

INTRODUCTION TO – Godliness and Salvation – Letters of Peter

Hello everyone.

This is an introduction to the KYB study of Peter's letters.

I wonder how many of you are right now in a life situation where the big question is 'What on earth am I supposed to do *now*?'

How can I be true to God in *this* situation?

How can I possibly glorify God in the midst of *this* problem?

How can I *not* sin with all of *this* going on around me?

How am I supposed to respond to these people who are treating me in *this* way?

How can I hold on to Christ and his Word with all of *this* stuff in my life that makes it incredibly hard to keep following Christ?

How can I keep on believing when *this* reality in which I live gives me no observable evidence that Jesus actually keeps his promises?

How can I keep hold on God's truth when *this* church, where I worship and serve, is letting it go, and teaching easy to swallow human ideas instead of God's pure and powerful truth?

What does God want me to do?

How does God want me to live?

When the suffering is too hard and too frequent?

When the pressure to give up on faith is so strong and so sustained?

When unbelievers ridicule and even attack?

When my fellow-Christians are the ones who are causing my deepest pain?

When people in my church sin openly and no one does anything about it?

When year after year, century after century passes, and Jesus just doesn't come back?

Does God understand how *hard* it is to follow him? Does he *know* the heavy load he's putting on us when he commands our trust, our obedience, our commitment?

Yes, he does. He does know. He does understand. The letter to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus, God in human flesh, suffered all the different kinds of pressure that we suffer, and most of the other New Testament books refer to suffering or pressure as well.

Peter's letters do so in particular.

Peter wrote his letters to Christians who were suffering.

Peter's first letter was written to people who were being persecuted or treated unjustly because of their faith. People misunderstood Christians. People hated Christians. People were suspicious of Christians and likely to blame them for anything that happened. They were the targets of deliberate mistreatment and abuse. It was about this time that Nero the Roman emperor launched an official persecution of Christians, and ended up accusing Christians of burning Rome, an action for which he himself was the guilty party.

Peter's second letter was written to Christians who were experiencing the pressure generated by destructive false teaching in their churches. The particular false teaching in question undermined confidence in the scriptures and in the gospel; it destroyed faith; it denied Christ; it exploited believers with made up stories; it encouraged and resulted in a grossly sinful and depraved lifestyle that brought Christianity into disrepute; its teachers oozed arrogance and disrespect and scoffed at the promise of Christ's return. All of this was going on right within the churches, making it extremely difficult for true believers to keep their faith intact and to live for God's glory.

The readers of each of these letters were doing it tough. In one way or another they were being pressured to give in and give up on their faith in Christ and their commitment to Christ.

To encourage his readers and strengthen them to stand firm in their faith in Christ, Peter reminds them, and us, of several extremely important facts:

Firstly, as we read in 1 Peter 1:1-2 we are believers, not because of anything in or of ourselves, but because of God's choice and God's action.

God chose us,

God, by his Spirit, set us apart as his own special people,

God, by his Spirit, set us apart to belong to Jesus Christ.

For those who are truly God's there is simply no 'opt-out' clause. We are his forever, by his choice.

This gives us great encouragement and confidence when we are being pushed to the edge. Even if we fail, we know that failure will be temporary, like Peter's was, because we know that God will not let us go.

Secondly, the salvation we have in Christ, through his death and resurrection, is because of God's great mercy.

1 Peter 1:3-6 teaches us that:

Because it's the result of God's mercy our salvation is absolutely certain.

God himself keeps it safe for us, and God himself keeps us safe by his power.

This is another source of great encouragement and confidence. God saved us *by his mercy*, not because of any merit of ours. No persecution or pressure that confronts us can undo the mercy of God. No weakness of ours as we face that pressure, can undo God's mercy by which we are saved.

Thirdly, this salvation that we have in Christ is the ultimate salvation predicted and anticipated in the Old Testament scriptures [1 Peter 1:10-12].

Those scriptures are rock solid because they were written by men moved and empowered by God's Spirit [2 Peter 1:19-21].

The gospel of Jesus Christ is similarly rock-solid: it was preached by men who were eye-witnesses of the power and glory of Christ.
[2 Peter 1:16-18]

The message of salvation in Christ, which we have embraced and for which we suffer, is not a fairy story, not a human idea, not a deception. It can be depended on completely and utterly [2 Peter 1:16].

This word of God by which we came to know Christ and his salvation, stands forever [1 Peter 1:23-25].

This word by which we are saved is this same powerful, eternal word by which the heavens and earth were created, and by which the present heavens and earth are being reserved for judgement [2 Peter 3:1-7].

This is a great and much needed assurance for us today, because

- in our world, people will believe anything or nothing,
- in our world, there is very little perception of truth as absolute and eternal,
- in our world, all religions or beliefs are seen as relative and changing human ideas, any one of them as good or as bad as the next.

The message about Christ that we have believed is true truth –

- No matter how many non-Christians think and say we are fools, we *know* that the message we have believed is the living word of the living God.
- No matter how many non-Christians are threatened by our beliefs and accuse us of intolerance or discrimination, *we know* that there is only this one truth, and that all other so-called truth is a lie.
- No matter how many false believers and false teachers within the church try to corrupt our perception of the truth about Christ and our obedience to Christ, *we know* that the teaching and commands of Christ are the teaching and commands of the one true living God, and that to believe and obey them is both reasonable and necessary.

Fourthly, the salvation we have in Christ is extremely precious, extremely costly.

We are redeemed through the precious blood of Christ, the Lamb of God [1 Peter 1:2,18-20].

Christ bore our sins in his body on the tree [1 Peter 2:24].

He was chosen for this sacrificial role before the creation of the world [1 Peter 1:20].

This salvation, planned from eternity, and secured by the sin-bearing death of Christ, is *worth all the suffering, worth all the pressure*.

Indeed, this salvation, secured for us by this Saviour, is a source of inexpressible and glorious joy [1 Peter 1:8-9].

This is no take-it-or-leave-it salvation. If we forsake *this* salvation anything we turn to, anything we put in its place, can only be inferior.

To turn our backs on this salvation would be the ultimate disaster. To give in under the pressure and turn our backs on Christ would be to leave the one way of salvation. It would be to despise the death of Christ on the cross and treat it as worthless – to say that Jesus died for nothing.

Christ *died* to save us ... that's how much this salvation is worth.

A few days of persecution, a few words of ridicule, a few embarrassing years during which we stick out in the crowd because we refuse to sin ... that's small cost to us in view of what it cost Jesus to save us.

Deserting Christ is not an option. Peter makes this clear. So we cannot escape the suffering and the pressure that belonging to Christ brings. Christ himself suffered. And we who belong to him suffer [1 Peter 2:21].

Belonging to Christ means we are now the targets of Satan's attacks [1 Peter 5:8-10].

Belonging to Christ means we are now in conflict with the rest of the world and that our faith and allegiance to Christ stands as a constant and hated exposure of their rejection of Christ [1 Peter 4:12-19].

Belonging to Christ means we are now a battle ground of conflicting desires – the old desires that try to drag us backward into sin and the new godly desires that lead us to godliness [1 Peter 1:13-16].

That's simply the way it is. We ought not be surprised when we are persecuted. We shouldn't be surprised when we are ridiculed. We shouldn't be surprised when people try to get us to sin and when we ourselves are tempted to sin.

So, what are we supposed to do?

How are we supposed to cope?

How are we supposed to live as God's holy people when we are being pressured to deny him and to dishonour him?

Peter encourages us to *remember who we are* –

We are God's elect, God's chosen people [1 Peter 1:1-2; 2:9]

We are a holy and royal priesthood [1 Peter 2:5,9]

We are a people belonging to God [1 Peter 2:9]

We are aliens and strangers in this world – we do not belong to it anymore
[1 Peter 1:1; 2:11]

Peter also encourages us to remember the grand and certain *hope we have in Christ* –

We have a hope that is living because of the resurrection of Christ
[1 Peter 1:3]

We have the promise of a secure inheritance [1 Peter 1:4]

We are shielded by God's power until the last day [1 Peter 1:5]

We receive even now the salvation of our souls [1 Peter 1:9].

Peter instructs us to look at Jesus Christ, who suffered unjustly, and to follow him in his example of a submissive, respectful spirit in every relationship of our lives:

To submit to all government authorities [1 Peter 2:13-15]

To submit to our employers, even if they mistreat us [1 Peter 2:18-23]

To submit to each other in the marriage relationship [1 Peter 3:1-7]

To exercise submission in relation to other believers [1 Peter 3:8-9]

To demonstrate a submissive spirit towards those who persecute us
[1 Peter 4:12-19]

To exercise leadership in a submissive manner [1 Peter 5:1-3]

To respond to leadership in a submissive manner [1 Peter 5:5]

We are to exercise this submission and respect with the well-being of the other and the glory of God as our objectives. Indeed, the glory of God is to be the over-riding consideration in all of our choices and responses. [1 Peter 2:11-12; 2:13,16,19]

Finally, Peter wants us to know that Christians are, as Christ said we would be, in a battle, and that therefore we should take on board a battle mindset.

He tells us to

- *Prepare our minds for action* [1 Peter 1:13]. The battle is won or lost in our minds. Peter urges us to take charge of our minds – to be self-controlled, and to be focused fully on the grace of Christ by which we will be saved at Christ's return.

He tells us to

- *Abstain from sinful desires that war against our soul* [1 Peter 2:11]. In this verse Peter reminds us that we don't belong to the world – therefore we are not to follow the world in its pursuit and fulfilment of its sinful desires. That would be to merge with the enemy.

He tells us to

- *Always be prepared to give an answer for the hope we have* [1 Peter 3:15]. That is, we are to always be ready to 'show our colours', to say, yes, we are on Christ's side, because Christ is the Lord of all, the one who has conquered sin and death.

He tells us to

- *Arm ourselves with the attitude of Christ* [1 Peter 4:1]. Our equipment in this battle is not power and might, but the attitude of Jesus Christ – the attitude of humility and submission, the attitude in which the well being of the other and the glory of God are the primary concern.

He tells us to

- *Be self-controlled and alert* [1 Peter 5:8]. Because our enemy is the devil who is pro-actively looking for someone to deceive and destroy, so we have to be self-controlled [not controlled by sin or unbelief] and alert – watchful, sceptical even, so that we will not be caught unprepared and fall into the devil's unexpected and deceptive traps.

He tells us to

- *Resist the devil, standing firm in the faith* [1 Peter 5:9]. We are to resist everything the devil throws at us in his attempts to deceive and destroy – this means we will stand firm in the faith – we are not to give in to false teaching, we are not to give in to disobedience.

He tells us to

- *Make every effort* [2 Peter 1:5; 3:14]. We are to be totally committed to the pursuit of goodness and godliness. We are to be totally committed to live a life that is pleasing to God and honours God.

He tells us to

- *Understand that the conflict is expected* [2 Peter 3:3]. The battle is not primarily about us or against us. The attacks – the pressure to give in and give up on either faith or obedience – are attacks aimed primarily against God. Satan and those he has deceived do not want God's word to be heard and believed. Satan and those he has deceived do not want God to be honoured by the lives of believers. The conflict between God's people and those deceived by Satan is unavoidable and inevitable. We have to realize that.

So Peter tells us to

- *Be on our guard* [2 Peter 3:17]. By recognizing that the battle is expected, by realising that there will always be those who corrupt the Scriptures and distort the gospel, we can and must be on our guard. We must recognize that we cannot and must not believe everything people in the church say. We must recognize that there will always be those who claim to be believers yet have no real relationship to Jesus Christ as their Lord. We must, as Peter commands, be on our guard.

There is a battle. There always will be a battle until Christ returns. Unlike human battles, the outcome is already decided. We who are Christ's are on the winning side.

Yes. It is hard now. Yes. We would far much rather that there was no suffering, no trouble, no persecution, no pressure.

But this interim of suffering, this time when God is even now allowing people the time to repent and believe, is worth it.

Peter expressed it this way in his first letter chapter 1 verses 3 to 9:

'Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls’.

As you study these two letters may you be encouraged to stand firm in your faith, even in the midst of pressure, even in the midst of suffering, even in the midst of error and deception.

Jesus Christ our Lord, and the salvation he purchased for us by his death, are worth hanging in there till the end.

Beyond that there is guaranteed eternal glory, eternal peace, eternal joy.

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