Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

First Peter
Scripture: 1 Peter
Code: MSB60

Title

The letter has always been identified (as are most general epistles, like James, John, and Jude) with the name of the author, Peter, and with the notation that it was his first inspired letter.

Author and Date

The opening verse of the epistle claims it was written by Peter, who was clearly the leader among Christ's apostles. The gospel writers emphasize this fact by placing his name at the head of each list of apostles (Matt. 10; Mark 3; Luke 6; Acts 1), and including more information about him in the 4 gospels than any person other than Christ. Originally known as Simon or Simeon, cf. Mark 1:16; John 1:40,41, Peter was the son of Jonas (Matt. 16:17) who was also known as John (John 1:42), and a member of a family of fishermen who lived in Bethsaida and later in Capernaum. Andrew, Peter's brother, brought him to Christ (John 1:40–42). He was married, and his wife apparently accompanied him in his ministry (Mark 1:29–31; 1 Cor. 9:5).

Peter was called to follow Christ in His early ministry (Mark 1:16,17), and was later appointed to apostleship (Matt. 10:2; Mark 3:14–16). Christ renamed him Peter, or Cephas, both words meaning "stone" or "rock" (John 1:42). The Lord clearly singled out Peter for special lessons throughout the gospels (e.g., Matt. 10; 16:13–21; 17:1–9; 24:1–7; 26:31–33; John 6:6; 21:3–7,15–17). He was the spokesman for the 12, articulating their thoughts and questions as well as his own. His triumphs and weaknesses are chronicled in the gospels and Acts 1–12.

After the resurrection and ascension, Peter initiated the plan for choosing a replacement for Judas (Acts 1:15). After the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1–4), he was empowered to become the leading gospel preacher from the Day of Pentecost on (Acts 2:12). He also performed notable miracles in the early days of the church (Acts 3–9), and opened the door of the gospel to the Samaritans (Acts 8) and to the Gentiles (Acts 10). According to tradition, Peter had to watch as his wife was crucified, but encouraged her with the words, "Remember the Lord." When it came time for him to be crucified, he reportedly pled that he was not worthy to be crucified like his Lord, but rather should be crucified upside down (ca. A.D. 67–68), which tradition says he was.

Because of his unique prominence, there was no shortage in the early church of documents falsely claiming to be written by Peter. That the Apostle Peter is the author of 1 Peter, however, is certain. The material in this letter bears definite resemblance to his messages in the book of Acts. The letter teaches, for example, that Christ is the Stone rejected by the builder (2:7,8; Acts 4:10,11), and that Christ is no respecter of persons (1:17; Acts 10:34). Peter teaches his readers to “gird yourself with humility” (5:5), an echo of the Lord’s girding Himself with a towel and washing the disciples’ feet (John 13:3–5). There are other statements in the letter similar to Christ’s sayings (4:14; 5:7,8). Moreover, the author claims to have been a witness of the sufferings of Christ (5:1; cf. 3:18; 4:1). In addition to these internal evidences, it is noteworthy that the early Christians universally recognized this letter as the work of Peter.

The only significant doubt to be raised about Peter’s authorship arises from the rather classical style of Greek employed in the letter. Some have argued that Peter, being an “unlearned” fisherman (Acts 4:13), could not have written in sophisticated Greek, especially in light of the less classical style of Greek employed in the writing of 2 Peter. However, this argument is not without a good answer. In the first place, that Peter was “unlearned” does not mean that he was illiterate, but only that he was without formal, rabbinical training in the Scriptures. Moreover, though Aramaic may have been Peter’s primary language, Greek would have been a widely spoken second language in Palestine. It is also apparent that at least some of the authors of the NT, though not highly educated, could read the Greek of the OT Septuagint (see James’ use of the LXX in Acts 15:14–18).

Beyond these evidences of Peter’s ability in Greek, Peter also explained (5:12) that he wrote this letter “by Silvanus,” also known as Silas. Silvanus was likely the messenger designated to take this letter to its intended readers. But more is implied by this statement in that Peter is acknowledging that Silvanus served as his secretary, or amanuensis. Dictation was common in the ancient Roman world (cf. Paul and Tertius; Rom. 16:22), and secretaries often could aid with syntax and grammar. So, Peter, under the superintendence of the Spirit of God, dictated the letter to Silvanus, while Silvanus, who also was a prophet (Acts 15:32), may have aided in some of the composition of the more classical Greek.

First Peter was most likely written just before or shortly after July, A.D. 64 when the city of Rome burned, thus a writing date of ca. A.D. 64–65.

Background and Setting

When the city of Rome burned, the Romans believed that their emperor, Nero, had set the city on fire, probably because of his incredible lust to build. In order to build more, he had to destroy what already existed.

The Romans were totally devastated. Their culture, in a sense, went down with the city. All the religious elements of their life were destroyed—their great temples, shrines, and even their household idols were burned up. This had great religious implications because it made them believe that their deities had been unable to deal with this conflagration and were also victims of it. The people were homeless and hopeless. Many had been killed. Their bitter resentment was severe, so Nero realized that he had to redirect the hostility.

The emperor's chosen scapegoat was the Christians, who were already hated because they were associated with Jews, and because they were seen as being hostile to the Roman culture. Nero spread the word quickly that the Christians had set the fires. As a result, a vicious persecution against Christians began, and soon spread throughout the Roman Empire, touching places N of the Taurus mountains, like Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1:1), and impacting the Christians, whom Peter calls "pilgrims." These "pilgrims," who were probably Gentiles, for the most part (1:14,18; 2:9,10; 4:3), possibly led to Christ by Paul and his associates, and established on Paul's teachings. But they needed spiritual strengthening because of their sufferings. Thus the Apostle Peter, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wrote this epistle to strengthen them.

Peter wrote that he was in "Babylon" when he penned the letter (5:13). Three locations have been suggested for this "Babylon." First, a Roman outpost in northern Egypt was named Babylon; but that place was too obscure, and there are no reasons to think that Peter was ever there. Second, ancient Bab-ylon in Mesopotamia is a possibility; but it would be quite unlikely that Peter, Mark, and Silvanus were all at this rather small, distant place at the same time. Third, "Babylon" is an alias for Rome; perhaps even a code word for Rome. In times of persecution, writers exercised unusual care not to endanger Christians by identifying them. Peter, according to some traditions, followed James and Paul and died as a martyr near Rome about two years after he wrote this letter, thus he had written this epistle near the end of his life, probably while staying in the imperial city. He did not want the letter to be found and the church to be persecuted, so he may have hidden its location under the code word, "Babylon," which aptly fit because of the city's idolatry (cf. Rev. 17,18).

Historical and Theological Themes

Since the believers addressed were suffering escalating persecution (1:6; 2:12,19–21; 3:9,13–18; 4:1,12–16,19), the purpose of this letter was to teach them how to live victoriously in the midst of that hostility: 1) without losing hope; 2) without becoming bitter; 3) while trusting in their Lord; and 4) while looking for His second coming. Peter wished to impress on his readers that by living an obedient, victorious life under duress, a Christian can actually evangelize his hostile world (cf. 1:14; 2:1,12,15; 3:1–6,13–17; 4:2; 5:8,9).

Believers are constantly exposed to a world system energized by Satan and his demons. Their effort is to discredit the church and to destroy its credulity and integrity. One way these spirits work is by

finding Christians whose lives are not consistent with the Word of God, and then parading them before the unbelievers to show what a sham the church is. Christians, however, must stand against the enemy and silence the critics by the power of holy lives. In this epistle, Peter is rather effusive in reciting two categories of truth. The first category is positive and includes a long list of blessings bestowed on Christians. As he speaks about the identity of Christians and what it means to know Christ, Peter mentions one privilege and blessing after another. Interwoven into this list of privileges is the catalog of suffering. Christians, though most greatly privileged, should also know that the world will treat them unjustly. Their citizenship is in heaven and they are strangers in a hostile, Satan-energized world. Thus the Christian life can be summed up as a call to victory and glory through the path of suffering. So, the basic question that Peter answers in this epistle is: How are Christians to deal with animosity? The answer features practical truths and focuses on Jesus Christ as the model of one who maintained a triumphant attitude in the midst of hostility.

First Peter also answers other important practical questions about Christian living such as: Do Christians need a priesthood to intercede with God for them (2:5–9)? What should be the Christian's attitude to secular government and civil disobedience (2:13–17)? What should a Christian employee's attitude be toward a hostile employer (2:18)? How should a Christian lady conduct herself (3:3,4)? How can a believing wife win her unsaved husband to Christ (3:1,2)?

Interpretive Challenges

First Peter 3:18–22 stands as one of the most difficult NT texts to translate and then interpret. For example, does "Spirit" in 3:18 refer to the Holy Spirit, or to Christ's Spirit? Did Christ preach through Noah before the Flood, or did He preach Himself after the crucifixion (3:19)? Was the audience to this preaching composed of the humans in Noah's day, or demons in the abyss (3:19)? Does 3:20,21 teach baptismal regeneration (salvation), or salvation by faith alone in Christ? Answers to these questions will be found in the notes.

Outline

Salutation (1:1, 2)

I. Remember Our Great Salvation (1:3–2:10)

A. The Certainty of Our Future Inheritance (1:3–12)

1. Preserved by the power of God (1:3–5)

2. Proven by the trials of persecution (1:6–9)

3. Predicted by the prophets of God (1:10–12)

B. The Consequences of Our Future Inheritance (1:13–2:10)

1. Perseverance of hope (1:13–16)

2. Persistence of wonder (1:17–21)

3. Power of love (1:22–2:3)

4. Praises of Christ (2:4–10)

II. Remember Our Example Before Men (2:11–4:6)

A. Honorable Living Before Unbelievers (2:11–3:7)

1. Submission to the government (2:11–17)

2. Submission to masters (2:18–25)

3. Submission in the family (3:1–7)

B. Honorable Living Before Believers (3:8–12)

C. Honorable Living in the Midst of Suffering (3:13–4:6)

1. The principle of suffering for righteousness (3:13–17)

2. The paragon of suffering for righteousness (3:18–22)

3. The purpose of suffering for righteousness (4:1–6)

III. Remember Our Lord Will Return (4:7–5:11)

A. The Responsibilities of Christian Living (4:7–11)

B. The Rewards of Christian Suffering (4:12–19)

C. The Requirements for Christian Leadership (5:1–4)

D. The Realization of Christian Victory (5:5–11)

Conclusion (5:12–14)

Available online at: http://www.gty.org
COPYRIGHT (C) 2015 Grace to You
You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright).