

Introduction to the Letter of 1 Peter



The Plan

Although 1 Peter maybe a small book near the back of our bibles it is an important and challenging letter directly speaking to how we should live in the world. Important because it is in the bible (!) and because it speaks about how a fledgling community should relate to the surrounding social order. Challenging because many of the things it says so clearly are not easy to follow. Peter writes to draw out many biblical themes and apply them to this new situation. As with all biblical books, it makes a huge difference to our ability to understand it and allow it to change our lives when we understand what that “new situation” is, and keep it in mind as we read all the way through.

Again, why not focus on the book in your own devotions. Start off by reading the book through in one sitting, and then work through it more slowly, bearing in mind the points made here and any other book that may help. Use different translations if you can. Read the relevant passages in the week before each Home Church gathering. We are looking not just to understand it better, but to be able to live it better.

Introduction

Peter, with the able help of Silas, has written a letter a number of church communities scattered around modern day Turkey. Peter is most likely in Rome around 65AD. He is deeply concerned about these Christians and wants to encourage them that they really in are in “the true grace of God” and that they should “stand fast in it”, whatever circumstances they face.

It seems clear that these churches are marginalised communities and maybe fairly new Christians. Even in his opening greeting he refers to them as “exiles of the Diaspora”, using a term that referred Jews who didn’t live in Jerusalem but were ‘scattered’ around the world. These churches felt like that, out of place in a wider world, like “strangers and immigrants”. Maybe they really were that, maybe they were people who had had to move out of Rome, say, to these out lying regions. Maybe they had to go there because their masters or families moved there [hence the passages talking directly to slaves and wives]. It is also clear from the letter that they a “suffering”, this is not through empire-wide direct persecution, but the everyday struggles of living following Jesus in the Roman empire. Whatever the social circumstances it is this ‘foreignness’ that Peter wants to remind them of and emphasise.

How then should this community understand themselves? How should they relate to the social situation? How should they behave? How should they seek to make a difference in the world? All of these questions are addressed clearly in this letter as Peter encourages them to be missional communities in whatever situation they find themselves.

Key Verses

2:11-12 – “Dear friends, I urge you as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.”

Things to look out for

Identity - Peter spends the first part of the letter reminding them of who they are. Although they may feel insignificant they are in fact God’s people. He wants them to understand that they are receiving what God has promised all through history, what they have and who they are has great value in the midst of God’s plan for the world. And so Peter uses terms that related to the nation of Israel to them. They are “a chosen people”, they are being built

into a temple, and are a holy priesthood; they *belong* to God. This identity with God is what makes them “strangers and aliens in the world”. This new identity does not mean that they want to escape, to return ‘home’, that is not Peter’s point. His point is that because they belong to God and are primarily part of his kingdom and household they should be different. Their identity forms how they live. This radical lifestyle that flows from this radical identity is the thing that honours God and causes people around them to honour God too.

Doing Good - What is it that most characterises this radical lifestyle? For Peter it is easily summed up in this phrase “do good”. This is an encouragement that is easier to say than to do it seems. He is calling them to do good in all situations: *even when the recipients don’t deserve it!* Do good when your slave master treats you badly, do good in response to the Roman empire, do good when people ask you what you believe, do good when people heap abuse on you. This is not encouragement to be a doormat but an instruction to live in the light of their true identity, to do good with their heads held high, confident in who they are. “If you are going to suffer, then suffer for doing good”!

Household Instructions - The standard social structure/order was firstly the Roman Empire and then the Household. The references to ‘the authorities’, household slaves, wives and husbands (2:13-3:9) outlines Christian behaviour within this specific social setting. He puts the authorities in their place as put there by God, and indicates that Christians are part of *His* Household [as slaves], and his household has a different ‘order’. The subsequent household code reverses the standard order – slaves first, then wives, then husbands [‘children’ is missing]. This reflects a priority on the marginalised and shows what is important in God’s household. The principles applied to slaves and wives are applicable to the whole community. Even slaves, wives and those under the empire are actually free, but they are free to live under the social order doing God for the sake of God.

Example of Jesus in the midst of struggles - Peter is encouraging Christians to keep the faith under all kinds of trials, especially those that they do not deserve, by reminding them of the eternal hope, it’s temporary nature and the example of Christ. This suffering is repeatedly put in the context of Christ and *his* sufferings to give it meaning and purpose. The slaves who receive the most difficult instruction are told that they are just like Christ, and are therefore an example for the whole community. In fact the whole community is “participating in the sufferings of Christ”. Jesus is the rejected stone, who was chosen by God and precious to him. They therefore can receive encouragement from their chief shepherd who has experienced what they experience, and anticipates their future reward.

Sections to cover:

- 1:1-12 - Greeting; A living Hope...
- 1:13-21 - ...lived out
- 1:22-2:3 - ...as a community
- 2:4-10 - Rejected but chosen
- 2:11-17 - Relating to the empire
- 2:18-25 - Household slaves and the example of Jesus
- 3:1-7 - Households: Wives to unbelieving husbands & Husbands
- 3:8-22 - Do Good
- 4:1-11 - Live for God
- 4:12-19 - Christ and Suffering
- 5:1-7 - In the church community
- 5:8-14 - Concluding exhortations

- Thoughts
- Community on the edge of society trying to find its identity
- How to live in the Roman empire
- “Doing good” is not a passive ‘let it be’ attitude but a radical force for Good in a way that honours God and brings benefit to the wider community
- “Live in the social system” – the social system is theirs not necessarily ours. The primary emphasis is Mission
- Mission is wholly incarnational
- “Provocative Church” – “Why would you do that?” – behaving in remarkable and unexpected ways
- It is wholly Christ-centred
- Reversed Household code [cause in reality in the household of God]
- Slaves are not equivalent to employees – more like “the poor”???? Peter humanised a de-humanising relationship. They were the powerless
- Wives deals with the issue of unbelieving husbands as a specific of all of the communities behaviour in general.
- Household code focuses on the weaker more vulnerable of the community, as examples of the vulnerable community as a whole.
- The conduct, character and goal of the exhortations are true for all.
- Equality of all members [all are co-heirs]
- The issue is doing what is right, rather than doping what is wrong, not subordination per se
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