

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Peter's First Epistle Chapter 1

Today we will look at the first chapter of Peter's first letter. It's a tremendously encouraging chapter! Very briefly, I could sum it up for you like this: we have been born again to a **living** hope, and it's living because it is based on the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Peter had been an eyewitness of the resurrection, which means that he had seen the Lord alive again, beyond the power of death! Peter therefore knew what he was going on to. It was real! Meanwhile the believers to whom Peter was writing were to have **faith** in the Lord that they personally hadn't seen, but whom they loved. Their faith would be richly rewarded! Therefore they were to gird up their minds and to set their hope fully on the grace that would be revealed. They could be confident because they had been born again through the Word of God. We fail, and our flesh fails, but the Word endures, and it is by that enduring Word that we have been born again.

With that encouragement in mind, let's take a closer look together at our chapter. The first two verses read as follows: *Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the pilgrims of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace be multiplied.* Peter refers to himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ. As an apostle, he had been specially commissioned by the Lord Jesus to bring His message, and so immediately we are informed that what we are going to read and study comes to us with and from Christ's authority, and thus, not surprisingly, it is full of comfort and encouragement. Peter is writing to **pilgrims** who have been scattered in foreign lands - part of what nowadays is Turkey. The reference to pilgrims gives a key to this letter. Peter is writing to people who are not at home, but are on their way home. That was true of them then, and it's true of us now. We are not in our final, true home. We are going on to an inheritance that Peter describes in the next few verses. In the meantime we are like pilgrims passing through. Note that Peter's readers had probably been evangelised by the Apostle Paul and his companions, given some of the names of the places in which they were dispersed. Peter is not now setting out the Gospel as Paul would have done, but he is writing to encourage them as Christians, in line with Paul's teaching. Notice the full involvement of the Trinity in verse 2 - they were elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, and set apart by the Holy Spirit, and this was for a purpose - to obedience of Jesus Christ. We have a very similar expression used by the Apostle Paul when writing to the Thessalonians, in chapter 2 of his second letter, verse 13: *But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.* How thankful we can be that God is fully involved in our salvation!

Let's move on to verses 3-5, which I'll read out as they are so encouraging: *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.* Perhaps these pilgrims, exiled from their homeland of Israel, and scattered abroad, might have been tempted to lose hope. But Peter tells them - and us - that they have been born again to **living** hope. It's living because it's based on new life: nothing less than the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

As I said earlier, Peter was an eyewitness of Jesus' resurrection. I was reading somewhere that Christ's resurrection was the occasion of Peter's restoration. Remember that Peter had denied the Lord in those sad hours leading up to the crucifixion. Poor Peter hadn't had a chance to put that right. But all changed as he met with the risen Christ, as we can read about at the end of John's Gospel. Everything was new and living as far as Peter was concerned.

Peter's description of the living hope is thoroughly encouraging. It's incorruptible - it cannot be damaged, spoilt or destroyed. It's undefiled - it's starting off in perfection, and it will stay that way. It doesn't fade away - it won't wear out or wear thin. It's reserved in heaven for you - it has already been assigned! It's ready to be revealed in the last time, so that means it must be ready now! Furthermore, God will ensure that we make it - we're kept by the power of God through faith. It's almost breathtaking in its sweep.

In the next few verses, that is verses 6-9, Peter moves on to the subject of faith. The recipients of his letter were going through difficulties. He speaks of them being *grieved by various trials*. They could rejoice in the wonderful living hope that he had just described to them. In fact, says Peter, these self-same trials only go to prove the genuineness of your faith. He makes an allusion to gold as an illustration. Gold, as we know, is a very stable element, which is why it is called a noble metal. Gold can be tried by fire. But even gold is perishable, as Peter says. On the other hand, their faith could be proved to be genuine as they went through these trials. Not only that, but their faith would be richly rewarded, so the trials would not have been wasted time. Their faith would *be found to praise, honour, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ*, as we read in verse 7.

We should note that their faith was based on One whom they loved. Verse 8, referring to Jesus Christ at the end of verse 7, says: *whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory*. You couldn't have faith in someone you didn't know. They hadn't seen the Lord, but they knew Him and loved Him, and they had faith in Him and in His words. It's the same with us - we haven't seen the Lord, but we do know Him. We know He keeps His word.

The next set of verses, 10-12, are very interesting. What they show us is that all that Peter has been encouraging us with is firmly based in the Scriptures. It's no afterthought, or second best, or some other vague promise. The fact that we can see it firmly grounded in the Scriptures gives us further confidence in this living hope. It's interesting to see that the Old Testament prophets wanted to know the scope of what they had prophesied. It shows us that their prophecies were not their own ideas, but rather what God had revealed to them. Peter expands on this point in his second letter, chapter 1 verses 20-21, where he writes: *knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit*. Furthermore, Peter indicates the real author of the Scriptures in verse 11 - *the Spirit of Christ who was in them*. Similarly in verse 12, we see that the New Testament Gospel is also from the Holy Spirit: *things which now have been reported to you through those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven - things which angels desire to look into*.

It's interesting to see that reference to angels, isn't it? We're told that the angels desire to look into these things. Those words, *look into*, apparently mean something like *to stoop to look into*, and so it means a careful consideration, not just a casual glance or a quick look. It gives us a clue as to what interests and captivates these heavenly creatures. What captivates me? And you?

All of these encouragements allow us to put into practice the exhortations of verses 13-21. In verse 13 we're told to *gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ*. Girding up the loins of your mind is a word picture, where we can imagine someone who is wearing long, flowing robes, and then tucks these into a belt so he can walk freely. In the same way, we need to control our thinking, not letting it just flow aimlessly in all directions. We have a goal in mind, a target - *rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ*. I like the way that the English Standard Version translates this verse, as *Therefore, preparing your*

minds for action, and being sober-minded.

Furthermore, Peter writes to his fellow Christians reminding them to live holy lives. I once went to a church in Oxford where the pastor made a very interesting observation in his evening service. He was saying that he had been looking through the Bible to see what instructions he could find about techniques for evangelism. What he concluded was that there wasn't very much in the New Testament letters specifically about *how* we should evangelise, but that there were plenty of instructions about holy living. Of course, we want to find a way in which we can share the good news with our relatives, friends and contacts. No doubt as we seek to live holy lives, not in any way by our own efforts, but in the power and strength of the Holy Spirit, we will then be useable by Him for spreading the good news. I find that quite a challenging thought!

In verses 17-21 we have some important teaching about Christ. Peter reminds his readers that they have been redeemed by the precious blood of Christ. Verses 20-21 read as follows: *He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you who through Him believe in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.* This is quite amazing when we stop to think about it! The redemption that the Lord Jesus accomplished for us on the cross was no last minute afterthought - He had been foreordained before the foundation of the world. Furthermore, He was manifested in these last times for you! The pilgrims of the dispersion to whom Peter was writing were probably considered as very unimportant people in their day, and they may have been tempted to feel downhearted. But no, Peter says, you have a wonderful, living hope to look forward to, and the Lord Jesus was manifested in these times for you! It's by Him that they - and us - believe in God. Peter goes on to say that God raised Jesus from the dead and gave Him glory, so that their faith and hope were in God. The Lord Jesus had not been left in the grave. He had been gloriously raised again, and is now in glory at the right hand of the Father. Peter is saying, if He has been raised again and given glory, then you too will enter into the living hope, all thanks to Him. Therefore you can have faith and hope in God - faith that won't be disappointed.

In verse 22, Peter moves on to another responsibility for us believers: *Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart.* Love for one another is a recurring theme in the New Testament. It was what the Lord Jesus taught, and it was repeated by the Apostles Paul, Peter and John. John puts it very nicely in his first letter, chapter 5 verse 1: *Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves Him who begot also loves him who is begotten of Him.* We love God who caused us to be born again, and so we should love others who have also been born of God.

How were we born again? Verse 23 gives us an explanation: *having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever.* It was the Word of God that was instrumental in our new birth. Elsewhere, in John's Gospel chapter 3, we learn that the agent was none other than God the Holy Spirit.

Peter then proceeds to quote from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, chapter 40 verses 6-8. Let's read those verses from Isaiah: *The voice said, Cry out! And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, because the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever.* Taken on its own, and out of context, this might not at first sight seem very encouraging - we are being compared to the very ephemeral, transient, short-lived grass and meadow flowers. They soon fade and wither away. But the point is this - in sharp contrast, the Word of God endures. It doesn't fade away. And it is precisely that which was used to bring about our new birth. No wonder we have a living hope, that doesn't fade away, to look forward to! It is based on the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and the reason that we can go there is because we have been redeemed and born again, born again with an incorruptible seed, through the living and abiding Word of God. And as Peter put it in the last verse of this first chapter: *Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you.*

What an encouragement this first chapter is! It is a real incentive to do just as verse 13 reads: *Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.* I once saw an article in a magazine about a waiting room many years ago in a train station that had been decorated and kitted out specially because a royal prince was going to pass through it to catch a train. The waiting room had beautiful chairs and amenities - if I remember correctly, there were even some board games available. I suppose it was an early version of a first class lounge. It all sounded very nice, but in one sense it rather missed the point. What I mean is, it can be nice to spend time in a lounge, but the real purpose is to make and complete your journey. You wouldn't want to be so engrossed in the waiting room that you missed the train and didn't end up at the planned destination! Perhaps the early Christians to whom Peter was writing would have quite liked a first class waiting room experience, rather than being *pilgrims of the Dispersion* as in verse 1, and being *grieved by various trials*, as in verse 6. But what Peter does in this first chapter is to remind them about the glorious destination to which they are headed - *to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you*, as we read before in verse 4. Plus, there was no question about them making it or not - verse 5 tells us that they were *kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time*. It's on that basis that Peter could then encourage his readers to set their minds for action, to live holy lives, and to love one another.

In that way, Peter's approach fits the Gospel approach that we see in the New Testament. Under the Gospel, we are not saved because of our performance or our keeping the Law. God first provides all that we need, and then He encourages us to holy living. In the Old Testament, under the Law, performance was demanded. For example, in Leviticus chapter 19 verse 2, we read: *Speak to all the congregation of the children of Israel, and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.* In that case, the Israelites had to be holy in order to be acceptable. The whole of the Old Testament shows that this was an impossibility. But notice how this is quoted in Peter's first letter, verses 14-16: *as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, Be holy, for I am holy.* It is completely different here. First of all, Peter addresses his readers as **children** - so they are already in relationship with God their Father. Secondly, it was God who **called** them - He took the initiative. But **because** God their Father is holy, Peter exhorts his readers - God's children - to imitate their Father. There is a world of difference between a command, *Be holy*, so that we can be accepted, and an exhortation, *Be holy*, because that fits and is suitable to what we are in terms of relationship.

Well, that is a lot of ground that we have covered today. It's amazing how much is packed into this chapter! There is the main subject, that we have considered, but we've also seen references to the Word of God itself and how it was generated and written; we've learnt what angels are interested in; we've seen how Old Testament quotes have New Testament applications; and finally, I think we can see that the lives, the concerns, the difficulties and the hopes of these first century Christians, two thousand years before us, were really not so different to ours. Like us, they had their sorrows and trials, and like us, they were going on to a wonderful inheritance. It's a good thing that the Holy Spirit led Peter to write his letter. I'm sure it encouraged his first hearers, and I'm sure that it will encourage us!

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