paul who tends to address slaves with Christian masters).
- (iii) In Peter's discussion of living stones in chapter 2 he must have been forcibly reminded of Matthew 16, v. 15-18 "Jesus asks the disciples "who do you say I am?". Simon Peter answered "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." Jesus replied "Blessed are you Simon, son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church." Protestants usually read this as rock referring to the confession by Peter (i.e. Jesus is the rock); the Roman Catholic tradition infers that Peter is the rock
- (iv) In relation to the apparent lack of balance on wives and husbands (chapter 3, v. 1-7), I came across one commentary that suggested that Christian duties of wives are given more attention than those of husbands on the ground that Christian women were more likely

than men to have pagan partners. Wives with pagan husbands were of two kinds: women converted to Christianity after marriage and women having entered into an arranged marriage.

- (v) In chapter 4, we are reminded of the Beatitudes in Matthew chapter 5, v.10. Suffering for right and wrong reasons: the passage is not concerned with retribution for sins but with the testing and strengthening of faith.

September 23. (1) The opening greeting and thanksgiving.

Before each reading, Olav will open with prayer

We shall read I Peter 1, v.1-12.

Qu. 1: Where did these Christians live and what are some implications of their scattered distribution?

Qu. 2: What do you notice about the structure of the opening greeting (verses 1-2)?

Qu. 3: What is “a living hope” (verse 3)?

Qu. 4: What is meant by the clause “when Jesus Christ is revealed” (verse 7)?

Qu. 5: Do you recognize the connection between v. 8 and John, chapter 20, v. 29?

September 30: (2) Set your hope

We shall read I Peter chapter 1, v.13-chapter 2, v.3

Qu. 1: What is God’s purpose for his people?

“Set your hope” (v.13). The Greek idiom here means “Roll up your sleeves and get down to hard work”.

Qu. 2: Why are the themes of obedience and holiness so important to Peter (v.14-16)?

Qu. 3: How does Peter resolve the paradox of living in fear and faith? (v. 17-21) These attitudes remain the basis for Christian confidence, based not on our own abilities or even on our faith but on the God in whom we trust.

Qu. 4: How have these former pagans (Gentiles) purified themselves?

Agape is a form of love without expectation of reciprocation. Spiritual birth is brought about by the word of God. Peter turns to Isaiah 40, v.8, “the grass withers and the flowers fall but the word of our God endures forever”.

Qu. 5: What do you understand by the term “pure spiritual milk”?

October 7. (3) Living stones

We shall read I Peter chapter 2, v.4 –25

Subjection to lawfully constituted authority; the duties of slaves under good and bad masters; the duties of wives and husbands; the call to unity; love, gentleness and humility, following the example of Jesus.

Qu. 1: How many kinds of stones do you find in this text (verses 4-10)?

Christ as the stone (v.6-8). One of the early challenges for the Christian community was to explain that Jesus was indeed the Messiah and this they did by quoting the OT passages from Psalms and Isaiah. Psalm 118, v.22 “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone”, followed by Isaiah 28, v.16 “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation” and Isaiah 8, v.14 “for both houses of Israel he will be a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall” all use a stone as a metaphor for the Messiah.

Chosen people (v.9-10). People as stones. In this section, Peter contrasts his readers with the people who don’t believe the Good News. His concern is to describe them in language drawn from the OT that was originally used to describe Israel as the chosen people of God. (cf. Exodus 19, v.6 “Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” or Isaiah 43, v.20-21 “This is what the Lord says: I am doing a new thing---I provide water in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland to give drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise”). Note also the extensive reference to Hosea 1, v. 9 and 2, v. 21-23

Qu. 2: What do we need to do when we lose confidence in Jesus? Chapter 2, v.9-10

Qu. 3: Why such a heavy emphasis on “submission” in chapter 2, v. 13 and 18?

The crucial term is “submit yourselves” which is not a popular theme in 21st century Canada. The motivation is partly self-preservation during persecutions from Nero but also, less popularly, because the Lord has appointed a hierarchy of positions in society to carry out his will. Talk of hierarchy is also unpopular today. Try to consider the implications of promoting a non-hierarchical political system during the First Millennium AD

Qu. 4: Why does Peter rely so heavily on Isaiah 53 in defining the basis for Christian living? Chapter 2, v. 22-25

Isaiah 53, v. 9b. is quoted literally “he has done no violence nor was any deceit in his mouth” but for Isaiah 52, v.13-53, v. 12 Peter provides his own summary (reminiscent of his first sermon on the Day of Pentecost, Acts chapter 2, v.14). These verses are central to the letter and provide the basis for all Christian behavior.

Qu.5: Why does Peter say nothing directly about social and political change. Should not Christians be in the vanguard of social reform?

October 14. (4) Suffering and the will of God.

We shall read I Peter chapter 3, v.1-22

Qu. 1: Why are 6 verses dealing with the obligations of wives and only one verse about husband’s obligations (verses 1-7)?

Qu. 2: Why such an extensive quotation from Psalm 34, verses 12-16a.?

Qu. 3: What are the blessings and opportunities of the persecuted?

Qu. 4: What is Peter's sense of the significance of Christ's victory?

Peter's main purpose in this section is to encourage his readers to face persecution fearlessly and positively. The death of Jesus is viewed as atonement for sin. Sin no longer stands between sinners and God. Peter is not so much harping on a doctrine of atonement for its own sake. He wants rather to emphasize our access to God and calling on him in confidence.

Qu. 5: Christ's proclamation to the spirits in prison: when did Christ go? Where did Christ go? To whom did Christ go? What did Christ preach?

October 21. (5) The strangeness of suffering and a call for resistance to the evil one.

We shall read chapter 4, v.1-chapter 5, v.14.

Qu. 1: What are the life style options presented? Why such a limited choice?

The life of the Christian congregation (v.7-11). The end of all things is near: the priority for Christians must be a life of prayer. Above all, the supreme importance of love. Showing hospitality is a special example of brotherly and sisterly love. The importance of providing the opportunity for all Christians to exercise their gifts

Qu. 2: What is Peter's view on the strangeness of suffering?

Suffering, joy and judgment (chap. 4, v.12-19).

Qu. 3: The elders and the young people are picked out. What about women and middle-aged men?

Qu. 4: The expression "in Christ" is very important. Where else in the Bible do we find this used?

Closing greetings (chapter 5, v.12-14). Silas is thought to be the same person who accompanied Paul after the separation from Barnabas at the start of Paul's Second Missionary journey (Acts chapter 15, v.39). "She who is in Babylon" must be the church in Rome (but there are problems with this interpretation). Mark is also mentioned and is thought to be the John Mark, who went with Paul on his First Missionary journey, though he made a premature exit (Acts chapter 13, v. 13).

Qu.5a: What have you found to be helpful in this scattered "biography" of Peter?

Qu. 5b: What have you found unhelpful in attempting to bring together all the Biblical evidence

USEFUL REFERENCES(in case you have some spare time)

McKnight S, 1996. I Peter. The NIV Application Commentary. Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan. The strength of this commentary is that it focusses on applications to the Christian life today.

Marshall IH, 1991. I Peter. The IVP New Testament Commentary Series. Downer's Grove, Illinois. This book is conservative, but has the virtue of covering each verse systematically.

Selwyn EG, 1947. The First Epistle of St. Peter, Macmillan, London. This book is radically critical and I do not find any helpful conclusions. But it does ask a lot of good questions.

Barker KL (ed.) 2006. Today's New International Version Study Bible. Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan. Maps, charts, insert sections and study notes are highly informative but should be recognized for what they are: conservative interpretations.