

## First Peter No. 1 “Peter”

### 1 Peter 1:1-2

September 10, 2017

The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

#### Text Comment

- v.1 If you consult the map in the back of your Bible you will find that these areas are found in the northern half of Asia Minor, present day Turkey. Interestingly, they were largely areas in which the Apostle Paul did not minister. Eusebius, the 4<sup>th</sup> century church historian, suggested that Peter may have had a part in evangelizing these areas, though we have no other evidence that he did. We do know that he did itinerant evangelism and church planting; but we don't know precisely where. It will become clear as we read the letter, however, that what Peter has to say applies to all Christians everywhere.

By the way, the references at the end of the letter to Silas, or Silvanus, (5:12) and to Mark (5:13), whom Peter calls his son, reminds us that there was more comradeship among the apostles and more partnership in ministry than we might have guessed from the little information we are given in Acts and the letters of Paul. Silas, as you remember, was a colleague of Paul and accompanied him on some of his missionary tours. Mark, or John Mark, who was a close associate of Peter – indeed, the Gospel of Mark was Mark's summary of Peter's teaching about the life and death of the Lord Jesus – would also serve the Apostle Paul in a similar role. Peter will mention Paul in his second letter and Paul mentions Peter in both Galatians and in his first letter to the Corinthians. Each man knew what the other was doing, they shared associates, and, of course, later, they would both be executed in Rome during Nero's persecution in the mid-60s.

Peter tells us in 5:13 that he was in Babylon when he wrote the letter, almost certainly a reference to Rome. That he calls the Christians “exiles” in v. 1 mixes the metaphor. Christians, like the Jews in exile in literal Babylon in the OT, are displaced persons in the theological and spiritual sense, even when they are living in their homeland. Peter was also an exile, a point highlighted by his telling his readers that he was in Babylon.

When Peter wrote his letter it appears that the Neronian persecution had not yet begun. Had it begun Peter would almost certainly have mentioned it, given that his readers were suffering persecution themselves. So the letter was probably written in the early 60s.

- v.2 What we have here is simply one among a number of such summaries of the salvation that God has bestowed on sinners that we find in the New Testament. In this case we have salvation from election (foreknowledge is just a synonym for God's choice of a people for salvation before the foundation of the world; indeed, some translate “*chosen* by God the Father”) to atonement to the changed life. The Bible doesn't always follow the tidy order we have been taught (we'd put the reference to the blood of Christ before the reference to sanctification) but the main points are all there.

Tonight we begin a new series of Lord's Day evening sermons on one of the truly fascinating books of the New Testament. I have preached through First Peter before but it has been many years and

neither I nor you can remember those sermons! Peter's letter is valuable for many reasons. It is a shorter summary of the Christian faith, without the detail and close argument of, say, Paul's letter to the Romans. Peter puts whole before us in a nutshell. One commentator on the letter calls 1 Peter "the most condensed New Testament resume of the Christian faith and of the conduct that it inspires." [Clowney, 15] Martyn Lloyd-Jones spent some 13 years working his way through

Romans, but that meant that by the time he reached the letter's ethical application it was hard to remember the details of the theological exposition that was meant to inspire and inform Christian behavior. With Peter, the wait will not be so long! *Peter's letter also reminds us of the two utterly unique features of our Christian faith*, both fundamental to its meaning and its power.

*The first is this.* Like other such summaries that we find in the New Testament, Peter reminds us in memorable ways of the connection between our faith and our life, between what we believe and how we live, between our doctrine and our practice. Christians are a people who live out of their faith. But even the most principled and convinced Christians can forget this and need reminding. I know I do.

Of course, there is little that we will find in Peter that we don't find elsewhere in the New Testament, apart from some details of argument. But more to the point, the general order in which the material is presented that we find in 1 Peter we also find in Paul. In Paul, as you will remember, we typically find an account of God's grace and saving work first. That is then followed by a description of the Christian life. The two sections of his letters are connected to one another by a "therefore." That is, because God has been so gracious to us, because he has accomplished our salvation in this way through Jesus Christ, because we have been made the children of God in defiance of our sinfulness and ill-desert, *therefore* we ought to live in this manner. You have that famously in Paul's letter to the Romans. After eleven chapters of the Bible's most complete exposition of God's work of salvation for us and in us, chapter 12 begins: "Therefore, I urge you, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."

You have the same in Ephesians. After three wonderful chapters on the way of salvation and God's grace toward sinners, from election to atonement to faith and justification, to sanctification, Paul begins his exposition of the Christian life with the words, "I urge you *therefore* to walk worthy of the grace you have received." And then he proceeds to tell us what "walking worthy" of that divine grace amounts to. You have the same thing in Colossians and you find the same "therefore" to the same effect in Philippians. Always it is the same: theology first, ethics second; our way of life is built on our understanding of God's grace and salvation. We discover both our motivation for the hard work of Christian obedience and the general shape of that obedience and service in the love that God has lavished on us in Christ by the Holy Spirit.

Well, it is the same here in Peter. You will see the same order in the very first chapter. Peter begins his letter with an account of salvation by grace through Christ. He praises God for so great a salvation in vv. 3ff. He is still talking about God's salvation in v. 10. Its greatness and mystery are such, he says in v. 12, that even angels long to look into, to understand such things. So great is God's salvation that even angels find it mesmerizing.

But, then, notice v. 13. "Therefore, prepare your minds for action..." There Peter begins to describe the life that is a worthy, a reasonable response to so great a salvation. Unlike Paul, he does not so

much divide his argument into two main sections; rather he weaves the two parts together throughout his letter. You get more theology in vv. 23-25 followed by another “Therefore” in 3:1. And so on. But this is the splendid uniqueness of the Christian life: it is life *from*, not life *to*; it is a loving response to a great love; it is the willing sacrifice of myself to honor an immeasurable sacrifice made for me.

Don’t make the mistake of thinking this “old hat.” The fact that the Christian life is a life *from* salvation and not *to* salvation is the most important thing that we can know about it. Christians live as they do, they keep the commandments of God, they seek to serve the Lord and his gospel not *in order to be saved*, but *because they have been saved*. This understanding is critical, fundamental to any right understanding of the Christian faith.

If you attend a course in the philosophy of religion in almost any American university today, you are very likely to be taught that all religions at bottom are the same, or amount to the expression of the same human need. Religion – whatever religion – is at bottom man’s quest for God, for the ultimate, for meaning in life, for peace in the face of death, or whatever. And in fact I think that is true, *if you exclude biblical Christianity from consideration!* All the other religions are, in fact, various expressions of the same religious impulse. All of them teach, all of them exist to teach a certain way of life, however the “good life” is defined in that religion. And each of them motivates its practitioners to live this good life with the promise of something in return. All of them, in one way or another, teach that if we do *this* we will *live*. All of them offer salvation of some kind and all of them require a certain behavior of us in order to obtain that salvation. Of course they define what ought to be done differently, very differently. The Hindu will bathe in the Ganges, offer sacrifices and prayers, abstain from certain foods, and on and on; the Muslim will observe “the five pillars,” especially his five-times-a-day prayer; the modern Jew, if he is orthodox will observe dietary and ritual laws, the worship of the synagogue; the Ten Commandments, if he is liberal he will try to be nice to people and give to charity, and so on..

In the same way, these religions will define salvation differently, the reward that one will obtain for doing what the religion requires. For the Muslim heaven is a very earthly paradise in which he will live in the future enjoyment of sensual pleasures of every kind. The Hindu will eventually ascend to Nirvana, after however many rounds of re-incarnation. Nirvana is nothing like the Muslim’s paradise. It is the condition one finally achieves as the individual is absorbed by the unity, the oneness at the heart of the universe; the individual, the particular person ceases to be and becomes part of the whole. Even the atheist seeks whatever reward might be found *in this world* – whether a clear conscience or the satisfaction of having done good, or the approbation of others, or pleasure itself – by doing certain things that atheists agree ought to be done. *No one does such things – no one lives his or her idea of a moral life, a good life, for no reason at all. Everyone, whatever his or her religion or non-religion is seeking some reward.* As Augustine and Pascal remind us, everything people do, *everything*, they do in the hopes of being happy, whether only now or in the world to come. And so all human religions in effect are telling their practitioners the same thing: “do this and you will be happy,” whatever *this* is and whatever *happy* means.

This is the fact, perhaps the bottom fact of human life: mankind is living *to* salvation. But it is not so in Christianity, at least not in Christianity as it is defined in the Bible. Here the believer lives *from* life, not *to* life. It is the grand uniqueness of the Christian faith. I’m not sure that Christians, that you and I, think about this as much as we should. Almost nothing we do is done *so that* we might finally

get to heaven. Christians know why they are going to heaven and it isn't going to be because they did this or did that.

The Bible's message is utterly different at the root. The God of the Bible does not ask you to earn your salvation or your happiness by pious works or works of any kind. He tells you plainly that you cannot, that your situation is hopeless insofar as it depends on you. You are guilty, comprehensively

guilty, of all manner of sins against a holy God who will not, who cannot clear the guilty, whose eyes are too pure to behold the iniquity of which your life is chock full. No, what must be done, you cannot do. *But, what you cannot do, God in his great love has done for you*, sending his Son in the flesh to pay for your sins and the Holy Spirit to renew your heart. See how Peter covers that ground in verse 2? Chosen by the Father, sanctified by the Spirit, sprinkled clean by the Son. Where is your effort in any of that? It all comes after. And so it is everywhere in the Bible. *No other religion begins with what God has done for us*. No other religion places our hope entirely in the good pleasure and love of God.

*And that leads us to the second fundamental uniqueness of our Christian faith. It rests upon, it is rooted in, it is the proclamation of events in history, real history, human history*. Our faith is not first a philosophy of life, it is not first a set of doctrines about God and man and salvation. It is an account of *things that happened in space and time*. No other religion has anything at all resembling the incarnation of God, his coming in the flesh as a human baby *in the middle of history*. No other religion has anything remotely resembling the events of the Lord's birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven. He was born during the reign of Augustus, we know when and where. He was crucified during the reign of Tiberias, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea. Again, we know when and where. No other religion has at its center the death of God incarnate, the terrible sacrifice of God himself, the suffering of God himself for the sake of his children. No other religion has a resurrection from the dead in the middle of history that is both the grounds for and the anticipation of the salvation that awaits all who trust in Jesus Christ. The Christian gospel is a message about what *God has done for man in history*. Man can serve God, to be sure, but his service is only the loving gratitude expressed by those whose lives have been transformed by God's far greater love lavished on them when Christ died for them.

*Peter is all about this history*, about these events that disclose the meaning of human life and the way of salvation. No wonder he was. *He was there for almost all of it!* No wonder he wants to talk about those things he himself witnessed and which, for that reason all the more, are the salvation of the world. He returns to this history, of which he was an eyewitness, again and again throughout his letter. Of course he would; we expect nothing less of an eyewitness of the Lord's miracles, of one who heard all his sermons, of one who saw him led away to crucifixion, of one who saw him alive again on Easter Sunday, and of one who stood on the Mount of Olives and watched him ascend to heaven with the promise of his return. Here is our Christian faith: God's action in history to deliver his people from sin and death and our response in gratitude and love. And that was Peter's message as it was of Paul and all the apostles. What is the bottom obligation of the Christian faith? It is this: receive the gift God stands ready to give you. Then, as it happens, you will live as someone will who realizes what a stupendous gift he has been given and with what a great love she has been loved. As Peter's friend, the Apostle John put it, "We love him because he first loved us." *That dynamic* of gift and gratitude, of love first received and then returned, *is the Christian faith and the Christian life!* There is nothing like this, nothing remotely like this in the other religions and philosophies of mankind. There wasn't in Peter's day and there isn't in ours.

We all tend to one extreme or another, to one pole or the other. Some of us are more theorists, others are more practical; some of us thrive on doctrinal reading and discussion, we want to know the right interpretation of the Bible's teaching on various themes, while others of us are more interested in the practical questions of daily living.

J.I. Packer begins his famous and splendid book *Knowing God* in this way.

“In *A Preface to Christian Theology*, John MacKay illustrated two kinds of interest in Christian things by picturing persons sitting on the high front balcony of a Spanish house watching travelers go by on the road below. The ‘balconees’ can overhear the travelers’ talk and chat with them; they may comment critically on the way that the travelers walk; or they may discuss questions about the road, how it can exist at all or lead anywhere, what might be seen from different points along it, and so forth; but they are onlookers, and their problems are theoretical only. The travelers, by contrast, face problems which, though they have their theoretical angle, are essentially practical -- problems of the ‘which-way-to-go’ and ‘how-to-make-it’ type, problems which call not merely for comprehension but for decision and action too.” [11-12]

Well, the Bible, by and large, is a book for travelers, not for “balconees.” It rarely interests itself in purely theoretical problems, but is intensely interested in the practical problems faced by those who must navigate the waters of this world and come successfully safe ashore in heaven.

It is little interested, for example, in the theoretical problem of evil -- how evil can exist in God's world -- but it is deeply interested in helping God's people think rightly and well about the evil they themselves face, the evil they suffer, and about their own response to evil as they encounter it. Those are much more practical problems and questions. These are the sort of problems raised in First Peter. But, you see, those practical issues are all, first, issues of belief, of doctrine. One must first believe rightly and think rightly before one can live and choose rightly. For example, to respond to evil in the world in a wise and godly way, one must apply what one knows about God's sovereignty and goodness, about sin, about the Devil, about the purposes of trials and tribulations in the counsel of God, and so on. *And so in First Peter as everywhere in the Bible* we find a mix of doctrine and practice and a definite relationship between the two; the doctrine laid down as the foundation of the practice and the practice drawn out of the doctrine by applying it to the questions of daily life.

And why not? Peter was himself a traveler. I don't suppose there is a major figure in New Testament history that ordinary believers such as you and I find so accessible, so easy to know and relate to as Peter. We know more about him, certainly more about his personality and personal history, than about anyone else in the New Testament, including Paul. And we know the very kinds of things that make us gravitate to the man.

We know that Paul, for example, continued to be a sinner after he became a Christian, an inveterate sinner, who did what he ought not to have done and did not do what he should have done. We know this because Paul tells us and does so in the most moving and convincing way in Romans 7. But, apart from one rather curious instance, we never *see* Paul sin; we don't observe his personal failures

over which he mourns in Romans 7. We never see him lose his temper, or shoot off his mouth, or be overcome by lust, or shrink from some danger, or clamor for public attention.

But we see this in Peter. We even see it in Mark's Gospel which is really Peter's Gospel, Mark writing it under Peter's authority. Peter is like Luther's artist friend, Albert Durer, who put his own head and face on his famous portrait of the Prodigal Son. He is like those Christian men and women

through the ages who have told the painters of their portraits to paint them as they really are, warts and all.

We see Peter always at the front of the band of disciples, speaking first, even when he should have had the sense to keep his mouth shut. We see him getting into trouble time and again with his careless and unstudied words – as when he blurted out his opinion on the Mountain of the Transfiguration and was as much as told to shut up by God himself speaking from the cloud. The recollection of that moment must have stung through the whole course of the man's life. And then, after the Lord had spoken about the difficulty of salvation, how it is harder for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, Peter had the audacity to say, and apparently to mean, "Lord, We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" Or, in other words, "We've made this big sacrifice; what's in it for us?" [Matt. 19:27] We might well think that even if we thought such a thing – and we've all thought such things – we would have had the sense not to blurt out the words!

And then we see him in his terrible fall, first boldly and proudly proclaiming before the entire room the night of the last supper, his invincible loyalty to the Lord Jesus and then, that same night, denying the Lord publicly three times for fear of some indefinite and uncertain danger he might face were he to be identified as Christ's disciple. Imagine Peter when he met the Lord on that resurrection Sunday: ashamed of what he had done, of his cowardice even as he rejoiced to see the Master once again. We know what that's like, don't we?

But that is not all. We might well suppose that the resurrection and Pentecost and Peter's deliverance from prison by the hand of an angel, would have destroyed his cowardice forever. But Peter was no John Knox. He was a man who never got over fearing the face of man. And later, in Antioch, he threw the progress of the gospel into terrible jeopardy by failing to stand up for the freedom of the Gentiles which God himself had explicitly taught him and which he himself had earlier taught to the rest of the church! The possible criticism of one party of Christians had him cowed. How much like Peter we all are. How hard won our victories, how easily hard-won ground is lost again.

But, then, there is the other side of Peter: the humility, the heroism, the nobility of spirit that jostles in his character with all of that frailty and foolishness and cowardice. It was Peter who first came out into the clear at Caesarea Philippi and, before and in front of his comrades, declared that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the Living God. It was Peter who at the miraculous catch of fish fell down at Jesus' feet and, with the truest and purest humility pled with the Lord, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." When others who had followed the Lord were deserting him after his controversial sermon on the "Bread of Life," it was Peter who spoke for the rest of the twelve, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." It was to Peter, not to James or John, that the Lord spoke after his resurrection concerning the pastoral oversight of his church, surely indicating the way in which Peter had all along been and continued to be the first among

equals in the Twelve. And so it was Peter whose great sermon on Pentecost Sunday was the opening salvo in Christianity's battle for the soul of the world. It was Peter, the loyal Jew, who, with open arms, welcomed Cornelius the Gentile (and Roman soldier to boot) into the Christian church and convinced others to do the same. Would that you and I had one such triumph in our Christian life equal to those!

And, one thing more about Peter. There are some touches, just touches mind you, that suggest that in many ways, Peter was an ordinary man. We know from a remark of the Apostle Paul in 1 Cor. 9 that Peter was married. Now most men in that day were married as most men are today. But, still, it humanizes Peter to us to think of him a married man, indeed, as a man, Paul tells us, who traveled with his wife when he went places in the service of the gospel. No so Paul. We can hardly even think of Paul as married. Paul, for all his undoubted open-heartedness, for all his personal friendship, for all the colleagues that he brought beside himself into the ministry of the gospel, Paul conveys a powerful sense of solitariness; he is the titan, standing high above in splendid isolation. Not so Peter.

And, then, there is that remark, that revealing, that winning, that so honest remark in 2 Peter 3:16 about there being in Paul's letters some things that are hard to understand. We cannot be certain of this, I suppose, but is it not the case that most readers of the New Testament, most of the readers who are familiar with Peter himself from the pages of the New Testament, naturally assume that Peter was including himself among the number of those who have had some difficulty understanding certain things in the writings of that supremely powerful intellect we know as the Apostle Paul? Peter wasn't a scholar, he wasn't a trained rabbi as Paul was. He certainly wasn't the well-read philosopher that Paul was. He was a fisherman by trade. And even very powerful intellects have struggled with some expressions of the great Apostle to the Gentiles. There would be nothing surprising at all in Peter's having some difficulties as well. *Peter was and is our kind of guy!*

This is one of the wonderful things about our faith. It is faith for real people, people like you and me who are always stubbing our toes, who are stumbling over the same stumbling stones we tripped over years ago. People who lie in bed at night weeping bitter tears over one more failure to live worthy of the grace they have received, and yet who are, nevertheless, living a genuine Christian life and serving God. We need Paul, we need a champion, a mind capable of jousting with and leaving dead in the field the enemies of the truth of God. But, we need Peter also, to remind us how it is that God has chosen to build his kingdom with the likes of folk as ordinary, as unremarkable, as frail as we are. Peter was a Galilean and even the Jews in Jerusalem had difficulty believing he could be as influential as he became. We read in Acts 4:13 that it astonished them that such an unschooled and ordinary man could create such a stir. *No one ever said that about the Apostle Paul!* But Peter had been with Jesus and that made all the difference in the world!

And when, as it were, God asked his beloved Son, "To whom shall we give the honor and the task of proving that the most ordinary folk can bring life to the world and prove that the power of God is at work among men," the Lord Christ replied, I'm sure with a smile, "Give that job to the big fisherman! He is my man to do that!"