

As God's Chosen People

Week One: 1 Peter Overview

This course is adapted from a CPH series called "God's Word for Today," which is a series of group Bible studies. Pastors will borrow heavily from this material but will happily add other points as they come up.

Today's Goal

Gain a better understanding of 1 Peter as an apostolic document and, therefore, an authoritative letter for every generation of readers, hearers, and Christians to consider.

Introduction Points

Many ancient secular documents are lost to us. Some of the finest were destroyed when famous libraries, such as those at Alexandria, Egypt, burned. Think of the great fire in Rome. Yet God, in his infinite wisdom, has preserved for his Church those books that we speak of as "God-breathed," to borrow the word Paul used by the Spirit's inspiration as he wrote to Timothy.

1 Peter offers such a God-breathed message and, thus, is an apostolic and authoritative book. We do not read it like a work of Plato or Socrates or a Roman Emperor. We do not even read it like a work of Martin Luther. None of those men were inspired by the Holy Spirit to originate documents that would be considered truly divine. We study this letter as material that addresses each of us directly through the work of the Holy Spirit, bringing us to faith in Jesus or enriching the faith in which we already live.

The Salutation

In the days of the apostle Peter, people wrote letters in a way that is different than our modern-day practice—not just from a technical standpoint, either! It was customary for the writer to name himself first and then to indicate to whom he was writing. These two items were followed by a greeting, which could be in the form of a prayer or a word of thanks. You can find such examples in **Acts 23:26; James 1:1; 1 Corinthians 1:4; Ephesians 1:3; and 1 Peter 1:1-2.**

The Author

In this epistle, the author used the name that Jesus gave him. At home, he had been known as Simon, the son of Jonah ("bar-Jonah" in Aramaic). As an apostle, however, he preferred to be called Peter ("Cephas" in Greek), the Rock man, on whose confession the Church would be built.

The Recipients and the Greeting

After naming himself, Peter described himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ and then went on to describe the first recipients of this letter (we will talk about those titles in the next lesson). Then, instead of the normal "Greetings," the apostle wrote, "Grace and peace be multiplied to you." Here he followed a pattern established by the Jewish High Council in Jerusalem. When this body of men wrote to synagogue, they concluded their salutation with the words, "May peace be multiplied to you." Peter added the New Testament word *grace* in his salutation to fellow Christians in Asia Minor.

The Conclusion

From the salutation we move, for a brief moment, to the conclusion of this epistle (**5:12-14**). There we note the mention of Silas (Silvanus) as the person who delivered the apostle's letter to the churches mentioned in the salutation. Some authorities believe that Silas may have served as Peter's scribe in the same sense that Tertius and Tychicus related to Paul (see **Romans 16:22** and **Ephesians 6:21**). The concluding verses state the purposes of the epistle and include greetings. The last sentence comprises a wish for peace, or, as a Jewish person like Peter would say, "Shalom!"

The Body

Between the salutation and conclusion, of course, is the body of the letter. Its wording indicates that the apostle was writing mainly to persons who either had just been baptized or were about to take part in this sacrament. In essence, Peter was addressing himself to the question that every new convert had, and still has, to ask: Is it really worthwhile to be a Christian?

At 4:11 Peter breaks into a doxology. Some commentators suggest that the first part of the letter, either up to **4:6** or **4:11**, is a sermon directed to newly baptized people, followed by more general words of exhortation and direction to the congregations as a whole (again, there will be more conversation on that as we get to those verses). We might think about a sermon given on Confirmation Sunday—parts are addressed to a specific group of celebrants on that day, but the message is still useful for all who hear it. Thinking of things in these terms does not affect the unity or authenticity of the document.

The Sequence

Epistles were not written to be outlined. In fact, they were not written with chapters, verses, or even punctuation! At the same time, determining movements in the inspired writer's thinking will help the reader understand more fully the individual passages (and overall thought pattern) of an epistle.

There are three doctrinal sections, each one of which is followed by a section of application.

- **1 Peter 1:3-12** – What the triune God has done for our salvation (doctrine)
- **1 Peter 1:13-25** – The kind of lifestyle that such salvation calls for (application)
- **1 Peter 2:1-10** – The means of grace at work in the priesthood of all believers (doctrine)
- **1 Peter 2:11-3:17** – Living to the glory of God (application)
- **1 Peter 3:18-22** – How Christ established his lordship over the whole universe (doctrine)
- **1 Peter 4:1-5:11** – New way of life in response to the reality that “the end...is near” (application)

The very fact that the apostle puts doctrine before illustration points out the proper sequence in which God works out our salvation. He acts first; then he moves us to respond (and even gives us guidance in how to respond—grace upon grace!). Hence, the title of this class: As God's Chosen People...this is how you think and live.

This is counter to every other religion in the world; it is even counter to some strands of nominal Christian churches in which people are bludgeoned with the law and told to work harder so that God might love them. Evaluate/fix the following (unfortunately common) approaches to behavior:

1. “If you aren't good, then Jesus won't love you.”
2. “If you do the dishes tonight, then I'll take you to get ice cream.”

We strive to follow Peter's pattern (which is ultimately God's pattern) of grace, which works faith, which naturally brings about our fruitful response in every walk of life.

The Occasion

Commentaries suggest various dates for the writing of this epistle, all the way from AD 63 to AD 112. Anyone who argues for a date beyond the sixties of the first century thereby implies that the epistle was not really written by Simon Peter. Yet the letter explicitly claims to have been written by him.

Peter did not date the letter. Therefore we must try to derive our conclusions from internal evidence. Two things stand out clearly. 1) The people to whom the apostle wrote were suffering some kind of social harassment (see **4:12**; **3:14**; **1:6**). 2) They were new converts and were being received into the church or had just become members (see **1:22**). The members of the congregations named in the salutation were shaken up by what they were experiencing, wondering whether God's children should really be expected to stand for suffering (see **2:21-23**).

When may this have happened? Probably in connection with the persecution of Christians following the burning of Rome in AD 64. Peter probably wrote from Rome, which the early Christians often referred to as Babylon (see **5:13**). He dispatched the epistle through Silas to the churches in Pontus, etc., (v. 1), to reassure them in their puzzlement and distress. Shortly after writing this letter of comfort, then, history tells us that Peter was crucified. This is similar to what happened to Paul—he wrote to Timothy and Titus to pass along the Word of truth and encourage these young men in their callings; then he met his death.

The Destination

The opening verses of 1 Peter clearly indicate to what areas this letter was first sent. Judging from the sequence in which the provinces are listed, Silas (and others who may have accompanied him) probably left Rome by ship and landed at Sinope, the main port of the Roman province of Pontus, which is on the northern coast of what is today Turkey [or Türkiye]). Then he (likely) moved by way of Galatia and Cappadocia westward to Asia (of which Ephesus was the capital) and from there northward to Bithynia, which at that time was part of Pontus. From there it was possible to return to Rome, if that is what he chose to do. We aren't sure if that would have happened, but it's one option of what may have happened.

The Purpose

1 Peter has a twofold purpose, as indicated in the conclusion in **5:12**. Turn there and identify the two purposeful prongs of this letter.

- 1.
- 2.

Authority

Peter testifies, not just as a random person who walked by Jesus one day—he was a chosen apostle, an eyewitness to the words and works of Jesus. That makes 1 Peter an apostolic document. To help us understand what that means, think about when we confess the Nicene Creed, “We believe in one holy Christian and apostolic Church.” What does that mean, that the Church (and this letter) is apostolic?

Discussion

1. What things recorded in the Gospels do you recall about Peter—things that will help you read and perhaps understand his letter better?
2. In what ways might you compare yourself with the people who first read this letter?
3. As time allows this week, page through 1 Peter and see what questions you have about certain phrases, verses, or sections. Bring them to class next week! It wouldn't pay to go through a book of the Bible and leave an answerable question unanswered.

Closing Prayer 892 By All Your Saints Still Striving v. 10

**We praise you, Lord, for Peter, so eager and so bold,
thrice falling, yet repentant, thrice charged to feed your fold.
Lord, make your pastors faithful to guard your flock from harm,
and hold them when they waver with your almighty arm. Amen.**