

Peter's Letters

by Derek Lindley

1 - Key Truths of the Bible

We begin today a study of two letters from Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ. They were written about 65 A.D. Peter's self-reliance has gone now and he's doing what Jesus told him to do. He's 'strengthening the brothers' (Luke 22:32) and 'feeding the lambs, taking care of the sheep' (John 21 verses 15-16). This is a letter of encouragement and personal witness.

In the early church Peter went east, but Paul went west. Peter was the apostle of hope, Paul the apostle of faith. Some think this letter was written from Babylon (1 Peter 5 verse 13) where there was a large colony of Jews who had fled Rome due to severe persecution under Emperor Claudius. Others reckon it was written from Rome, a latter-day Babylon. The recipients are Gentiles, converts from paganism, and also Jews of the Dispersion. In other words he wrote to Christians scattered throughout Asia Minor i.e. modern day Turkey.

Wherever the exiled Jew settled, his eyes were towards Jerusalem, in foreign countries his synagogues were so built that, when the worshipper entered, he was facing towards Jerusalem. Paul addresses them as "God's elect, strangers in the world." In reality all believers are temporary residents, sojourners in a strange land, never really feeling at home in this world.

Pentecost is behind him, three decades ago. Peter knows what it is to take a stand for Christ. He's been arrested and put in jail. He's been threatened and realizes that crucifixion, as foretold by Christ, awaits him some time in the future.

Never dismiss Peter as an ignorant fisherman. In the first few verses of his first letter, he deals with the great doctrines of election, foreknowledge, sanctification, obedience. The blood of Christ, the Trinity, the grace of God, salvation, predestination, revelation, glory, faith and hope!

Paul expressed similar thoughts famously in his Roman letter. "For those God foreknew, He also predestined, and those He predestined, He also called, those He called, he also justified; those He justified, He also glorified" (Romans 8 verses 29 and 30).

How wonderful to know that He, who predestined us in eternity, calls us in time and gives us grace to respond to Him. God has planned things. He's always ahead of the game. He never has to hurriedly convene an extra-special emergency meeting because of unforeseen circumstances. He has made a decree, from before the foundation of the world that He would save those who came to Him, the elect. Those who turn to Christ for salvation are the elect. Whosoever will may come.

As Vernon McGee says, "I don't know why we find fault with God for having a plan. Perhaps some folk imagine He's up to some dirty tricks. God knows everything that is foreseeable and unforeseeable."

How can you know if you're one of the elect? Henry Ward Beecher divided people into two categories. Knowing that 'whosoever will may come' he said, "The two categories are the whosoever wills, and the whosoever won't's."

In verse 2 we see how the Trinity is engaged in our salvation. We are chosen by the Father, purchased by the Son and set apart by the Spirit. As far as the Father is concerned, I was saved when He chose me in Christ before the foundation of the world. (This is the election of the Father in eternity). As far as the Son is concerned, I was saved when Jesus Christ died for me on the cross 2,000 years ago. As far as the Spirit is concerned, I was saved one Friday night in the summer of 1966 in Georgetown, Guyana, South America when I came as a sinner to Jesus. Then it all came together, but it took all three persons of the Godhead to bring me to salvation.

Now Peter has a living hope, grounded on the living Word of God, made possible by the living Son of God who rose from the dead. His encounter with the Risen Christ completely transformed Peter from a no-hoper into the apostle of hope. God, in His great mercy, has for believers an inheritance that can never perish or decay, never be spoiled or fade away. Peter writes in verse 4 that it is 'kept in heaven for you'. It's reserved; it's got your name on it.

The Levites were told in Numbers 18 verse 20 that God Himself was their inheritance. Will the born again receive anything less? Imagine the joy of exploring the wonder of God Himself for all eternity!

Some timid soul might bleat, "Suppose I don't make it", Peter counters, that believers 'are shielded by God's power' (verse 5). The same word is used in 2 Corinthians 11 verse 32 where it's translated 'guarded.' (See also Philippians 4 verse 7) The divine power surrounds the saints like a bodyguard or an armed

force on escort duty. All believers can declare “the Lord is my Keeper.” Wasn’t it the Good Shepherd Himself who said of His sheep, “No one can snatch them out of My hand”? (John 10 verse 28).

Peter acknowledges that ‘now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials’ (verse 6). The Greek word for ‘all kinds of’ is ‘poikilos’. It means ‘many coloured.’ It’s the same word used in 1 Peter 4:10 to describe ‘God’s grace in its various forms’. Grace for every trial. Manifold grace for manifold trials. 2 Peter 2 verse 9 underscores the fact that ‘the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials’.

Faith – ‘of greater worth than gold’ – is tested that it ‘may be proved genuine.’ By heating precious metals to melting point, all foreign bodies are skimmed off in the refining process and the end result is genuine. Suffering in a Christian’s life is designed to prove his faith genuine. Although Satan designs temptation to defeat us, God uses it to test the authenticity of our faith. It’s a process. You say, ‘Nothing’s happening, only trouble, trials and tribulation.’ God says, ‘A lot’s happening. It’s the refiner’s fire.’

Apostles viewed life from God’s perspective. They spoke beyond common sense and uttered revelation truth. That’s why the natural mind thinks it bizarre to read in James 1 verse 2 “Consider it a pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds.” Our immediate reaction is to consider it sheer hell. The divine perspective is very different. “Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love Him” (James 1 verse 2).

Someone has well said that when God permits His children to go through the fiery furnace, He keeps His eye on the clock and His hand on the thermostat. If we rebel, He may have to reset the clock. In every furnace there is one like the Son of Man accompanying us.

The eastern goldsmith kept the metal in the furnace until he could see his face reflected in it. So our Lord keeps us in the furnace of suffering until we reflect the glory and beauty of Jesus Christ

2 - A Great Salvation

Peter wrote his first letter to believers who were suffering various trials because of their allegiance to Jesus Christ. Their faith was receiving a hammering and he wrote to encourage them to stand fast in the grace of God (1 Peter 5 verse 12).

He writes to believers in an area that covers most of modern Turkey and he reminds them that one day they will see Jesus. “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” (1 Peter 1 verse 8).

Peter, of course, had seen Jesus. He was one of the ‘eyewitnesses of His majesty’ on Transfiguration mountain (2 Peter 1:16-18) and he was ‘a witness of Christ’s sufferings’ (1 Peter 5 verse 1). But hadn’t Peter heard the Master say, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed”? (John 20 verse 29). Loving Christ brings rejoicing to your heart. Do you love Him? Are you a rejoicing Christian or a believer with a long face as if there’s just been a multiple pile-up on the motorway? Joyless Christians should be sued under the Trade Descriptions Act!

The Old Testament prophets wondered whether Christ would come in their day. ‘They searched intently and with the greatest care’. They spoke of ‘the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow’, but, like the saints Peter is writing to, they did not see Him.

This great salvation, this gospel that has been preached ‘by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven’ is a baffling affair. Peter was there at Pentecost and saw the Holy Spirit fall. 1 Peter 1 verse 12 declares “Even angels long to look into these things.” The picture is of angelic beings looking over the rim of heaven and peering down into this earth. It’s the same word used of Peter and Mary when they ‘bent over’ to look into the empty tomb (John 20).

Angels wonder at grace. There is no redemptive plan of God for fallen angels, so they are more than curious. Just as the cherubim bent down over the mercy seat, the emblem of redemption, in the Holy of Holies, so the angels intently gaze, desiring to fathom the depths of ‘the great mystery of godliness.’ Angels have never experienced such mercy themselves in glory for they have never needed mercy, for they have always lived sinless lives. Paul expressed a similar thought in 1 Corinthians 4 verse 9 “We (apostles) have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men.”

Angels would love to come and proclaim salvation to the world. They must wonder why we don't get busy. I remember hearing Dr. Vernon McGee on his radio programme "Through the Bible" which is still broadcast on every continent. Dr. McGee said he could imagine Gabriel saying to him as he sat in front of the microphone, "Move over, preacher, you're not putting enough into it." Although Gabriel would like to come down, God won't let him. Today He is using human instruments to get the message out. Personal experience and testimony are essential and angels have never been ransomed, they've never experienced salvation.

This letter, of course, was written by a forgiven and restored leader, the Apostle Peter. It's as if he's writing a travellers' guide for Christian pilgrims. Trials are unavoidable because the Divine Refiner is going for gold. In verse 13 we read, "Prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed." The Authorised Version says "Gird up the loins of your mind." We might say "Pull your thoughts together."

When we conform ourselves according to the will of God – that is obedience. Holiness always results in obedience. We are called to be holy in all we do, because God is holy. Holiness is the possession of the soul by God. The Christless life is marked by ignorance, dominated by evil desires and characterised by futility. It is an 'empty way of life' (verse 18).

Once, the people who had been markedly different from others were the Jews, now the people who are called to live differently are the Christians. To be sanctified carries the idea of being 'different for God', set apart for Him. The supreme purpose of redemption is to make men holy (verses 15 to 16). Holiness is the property of God alone and to this we are called. To become holy as God is holy is to open one's entire being to the all- pervading presence of the Holy One. The Christ-filled life is one of obedience and holiness. Holy (hagios) has the root meaning of 'different'. The Temple is 'hagios' because it is different from other buildings. The Sabbath is 'hagios' because it is different from other days. The Christian is 'hagios' because he is different from other men. The Christian is God's man, by God's choice. The Christian is chosen for a task in this world and for a glorious destiny in the world to come throughout eternity.

Peter urges the Christians (verse 17) to 'live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.' Because Christians are strangers in the world, they are considered to be strange in the eyes of the world (1Peter 4 verse 4). The first

century Christians did not join in the worship of the various Roman gods; they often didn't want to take advantage of the bargains on offer at the meat market just because it was meat left over after a heathen sacrifice. Christians no longer relished watching the gladiatorial combats and, it was alleged, they worshipped a criminal, executed by crucifixion, who died like a traitor.

All this seemed such a strange life-style to pagans and could attract suffering. Do we, as 21st century Christians, cultivate enough of the spirit of the stranger or are we so at home in this world that no one can see any difference?

The cost of our redemption has been immense. The treasures of heaven could not redeem us, the jewels of its walls or the gold of its pavements would not redeem one soul. As F. B. Meyer has stated, "Anything less than the costliest blood would not have availed. Only Jesus' blood was adequate to cleanse away the terrible aggregate of sin." Because of the foreknowledge of God, He knows all the sins that will be committed to the end of time.

As long as the blood of our Lord 'a lamb without blemish or defect' (verse 19) coursed through His veins, it had no saving value for us; but when that precious blood was shed, Christ Jesus gave His life. The gospel has not been preached until the meaning of the blood of Christ has been explained. It may offend you aesthetically. As Dr. Vernon McGee said, "The offence of the cross is that He shed His blood. Of course, it is not pretty, but your sin and my sin are not pretty either."

Nowadays the blood is not mentioned in some religious circles. Hymnals in liberal churches have been sanitised and verses that mention the blood have been omitted. But the vital question remains. "Have you been to Jesus for the cleansing power? Are you washed in the blood of the lamb?"

3 - Living Godly Lives

One of the themes of Peter's first letter is how to live godly lives in a godless world. The pagan world of his day was riddled with gods of this, that and the other. How do we know our God is the right God? The word 'god' is very elastic and can refer to any old god. Here's the test for discovering the true God. Is He the One revealed in history in Jesus of Nazareth? In 1 Peter 1 verses 20 to 21 we read that Jesus Christ 'was chosen before the creation of the world.' Note He was a Redeemer before He was Creator. His redeeming purpose was not an emergency measure. "He was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through Him you believe in God." Jesus is the revealer of God. We do not know the true God until we see Him in the face of Jesus Christ. It is this God who raised Jesus from the dead and glorified Him, and so your faith and hope are in God.

Peter continues, "Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers – 'sincere' literally means 'un-hypocritical' – love one another deeply, from the heart" (verse 22). The Authorised Version says 'fervently.' I guess our love seldom gets beyond temperate and never to boiling point.

It was Peter who declared that Christ alone had the words of eternal life (John 6 verse 68). He knew that the Word of God, the Scripture, is God's means of inducing the new birth. The Christian is remade by the entry into Him of the seed of the Word. We have been born again of imperishable seed. The living and enduring word of God implanted within us is 'imperishable' (verse 23). Our inheritance 'can never perish' (verse 4) and we were redeemed 'not with perishable things such as silver or gold' (verse 18).

Peter emphasises that God is the Father of His children by likening the Word of God to human sperm. The Latin Vulgate uses the word semen. It is God's life which enters dead human souls through the Word and makes them live.

Peter quotes some lines from Isaiah chapter 40. "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands for ever." It brings to mind the old hymn which went "We blossom and flourish like leaves on the tree, and wither and perish but nought changeth Thee." Man's glory simply does not last, but God's glory is eternal. Everything God is and does is characterised by glory. He is glorious in wisdom and power. All He thinks and does is marked by glory.

Chapter 2 begins with an exhortation to do some spring-cleaning. The responsibility is ours; the resources are His. “Rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy and slander of every kind” (verse 1). The word preached to you has brought life to you so strip off all malice – that’s the positive desire to do someone else harm. Malice is an unforgiving spirit. Strip off all deceit which has its root in the word for bait which attracts fish to certain death. Sir Walter Scott wrote, “O what a tangled web we weave, when first we practise to deceive.” Strip off hypocrisy (sham pretence) envy and slander of every kind – disparaging gossip, evil speaking which slays character and splits the church of Jesus Christ. There can be no brotherly love as long as these evil things exist. It’s amazing, isn’t it, that it’s necessary to urge Christians to surrender such obvious evils as these. No Christian can stay the way he is. We are to go on to maturity. How embarrassing it would be to go into the presence of God as still a burping baby. So Peter writes, “Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good” (verses 2 and 3).

How does a Christian grow? By studying the Word of God and doing it. There is no growth apart from the Word of God. A preacher held a baby. It was bawling its head off, but as soon as it saw the milk bottle, it started moving its hands, mouth and feet and reaching out for it with every part of its body. The preacher said, “I wish I had a congregation that would reach out after the Word of God like that!”

Have you a craving for God? David said “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God! My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (Psalm 42 verses 1 and 2). Are you hungry for God and His word like that? How vital is the Bible to you? Is it just something you hunt for each week so you can take it to church to make you look religious? Jesus said, “Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4 verse 4). Stunted growth can occur when we stop feeding on God’s Word.

Peter’s first letter has more Old Testament references than any other letter in the New Testament except Romans which is three times longer. Quoting from Isaiah and Psalms Peter says Jesus is “a chosen and precious cornerstone” (Isaiah 28 verse 16) laid by God in Zion. Jesus is “the stone the builders rejected” (Psalm 118 verse 22) who has become the capstone or cornerstone. Jesus is also “a stone that causes men to stumble” (Isaiah 8 verse 14).

Peter calls Jesus 'the living stone.' Verses 4 and 5 read, "As you come to Him, the living stone – rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to Him – you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house. Jesus Himself is the chief cornerstone. In Him the whole building is joined together and in Him we're built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit.

Peter writes, "Now to you who believe, this stone is precious" (verse 7). Spurgeon said, "Let the thought of what life would be without Him enhance His preciousness." As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "No one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1Corinthians 3 verse 11).

4 - A Royal People

Peter's first letter was written around 62 - 64 AD when it was dangerous to be a Christian. In his second chapter he has likened Jesus to a Life-giving Stone, God's choice and precious to Him. At the same time Jesus is the stone rejected by the builders of all human religious systems.

There's a tradition that, at the beginning of the building project of Solomon's temple, a very large, fine looking stone came up from the quarry. The builders couldn't fit it in, so it was moved to one side. It was in the way, so they pushed it over the brow of the hill. Later, word went back to the quarry, "Send up the cornerstone" and they had to haul it back up.

God manufactures His stores of precious stones in the quarries down here. We're all dead stones prior to the new birth. We're cold, hard stones lying deep down in the darkness under the ground. Do you ever wonder at the pit out of which you've been dug? When God planned His church, He selected individual stones, all hand-picked, all shaped individually to fit into the exact place in His house for which they were chosen. We're not bricks –all made in the same way, with the same dimensions, looking alike. We're isolated believers, living stones, cemented together with other believers. The Master Mason carefully chisels the rough stones to fit together. This is the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. One day, the facets of these precious stones, cut here in pain, shall flash for ever in the light of His glory up yonder.

Peter reminds his readers that they also, "like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (verse 5). All believers are living stones, all believers are priests. The Latin word for priest is pontifex – a bridge builder. The priest is a person who builds a bridge for others to come to God. The church is not a hotchpotch of individuals, a collection of odd-balls, but a chosen people – chosen as the Jews once were. The church is 'a royal priesthood' which is what the Israelites were meant to be (Exodus 19 verse 6), but Israel broke God's law and the priesthood was limited to the family of Aaron.

Of course, in the Old Testament no king served as a priest. The two offices were kept apart. But in Christ these offices unite as prophesied by Zechariah chapter 6 verses 12 and 13. "Here is the man whose name is the Branch, and he will branch out from his place and build the temple of the Lord. It is he who will build the temple of the Lord, and he will be clothed with majesty and will

sit and rule on his throne. And he will be a priest on his throne. And there will be harmony between the two.” God’s people in the Old Testament had a priesthood.

God’s people now are a priesthood. This is the priesthood of all believers. Priests offer sacrifices – not animals as in the Old Testament – but “a sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips that confess His name” (Hebrews 13 verse 15) whilst not forgetting “to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased” (Hebrews 13 verse 16).

Christians are not only ‘a chosen people’ and ‘a royal priesthood’ but ‘a holy nation’ and ‘a people belonging to God’ – vast privileges once only afforded to Israel. And, Peter informs them, this mercy has happened “that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light” (verse 10).

The foundations of gospel truth have been laid. Now here come exhortations to practical godliness. How should a Christian behave? Because belief affects behaviour, we must back up our talk with our walk. We are called to live exemplary lives of holiness (chapter 1 verse 15) and love (chapter 1 verse 22). Peter writes, “Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires which war against your soul” (verse 11). Every Christian is under constant attack by a band of secret agents. These spiritual ‘hit men’ are the evil desires of the flesh.

If you’re a Christian, you are not living in a demilitarised zone. You’re on the battlefield 24/7. You’re in a war where there can be sudden sniper fire. This constant warfare was colourfully expressed by a teacher. She said, “It’s like having a class that constantly needs telling.” Our real battle is not with people around us, but with passions within us. As D. L. Moody said, “I have more trouble with D. L. Moody than with any man I know.”

In verse 12 Peter writes, “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.” There should be nothing in our conduct that will give the unsaved ammunition to attack Christ and the Gospel. Our good works must back up our good words. “Live good lives” carries the idea of beauty and attractiveness. Christians in Nero’s day had a bad press. The only effective way to refute the critics was to live lives so lovely the charges would be seen as obviously untrue. When the Greek philosopher Plato was told that a certain man had been making various charges against him, his answer was, “I will live

in such a way that no one will believe what he says.” Was it not Jesus who said, “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven”? (Matthew 5 verse 16).

5 - Christian Submission

We now tackle the central section of this important letter. 1 Peter 2 verse 11 to 3 verse 12 emphasises submission in a believer's life. Submission as a citizen (2 verses 11 to 17): as a worker (2 verses 18 to 25): as a marriage partner (3 verses 1 to 7) and as a member of the Christian assembly (3 verses 8 to 12). When people are on a quest for personal fulfilment, submission isn't a word they wish to hear. Submission is the recognition of God's authority in our lives. Today's largely anti-authoritarian world resents this teaching. Many believers wish it wasn't in the Bible. Peter wrote, "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the King, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right" (1 Peter 2 verses 13 to 14). Paul's Roman letter contains the same teaching (Romans 13 verses 1 and 2) that the authorities that exist have been established by God and must be obeyed. The one in authority is God's servant. We may object because it doesn't look like it. How can evil and despotic rulers such as Sennacherib, Nero, Hitler, Idi Amin, Pol Pot or Saddam Hussein be God's choice? The New Testament teaches that the ruler is not just allowed by God, but ordained by Him. "The powers that be" reflect God's plan of order in society. Theirs is an awesome responsibility for which they will be held to account. Jesus, our example, submitted to earthly authority. His reply to Pilate, the Roman Governor, was "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above" (John 19 verse 11). The Governor's power was a delegated one. Christians are called to be obedient to human laws as long as they do not conflict with God's laws. As Papa Ten Boom said to his family who were hiding Jews on the run from the Nazis, "We will obey those who make the laws, but not if they are against God's higher law."

Peter says that Christians are to "live as free men" and "live as servants of God" (verse 16). Liberty is not to become licence. The four imperatives of verse 17 are clear as daylight. "Show proper respect to everyone: love the brotherhood of believers, fear God and honour the King." Christians in the family of God are to be devoted to one another.

Think of an elderly couple – the lady seriously invalided. She can no longer care for herself or her family. The old gentleman takes up the responsibility and waits hand and foot on his beloved. When we see them we can't discern what attracted him to her, but he remembers that lovely Christian who made home heaven for so many years. He cares for her right up until the day she falls

asleep in Jesus. Deeper than obedience because of duty, is obedience because of devotion.

Peter's letters blaze the trail in explaining Christian honour. The basic meaning of honour is recognition of intrinsic value. Honour is respect in action. A believer is to 'show proper respect to everyone' (1 Peter 2 verse 17). Peter, a married man says husbands should treat their wives with respect (1 Peter 3 verse 7). Because Christ paid the ultimate price for us, God has highly honoured us. He did not send a seraph or an angel or an archangel, but His only begotten Son.

Verse 18 of 1 Peter 2 needs some unpacking. "Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh." The word "harsh" literally means "crooked" or "bent". The word for slaves here is 'oiketes', which means 'household slaves', not just unskilled, but also managers, teachers, doctors, musicians and secretaries. They did the work in Rome. There were 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire. Many slaves were loved and trusted family members, but they had no rights of their own.

A slave was a thing in Roman law. Justice did not exist for slaves. They were never told to escape or rebel against their masters. Slavery was accepted, more or less, as a fact of life. But here is a new doctrine. Every man is precious in the sight of God. Within the church, the social barriers were broken down. It was quite possible for a slave to be president of the congregation and his master a member of it.

Submission to authority doesn't come naturally to us because we are rebels at heart. We're so apt to think "Why should I submit? No one's going to tell me what to do." But when we do something in the will of God, as the servants of God, then we are doing it 'for the Lord's sake.'

Verse 19 reads, "It is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God." Peter goes on in verse 20 "If you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God." That last phrase "this is commendable before God" can be translated "God says thank you." So hold back that outburst, quash that acidic remark, don't answer back and a thrill of delight starts through the very heart of God and from the throne God stoops to say thank you. You absorbed it – you 'Jesus-ed' it. Look what we're called to in verse 21. "To this you were called, because

Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps.” False charges against Christians must be dealt with in God’s way.

It’s a sobering thought to realise that the verses we’ve not underlined in our Bible are still in our Bible. For example John 15 verse 20 where Jesus told His disciples “No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me they will persecute you also.” 2 Timothy 3 verse 12 says “Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” Jesus is the classic example of a person completely in the will of God, greatly loved, and yet still suffering unjustly. Peter writes “To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in His steps” (1 Peter 2 verse 21). The teaching seems to be if you’re buffeted through well doing, endure it. Though that particular allegation may be wrong, on many occasions in our lives we received more praise and thanks than were our due. Perhaps our uncomplaining meekness may touch our persecutors as no words of indignation would.

6 - Husbands and Wives

We're near the end of 1 Peter 2. Christ, the sinless One, could have escaped it all – the awful weals and wounds made in the body of Jesus by those dreadful whips. Instead, "when they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats. Instead, He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly" (verse 23). He committed Himself to the tender care of His loving Father. Jesus let His Father settle the account.

Peter states, "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by His wounds you have been healed" (verse 24). The sins of untold myriads meet on Him. Because the stripes fell thick and heavy on Him, they need never fall on us. Peter writes, "For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls" (verse 25). In the Old Testament the sheep died for the shepherd. At Calvary the Shepherd died for the sheep. Is He your shepherd? Is He your overseer? The word means the guardian and watchman of our souls. Are you a member of the Shepherd's flock by repentance and faith?

Chapter 3 addresses husbands and wives. Some have wondered why the advice given to wives is six times as long as that given to husbands. This is not sexism. The wife's position was far more difficult. If a man became a Christian, his wife would automatically follow him to church, for a woman had no rights at all. But for a wife to change her religion, while her husband did not, was unthinkable. He'd remain faithful to the ancestral gods, but what if she became born again?

Now she must play her cards carefully. Peter says, in effect, be a good wife. You can't nag him into the kingdom, nor can you drag him into the kingdom, but you can live such a lovely, Christ filled life in your own home with your pagan husband that he'll want what you've got.

Peter, who took his wife with him when he travelled (1 Corinthians 9:5), teaches that submission is the path to true beauty and true spirituality. Christian wives are not called to be holy doormats, but their godly behaviour will not go unnoticed. The unsaved husband may be tough to live with, but he isn't blind. He can't ignore the pure and reverent behaviour of his believing wife. This silent preaching of the sheer loveliness of her holy life will break down the barriers. Peter insists that internal beauty is more important than external adornments. 'The unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit is of

great worth in God's sight' (verse 4). True beauty is spiritual, your inner self, the hidden person of the heart. Some may think I'd gladly live like that, if I had the right kind of husband. This instruction is for the wife who has the wrong kind of husband.

How did the holy women of the past, who put their hope in God, make themselves beautiful? They were submissive to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master (verses 5- 6). The headship of the husband is not dictatorship, but a loving exercise of divine authority. Peter writes "Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives" – do we, as men, tend to be inconsiderate? – "and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers" (verse 7). Husbands and wives have different roles but they have equal spiritual rights as 'fellow heirs of the gracious gift of life'. It was such a liberating truth Paul had taught the Galatians: "There is ... neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus ... heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3 verses 28 to 29).

Verse 8 deals with how believers interface with the world at large. In an age of selfish individualism we are to avoid slipping into a survival of the fittest mentality. Peter writes, "Live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble". Sympathy and selfishness can not co-exist. Compassion or pity is in danger of becoming a lost virtue. Compassion has been explained as 'everything within me goes out to him or her.' Humility, so despised by the Greeks, was to be prized by the Christians. This does not mean 'putting ourselves down' but rather it is a willingness to take second place and put others first.

Believers are not to retaliate or give as good as they get. Moffatt translates verse 9 as "This is your vocation, to bless and to inherit blessing."

Do you love life or do you wish it were over? Have you indulged in the death wish? Peter quotes from Psalm 34 verses 12 to 16 some interesting words – "Whoever would love life and see good days" must do three things – 'keep his tongue from evil and his lips from deceitful speech;' 'turn from evil and do good;' 'seek peace and pursue it.' Verse 12 is well worth meditating. "The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and His ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."

Peter asks "Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed" (verses 13 and 14). Listen,

Christian, you know that you're not going to escape suffering in this world, if you're a child of God. Whatever happens, you're going to be blessed, provided you're suffering for the right. The suffering Christian must ever remember he follows a suffering Lord.

7 - Suffering and Salvation

We need to remember that the early church was constantly under fire. Slanderous charges were continually being levelled at believers. They were accused of turning slaves against their masters because large numbers of poor slaves fled to the shelter of the Christian church where they found liberty, love, acceptance and equality between slave and owner. Christians were accused of disloyalty to Caesar. No Christian would worship the Emperor's godhead and burn his pinch of incense, declaring "Caesar is Lord." Consequently Christians were accused of plotting the overthrow of the Empire and the dethronement of Caesar. Their private meetings were thought to be convened for unlawful political purposes. From Nero's day onwards it was dangerous to be a Christian, although persecution was not constant and consistent throughout the Empire. It depended on the governor and if complaints were received. It followed that Christians had to live exceptional lives in order to silence their critics by the excellence of their conduct.

1 Peter chapter 3 verse 14 "But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed." The suffering Christian must ever remember he follows a suffering Lord. The main theme of 1 Peter is suffering. It's mentioned 15 times. Christ gave us an example of innocent suffering. It's important to have thought out your faith for at times it will be challenged. Peter writes "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have, but do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander" (verses 15 and 16). Obviously, Jesus Christ Himself demonstrated that a person could be in the centre of God's will, greatly loved, and still suffer unjustly.

The original Greek word for "give an answer" is 'apologia'. It has the sense of a defence lawyer speaking on his client's behalf. 'Christian apologetics' is the way Christians handle questions and defend their faith.

Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit. He then visited Hades, the realm of the dead. When it says (verse 19) 'He went and preached to the spirits in prison' it does not mean the people of Noah's day had a second chance to repent and believe. The Greek word used for 'preach' here does not mean to evangelise or preach the gospel. The word is 'to announce as a herald', 'to proclaim the victory'. He addresses the fallen

spirits. He went to Hades to herald His finished work and deliver the proclamation “I am victorious.”

In verse 20 Peter mentions Noah – a man of faith who kept doing God’s will even when he seemed to be a failure. This would encourage Peter’s readers. If we measured faithfulness by results, Noah would get a very low grade, but God ranked him very highly. Peter says the eight in the ark ‘were saved through water’, that is, brought to safety through the flood because they were in the ark. ‘This water symbolises (or corresponds to) baptism’ (verse 21). Christ is our ark who carries us across from the old life to the new. This illustration does not imply salvation by baptism, but baptism is a figure of that which does save us, namely, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Baptism does save us from one thing, a bad conscience. We know that a clear conscience is important to a successful witness (verse 16).

Bible teacher Warren Wiersbe says the ark rested on Mount Ararat on the 17th day of the 7th month (Genesis 8 verse 4). The Jewish civil year began with October. The seventh month is April. Jesus was crucified on 14th day as the Passover Lamb (Exodus 12:6). Three days later – on the 17th – He rose from the dead, mighty Conqueror.

We don’t have to be baptised to go to heaven, but baptism is necessary in order for us to have a good conscience before God. Our obedience to baptism is “the pledge of a good conscience” (verse 21).

The chapter closes with the apostle emphasising Christ’s utter supremacy over ‘angels, authorities and powers’. At the ascension and Christ’s victorious entry into heaven all Satan’s’ evil hosts submitted to His Lordship. In chapters 2 and 3 there’s a lot about submission. All the beings in heaven are in submission to Him – only man rebels.

Chapter 4 opens by reminding us that a Christian mind-set or attitude is hostile to sin and friendly to righteousness, whatever the cost. For a believer, sin is not an option any more. Let me ask you “Are you done with sin?” People said of the evangelist Billy Sunday, “He preached on sin and he always was specific when he spoke about sin. He spelled it out.” So does Peter here. He says, in effect, live the rest of your earthly life for God. “You have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do – living in debauchery (sexual sin), lust (appetite run wild), drunkenness, orgies and detestable idolatry.” In pagan worship there was often gross immorality and religious prostitution. Pagans “think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of

dissipation, and they heap abuse on you” (verse 4). The pagan life style of ‘living for kicks’ no longer appeals to the believer. He can see through it and has given up that reckless drive for pleasure without any brakes put on. Believers are wiser, knowing there is a day of reckoning and wisdom dictates they should live in the light of coming judgement.

8 - Suffering as a Christian

T. S. Elliot, writing about judgement day said, “Be prepared for Him who knows how to ask questions.” How we live and serve today will determine how we’re judged and rewarded on that day. Judgement is unavoidable – for the living and the dead. There is no second chance after death. Because “the end of all things is near” (verse 7) we should live in the light of eternity. Peter urges us to “be clear minded and self-controlled” (verse 7). The Authorised Version says “Watch unto prayer.” Perhaps Peter was thinking back to Gethsemane. The primacy of love is stressed because “love covers over a multitude of sins” (verse 8). In Genesis chapter 9 you remember how Noah when drunk lay naked inside his tent. Then “Shem and Japheth took a garment and laid it across their shoulders; then they walked in backwards and covered their father’s nakedness” (verse 23). Love doesn’t expose sin, it covers it.

Peter writes “Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling” (verse 9). In Bible days inns were filthy, expensive and immoral places, so travelling missionaries stayed in Christian homes. In fact for two hundred years there were no church buildings. Through His children, the Master still asks “Where is the guest chamber?” Hebrews 13 verse 2 says, “Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.” Are you ‘given to hospitality’ – Is there real warmth in your welcome or are you thinking “Oh no, not them again: we had them last week!”?

Graces are those aspects of Christian living we are all called to display – self control, prayerfulness, love and showing hospitality. Gifts, however, are specific abilities given to individuals by the Holy Spirit to serve God and others. “Each one of us should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms” (verse 10). It’s the same Greek word we had in chapter 1 verse 6. Just as there are ‘all kinds of trials’, so there are ‘various forms’ of grace. Just as a stained glass window has but the one sun shining through it giving a multitude of different effects, so is God’s grace. Peter describes two kinds of gifts – speaking and doing. “If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the very strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ” (verse 11).

Peter now writes about the Christian response to suffering. “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial” – literally the Greek suggests an experience of ‘burning.’ Once Peter did think it strange that His Master should

think of suffering. Remember Jesus had said, “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first” (John 15 verse 18) and “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also” (John 15 verse 20). Peter says “Rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when His glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you” (verses 13 and 14). Enduring through trials is one indication of the genuineness of our faith.

I remember reading about Pastor Richard Wurmbbrand who spent three years in solitary confinement in an underground prison in Rumania because of his faith. He said at times the presence of the Lord was so real that he had to literally dance for joy.

Could it be that eternal glory awaits the one who has stood up for Christ unmoved amid the mockery of schoolmates or the taunts of fellow workers? Trials are intended, in the economy of God, to reveal the secrets of our hearts, to humble us and to prove us. We must not look on trials as punishment for the past because all penalty has been borne for us by Our Redeemer.

St. Bernard said that Jesus always fled when they wanted to make Him king and presented Himself when they wanted to crucify Him. I recall the noble words of Ittai the Gittite (2 Samuel 15 verse 21) to King David, “As surely as the Lord lives, and as my lord the king lives, wherever my lord the king may be, whether it means life or death, there will your servant be.”

Many believe that before God pours out His wrath upon this world in the Great Tribulation, a fiery trial will come to God’s church to unite and purify her that she might be a strong witness to the lost.

Spiritually, when it’s ‘summertime, and the livin’ is easy’, we tend to drift. Suffering draws us back to God very quickly.

Verse 15 is interesting. “If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler,” Interesting that ‘meddling’, being an interfering busybody is included. As we see in 1Thessalonians 4 verse 11, believers are encouraged to mind their own business!

One of the first questions to ask of any experience of suffering is this: Why am I suffering? Is it because of faithfulness to Christ or as a result of my own sin? There is no shame attached to suffering as a Christian if it is as a result of standing up for Jesus. Judgement begins with the family of God. We’re treated as legitimate children of God whom He lovingly disciplines when we

need His correction. “God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in His holiness” (Hebrews 12 verse 10). “When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world” (1Corinthians 11 verse 32).

Judgement for non-Christians is very different. They will have to give an account of their lives without the ‘defence counsel’ of Jesus Christ to speak up for them! Peter quotes from Proverbs 11 verse 31 “If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?”

If we are suffering according to God’s will, we should, just like Jesus, commit ourselves to our faithful Creator and continue to do good. It’s the same word that Jesus used on the cross, when He cried out “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”

9 - A Word for Shepherds and Sheep

Chapter 5 of 1 Peter opens with an exhortation to the elders, the spiritual leaders of the church. It comes from a veteran shepherd, Peter, who describes himself as 'a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed' (NKJV verse 1).

William Barclay speaks of eldership as an honour – the oldest religious office in the world whose history can be traced through Christianity and Judaism 4,000 years. An elder was a defender of the faith.

Peter writes "Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly" (NKJV verse 2). Sheep are allotted to our care, as church leaders. We are expected to display the attitude of God to the flock, an attitude of seeking love. One must have a shepherd's heart, if one would do a shepherd's work. F. B. Meyer wrote, "It is not enough to preach to the flock once or twice each week. There must be personal supervision, watching for souls as by those who must give account. Seeking them if they go astray."

A New Testament bishop or overseer was not a man who dressed in a special hat or wore a large ring which all the people stooped to kiss. Nor was the eldership a chain-gang, but a fellowship of servants. Not driving, but leading: not domineering, but setting an example. The elders supplied a local sphere of service, they had a fixed spiritual abode. On that day 'when the Chief Shepherd appears' there will be an unfading crown of glory for elders.

The young men are told to be submissive to those who are older, and all are instructed to be clothed with humility towards one another because "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (verse 5).

Suffering often produces humility and patience. Slaves used to knot a white scarf or apron over their clothing to distinguish themselves from freemen. Jesus wore such an apron when he washed the disciples' feet in John chapter 13. Christians should tie humility, like a piece of clothing, to their conduct so that everyone is able to recognise them. "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that He may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you" (verses 6 and 7). Cast means throw. He is the burden-bearer. We are to treat cares as we treat sins. Hand them over to Jesus one by one as they occur. He takes up the isles as a very little thing,

therefore, how easily He can manage our heaviest load. The weary ache of care need burden you no longer.

There's a lovely verse in Proverbs chapter 12 verse 25. "An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers him up."

Peter continues, "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of suffering" (verses 8 and 9). The devil is constantly harassing the saints. Underneath the arenas in Rome, literally, there were hungry lions caged up, waiting to be released into the midst of helpless Christians. One of Satan's tactics is to seek to depress believers so they concentrate exclusively on their own problems.

Through suffering God will restore a person. The Greek word is the word for mending nets. Suffering can repair the weaknesses in a person's character. The story is told of a mother who lost her favourite son. Her daughter commented, "That's where my mother got her soft eyes and that is why other mothers ran to her when they had lost a child."

So Peter signs off "And the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will Himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast" (verse 10). It is God alone who can establish a man – make him as solid as granite and fill him with strength.

In his post-script Peter mentions Silas, Paul's right hand man on the second missionary journey. He's a faithful brother. Verse 13 presents us with a slight mystery. It says "She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you her greetings." According to Calvin and Erasmus this really is Babylon, not a code name for Rome, but the ancient city of Babylon itself where a large colony of Jews had fled following the severe persecution in Rome under the Emperor Claudius. So Peter's many exhortations in his first letter have come to an end. A brief letter encouraging the scattered saints to stand fast in the true grace of God.

Peter has been writing to alert the Christians who were currently going through the mill for Christ that they have a secure future in Him unlike investors whose 'securities' can go up or down in value. They may feel like round pegs in square holes in this abusive world, often facing critical verbal sniper-fire, but they remain God's own special people. Christian, I'm sure you

are not unaware that the devil is the instigator of verbal flack from non-Christians, for he wants to 'devour' us, that is, to do away with us.

Tertullian contrasts the exceptional lives of the early Christians with the heathen. The heathen delighted in the bloody gladiatorial shows in the amphitheatre, whereas a Christian was excommunicated if he went to it at all. When pagans deserted their nearest relatives in the plague Christian's ministered to the sick. When Gentiles left their dead unburied on the field of battle and cast their wounded into the streets, the disciples hastened to relieve their sufferings. In fact Pliny admitted in his letter to the Emperor Trajan that there was no cause of blame in the followers of the new religion 'save a perverse and extravagant superstition.' It was Tertullian who remarked "How these Christians love one another."

10 - Be On Your Guard

One of the neglected New Testament books is Peter's second letter. It was written to combat beliefs and activities of certain men who were a threat to the church. Peter warns of heresy like poison seeping into the church via its teachers.

This letter, written around 66 AD, was Peter's swan-song in which he takes a strong stand against those who would depart from the faith. If someone defects from their beliefs and abandons their religious faith, we may call such a person an apostate. Peter, like Paul, was keen to anchor the church on the Word of God as the only defence against the coming storm of false doctrine and apostasy. It's as if Peter is saying, knowledge of the scriptures will be our defence and shield. Decide not to be a biblically ignorant Christian.

If Peter's first letter was saying be hopeful though persecution is coming upon you, from outside the church, his second letter is saying be alert because there are real dangers inside the church. False teachers spreading error are dangerous. It's not unchristian to warn of spiritual charlatans and religious shysters. A group called Gnostics claimed to have some secret knowledge that no one else had. They had a form or formula, a rite or ritual, a secret order or password that you had to get in order to join their society. Peter says real knowledge is not the preserve of the private few, the initiated elite. Real knowledge is to know Jesus Christ. It is in the public domain. Know Him, the living Word, and know the Scripture, the written word. This is a vital truth especially in our day. You will not be able to live for God in these days of apostasy unless you have a knowledge of the Word of God. That's Peter's theme – knowing will result in growing. Hadn't Hosea written "My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge"?

Peter begins his second letter by calling himself 'a servant 'or slave of Jesus Christ. It's a title of humiliation for it signified an unquestioning obedience. In the ancient world the slave had literally no time of his own, no holidays, no leisure. All his time belonged to his Master.

2 Peter 1 verse 3 is well worth memorising, "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness." How? "Through our knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness." When born again we are given the divine nature. We receive faith that is 'precious' (verse 1) and promises that are 'great and precious' (verse 4) and godly living is the result of cultivating the new nature within. That's why Peter (verse 5) urges us to 'make

every effort to add to our faith' seven qualities of Christian character. We're to add 'goodness, knowledge and self control.' Proverbs 25 verse 28 says, "Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control." Many false teachers claimed knowledge made self control unnecessary. Peter believed that Christian knowledge led to self control. We're to add 'perseverance' which relates to the pressures of life and 'godliness' or godlikeness. Also we must add 'brotherly kindness and love.' Such qualities are Spirit produced.

It's so important in the Christian life to keep on making progress. The supreme effort of man must cooperate with the grace of God. It's not about polishing human qualities, but rather producing divine qualities. There's a great promise in verse 8. "If you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."

The Authorised Version says (verse 11) "Give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall." Believer, don't park up in a local church and rest in a spiritual lay by, keep moving. Nutritionists say that diet can certainly affect vision. If we desire to see clearly in the spiritual realm, we need to feed on the Word of God and remember we have been cleansed from our past sins. Think of the rich welcome that awaits the overcomer on that day in the eternal kingdom.

Peter reminds them of truth they already know and he says 'I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body' (verse 13). He knows his tent must be folded up very soon – as Jesus prophesied. Death is taking down your tent and pitching it in another location – in the believer's case, on higher ground! Peter is acting very responsibly as he writes (verse 15) "I will make every effort to see that after my departure (his exodus from this world) you will always be able to remember these things."

The apostle includes his own personal testimony, "We weren't just wishing on a star when we laid the facts out before you regarding the powerful return of our Master, Jesus Christ" (verse 16 'The Message'). Peter, remember, was one of the eyewitnesses of the supernatural occurrence on the Mount of Transfiguration. "He (Jesus) received honour and glory from God the Father when the voice came to Him from the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, whom I love, with Him I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with Him on the sacred mount" (verses 17 and 18).

Was the Transfiguration a miniature picture of the kingdom with Old Testament and New Testament saints present? Was it a foretaste of His coming glory and the kingdom come with power? The Transfiguration was God's way of strengthening Jesus for Calvary.

We live in a demonised world at the foot of the mountain but Peter's powerful testimony (verse 16) was, literally, 'we were admitted to the spectacle of His sovereignty.' Remember these are the words of the apostle and martyr who had had breakfast with the Risen Christ on the shore of Galilee lake and later preached in Jerusalem at Pentecost when 3,000 people were saved and baptised in water.

11 - Beware of False Teachers

Let me greet you with Peter's words in the first chapter of his second letter: "Grace and peace be multiplied unto you through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord" (verse 2). He's addressing believers who have 'escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust' (verse 4).

We live in a day when religious deception is on the increase because believers don't know their Bibles. Peter writes, "We have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place" (verse 19). The word 'dark' suggests 'dismal, murky' – a picture of a dark cellar or a dismal swamp. The Message puts it this way "The prophetic Word --- is the one light you have in a dark time as you wait for daybreak and the rising of the Morning Star in your hearts."

Peter writes (verse 20), "You must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophets' own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man." Isaiah didn't get out of bed one morning and say, 'I think I'll write a few prophecies today.' "Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (verse 21). These were holy men 'blown along by the wind of God's Spirit' like a sailing ship. "All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3 verse 16).

And so to 2 Peter 2 which Martyn Lloyd-Jones called "One of the most terrible chapters in the entire Bible." It's about false prophets and their shameful ways. There were 'false prophets' in the Old Testament, for example, Zedekiah (1 Kings 22) and Hananiah (Jeremiah 28). Often they brought a popular "Peace, peace" comfortable message opposite to what God was saying. Peter warns that false teachers 'secretly introduce destructive heresies' (verse 1). Heresy is literally something which forces people to make a choice. Wrong teaching creates division. False teachers had to be stopped before the faith was wrecked by their perversion of the truth.

Satan works overtime at influencing the running of churches. He deals in forgeries and counterfeits. The devil has false apostles, false Christians, children of the devil, a false gospel and one day he'll present to the world a false Christ.

False teachers are often better known for what they deny, than what they affirm. Because they deny 'the sovereign Lord who bought them' (verse 1),

they are clearly not saved and are later compared not to sheep, but to dogs and pigs. Jude describes them in his letter (verse 19) thus: “These are the men who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts, and do not have the Spirit.” The Message says such charlatans “give truth a bad name. They’re only out for themselves. They’ll say anything, anything that sounds good to exploit you.”

False teachers are often clever with words. They use plastic words twisted to mean anything you want them to mean. They may talk of resurrection, but they don’t mean bodily resurrection. They may talk of salvation or inspiration, but they don’t mean what we mean. Warren Wiersbe remarks, “The false teachers use our vocabulary, but they don’t use our dictionary.”

Peter makes it crystal clear that judgement is sure for all false teachers ‘Their condemnation has long been hanging over them’ (verse 3). If rebel angels, who sinned against God, could not escape judgement, why should we suppose men and women could? The same God who protected Noah, a preacher of righteousness, used the flood waters that drowned the ungodly ancient world to lift him and his household up above the judgement. The same God who burnt to ashes Sodom and Gomorrah as ‘an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly’ (verse 6), rescued Lot whose soul was daily tormented by the lawless deeds he witnessed. This same God is the Lord who “knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgement’ (verse 9).

We’re surprised to see Lot described as a ‘righteous’ man. Genesis Chapter 19 shows him as a greedy, selfish man who treated two of his daughters abominably. But God’s assessment is, “Lot trusts in Me.” It was torture for him to live in Sodom. We never got that impression of Lot, whilst reading Genesis.

Pause to reflect what a privilege Lot had – to walk with Abraham, who walked with God. Lot chose to live in Sodom where he lost his testimony. Lot had entered Sodom and then Sodom had entered Lot and he found it difficult to leave. Clearly Lot was saved: he is called ‘a righteous man.’ He hated the lifestyle in Sodom and he was justified because of his faith, but his life denied everything he believed and he never had a moment’s peace down here. I reckon the rescue of Lot from Sodom prefigures the rapture of the church – the great snatch of God.

The apostates are described as ‘bold and arrogant’ (verse 10). They despise authority and rush in where angels fear to tread. Godly angels do not even

speak against fallen angels but apostates know no such bounds. They are not afraid to slander celestial beings.

The Message paraphrase calls them “brute beasts ... predators on the prowl ... losers in the end.” Indeed this chapter is one of the most sombre in scripture, with a grim message and dire warnings.

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12 - The Mark of an Apostate

In Chapter 2 of Peter's second letter he launches into some magnificent invective against apostates or false teachers. Through this fiery denunciation glows the heat of flaming moral indignation. J. B. Phillips translates verse 12, "They scoff at things outside their own experience." These religious con-men are very dangerous. Outwardly they appear to serve God and minister to the people but inwardly they feed their own egos and feather their own nests. They exalt themselves, instead of exalting Christ.

One third of this short letter is on false teachers and the damage they do to the cause of Christ. The vivid description of an unsaved apostate is bleak indeed. "They are like brute beasts ... and like beasts they too will perish" (verse 12). "They are blots and blemishes" (verse 13). Quite the opposite of the Christ-like character. "With eyes full of adultery, they never stop sinning; they seduce the unstable; they are experts in greed – an accursed brood!" (verse 14).

"They have left the straight way and wandered off to follow the way of Balaam" (verse 15). Balaam is mentioned three times in the closing books of the New Testament. Peter speaks of 'the way of Balaam,' Jude speaks of 'the error of Balaam' and Revelation mentions 'the doctrine of Balaam.'

Balaam knew he should not go and prophesy against Israel, but the price was right. He was a Gentile prophet who turned profiteer. He knew the truth of God and the will of God, but he deliberately went astray and abandoned the right way to make money (Numbers chapters 22-24). He could get messages from God, but he led people away from God. He was a rebel at heart. He kept 'playing with the will of God' by trying to get 'a different viewpoint.' Peter called this attitude 'madness'. Just as the angel of Lord stood in 'a narrow place' (Numbers 22 verse 26) to prevent Balaam from going in the wrong way, so Jesus says 'the road is narrow that leads to life.' Balaam was of those people who 'eager for money have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs" (1 Timothy 6 verse 10).

The Message paraphrase slates these false teachers. "There's nothing to these people – they're dried up fountains, storm-scattered clouds, headed for a black hole in hell. They are loudmouths, full of hot air, but still they're dangerous" (verses 17-18). Their aim is to deceive – they promise something they can't deliver. Verse 19 expresses it succinctly "They promise them freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity – for a man is a slave to whatever has

mastered him.” Apostates have had a religious experience which was false. They never trusted Christ and became his sheep, that’s why they are likened to dogs – filthy scavengers that lived on garbage. Reformation cleans up the outside, but regeneration changes the inside. A scrubbed sow goes back to rolling in the mud – nothing’s changed on the inside.

Peter says, regarding apostates, “The proverbs are true: ‘A dog returns to its vomit’, and ‘A sow that is washed goes back to her wallowing in the mud’” (verse 22). In fact, Peter gives us the parable of the prodigal pig. The pig looked better, the dog felt better, but neither had been changed. It was the same old nature. They revert to type. They return to their true, natural, unchanged condition. The apostate teaches error deliberately – he is a false brother, self-promoting, with a message geared towards new converts to lead them astray.

Why is this chapter so similar to Jude’s letter? Both men were contending for the faith that was once delivered to the saints. Some warnings cannot be repeated too often. God permits cults and “isms” in order to draw away from the true church that which is false, because those who are phoney will go after that sort of thing. Someone has said, “It’s not our profession of faith that guarantees we’re saved: it’s our progression in the faith that gives us that assurance.” The eleven thought Judas was a spiritual man, but he was not saved.

The rather difficult section towards the end of chapter 2 is paraphrased in the Message, referring to apostates, “If they’ve escaped from the slum of sin by experiencing our Master and Saviour, Jesus Christ, and then slid back into that same old life again, they’re worse than if they had never left. Better not to have started out on the straight road to God than to start out and then turn back, repudiating the experience and the holy command.” It begs the question were such people ever really saved in the first place?

Chapter 3 opens with the thought that the answer to heresy is maturity. Here’s Peter’s shepherd heart addressing God’s elect, “Dear friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both of them as reminders to stimulate you to wholesome thinking. I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Saviour through your apostles” (verses 1 and 2).

Apostates mock the second coming. They scoff at such a preposterous idea. “Where is this ‘coming’ He promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything

goes on as it has since the beginning of creation” (verse 4). They assume that this is a stable universe and nothing changes here. “They deliberately forget that long ago by God’s word the heavens existed and the earth was formed” (verse 5). It was formed out of a watery chaos, but it later perished in the flood.

Here’s the trademark of an apostate. He is not a seeker after truth. Of some things he is wilfully ignorant. False teachers purposely ignore a good deal of the evidence. They can be very selective and overlook data that doesn’t match their theory.

The truth is the earth was judged in the past and will be judged in the future, but it will still go on. Righteousness does not dwell in this earth today. It’s not at home here. The times are out of joint. One day God will trade in the old model, for there’s a new world coming, the home of righteousness.

13 - Jesus is Coming

There's an old saying "God's in His heaven, all's right with the world", but all's not right with the world, but He's going to make it right some day. One day there'll be "a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth shall pass away" (Revelation 21:1). Peter expresses it thus, in 2 Peter 3:7: "The present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgement and destruction of ungodly men."

Four times in this last chapter Peter addresses his readers as 'dear friends.' So in verse 8 he writes, "Do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day." God is not rushing things. After all, He has eternity behind Him and eternity ahead of Him. He doesn't need to worry about time. God is not slow. He doesn't need prodding to get a move on. He is the ultimate promise-keeper. His patience with us is because He is 'not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance' (verse 9). Be thankful for the mercy of God's delay.

"The day of the Lord will come like a thief" (verse 10). The Day of the Lord is an extended period of time. It opens with the Tribulation, then the one thousand year reign of Christ (the millennium), the brief rebellion led by Satan, the Great White Throne judgement and ultimately new heavens and new earth. The Day of the Lord is the direct intervention of God at the end of the age. Peter says "The heavens (the atmosphere) will disappear with a crackling roar. The Greek word suggests the sound a spear makes as it hurtles through the air, the crackling of the flames of a forest fire, the swish of an arrow. The elements – everything that goes to make up our world as we know it – will be destroyed by fire.

In the Authorised Version it says "the elements shall melt with fervent heat" (verse 12). Quite a remarkable statement from a fisherman in Galilee. How could the sea where he fished burn? The elements (the atoms), the building blocks of the universe are to be absolutely melted. The Greek word 'tekomaí' suggests the wasting away of nature, the dissolution of the present heavens.

A tremendous question is raised in verse 11: "Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be?" His answer "You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming" (verse 12).

Now there's a thought! When we live right and evangelise we hasten the soon return of Christ as King. The missionary activity of the church will speed the coming of the King. Our coldness of heart and disobedience delay His coming. Rabbis used to say, "It is the sins of the people which prevent the coming of the Messiah. If the Jews would genuinely repent for one day, the Messiah would come."

Peter's contention is that second coming teaching should not make us crackpots, but it should be a dynamic belief that draws us expectantly to look forward to seeing Jesus. "In keeping with His promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness" (verse 13).

James Agate once declared that his mind was not a bed to be made and remade, but that on certain things it was finally made up. So with Peter. Because Jesus Christ is Lord and one day we shall be with Him forever – Are you looking forward to this? – we should "make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with Him" (verse 14). In short, what we believe must affect how we behave. That's what he's been writing chapter after chapter. "Be holy in all you do" (1 Peter 1 verse 15), "love one another deeply, from the heart" (1 Peter 1 verse 22): "Be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray" (1 Peter 4 verse 7). Christians should be different, but not odd. When we are different, we attract others. If we are odd, we repel them. False doctrine leads to false living, but righteous living proceeds from right doctrine.

Never forget that our Lord's patience means more opportunity for salvation; it does not indicate indifference on God's part. It always amuses me to read Peter's comment on Paul's letters which were known and used throughout the church by this time and covered the same topic of false doctrine. He says of 'dear brother Paul' who 'wrote to you with the wisdom that God gave him ... His letters contain some things that are hard to understand' (verse 16). We can all say 'Amen' to that!

Here's what 'ignorant and unstable people' do. They 'distort' scripture – the Greek word means 'to torture on the rack or to pervert.' This destructive practice is at the heart of most heresies. They are a perversion of some fundamental biblical doctrine. False teachers tortured the Word of God in order to prove their false doctrines.

So Peter signs off. “Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position ” (verse 17).

“Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (verse 18). How easy it is to grow in knowledge and not in grace. We all know far more of the Bible than we really live. The lessons learned in the school of grace are always costly lessons, requiring diligence, discipline and priorities.

Through the straight talking in Peter’s letter about suffering (1 Peter) and false teachers (2 Peter), it’s easy to forget that letter one began in grace: “Grace and peace be yours in abundance” (1 Peter 1 verse 2), and ended with grace: “this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it” (1 Peter 5:12). And letter two began with grace: “Grace and peace be yours in abundance” (2 Peter 1:2) and ended in grace: “grow in grace” (2 Peter 3:18).