

## **2 Peter No. 1, “The Apostle Peter”**

**2 Peter 1:1-2**

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**The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

As it happens, I have never preached through 2 Peter. I have how preached through 1 Peter twice, but never 2 Peter. So, it seemed right to me, having just finished Peter’s first letter, to continue on through his shorter second letter.

2 Peter is, in some ways, an unusual letter. For example, as you may remember, short as the letter is, it shares to a remarkable extent some material in chapter 2 with Jude. You have only to read 2 Peter 2 and Jude to realize that either Jude had 2 Peter in front of him when he wrote, Peter had Jude in front of him when he wrote, or both had the same text by some other author before them when they wrote. It is not only that the subject of the verses is the same, the argument is the same in distinctive ways and the wording is very similar and, in some places, identical. For example, compare 2 Peter 2:4 –

“For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment...” –

with Jude 6:

“And the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day...”

There is also some unusual vocabulary found in both of those sentences. Virtually no one thinks that the similarity could be accidental. There is a literary dependence, whoever it was who depended on whom. [Carson and Moo, *Intro to the NT*, 655-657] Line after line in 2 Peter 2 has its counterpart in Jude. Indeed, of the 25 verses in Jude no less than 15 appear in whole or in part in 2 Peter. That one of those men borrowed from the other is the simplest explanation and, according to Occam’s razor that explanation therefore ought to be preferred. Most modern scholars, including most of our evangelical men think that Peter borrowed from Jude, but the argument is hardly conclusive, and it is certainly possible that Jude borrowed from Peter. Still, it is striking that virtually the same condemnation of false teachers in the same words is found in both letters. The two men certainly seem to be talking about the same situation: the same false teachers, and the same false teaching. There is nothing quite like this in the other letters of the New Testament, though, of course, the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke do have many passages that resemble one another, often word for word.

Second, 2 Peter is unusual among the books of the NT in that there has long been concern as to its *canonicity*, that is, whether it actually belongs in the Bible. It is important for you to know that much biblical scholarship has for long years argued that this short letter was not in fact written by the Apostle Peter – no matter that it claims to have been and no matter that it includes some personal reminiscences of Peter, for example his experience of Christ’s glory on the Mount of Transfiguration mentioned in chapter 1. In fact, of all the books of the New Testament, 2 Peter

is the one that more scholars doubt is what it appears to be. They argue 1) that the Greek of 2 Peter, quite different in some ways from that of 1 Peter, could not have been written by a fisherman from Galilee; 2) that the false teaching being combatted in the letter had not appeared by the time of Peter's death; 3) that Peter's reference to Paul's writings as *Scripture* in chapter 3 is anachronistic, since the New Testament writings were not considered to be *Scripture* until some years after Peter's death; 4) that the explanation of the delay in Christ's return we find in chapter 3 suggests a date after the lifetime of the apostles; and 5) that the attestation of 2 Peter is weak in the writings of the early church (that is, there is little evidence until the 4<sup>th</sup> century that the church thought of 2 Peter and used 2 Peter as Holy Scripture).

I won't bore you with the details, but not a one of those arguments is nearly as consequential as it might seem at first blush. The Greek of the letter is distinctive, but its distinctiveness has often been exaggerated and, fact is, any number of factors can alter the way an author writes a letter, as many studies have demonstrated by examining the undisputed writings of the same author. In any case, we said last week that, for all we know, Silas or Silvanus might have been significantly involved in the writing of 1 Peter. Peter had spent many years, after all, in Christian ministry among Greek-speakers after leaving his nets, and, for that matter, Greek was widely spoken in his homeland of Galilee in the first century. No one actually knows how well Peter spoke and wrote Greek. The claim that the false teaching addressed in the letter appeared only after the apostolic period assumes what it purports to prove. The fact is, it is very hard even to tell precisely *what* the false teachers whom Peter finds in his crosshairs were actually teaching. Peter talks much more about their way of life than about their doctrine. There is much evidence in the New Testament to prove that the NT authors understood when they put pen to parchment that they were writing the Word of God, as the OT prophets had before them. And, the facts are, that while it took some time for 2 Peter to be received throughout the church as indubitably the Word of God, there is evidence that from the beginning many did regard it to be so and no Christian writer whose work has survived ever argued that the letter was, in fact, not written by Peter.

A fact that may well explain why 2 Peter was perhaps slower to be acknowledged as canonical throughout the church is that there were a great many Petrine forgeries written in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries, that is books purporting to be by Peter that were mere forgeries. For that reason, the church had to be especially careful in separating 2 Peter from those spurious works.

What is more, no one has yet come near to demonstrating that the church would ever have accepted a writing as Holy Scripture that had been passed off as the letter of an apostle when it was known or even suspected to have been written by someone else. There were certainly pseudonymous writings in that period, many of them in fact. Jude refers, for example, to *I Enoch*. There is the *Gospel of Peter*, the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Philip*, the *Acts of John*, and *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* among many others. But there is little evidence that serious Christians were taken in by this or believed that such a book as *I Enoch* had been written by Enoch himself. What is more, the 2<sup>nd</sup> century author of *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, was deposed from the ministry for having sought to pass off his book as genuine. [Michael Green, *TNTC*, 33-34] A host of such books were written in the name of apostles in the decades and centuries following the death of the last apostle and the church uniformly rejected such books as nothing but inventions and so forgeries. As one scholar put it:

“No one ever seems to have accepted a document as religiously and philosophically prescriptive [that is, authoritative] which was known to be forged. I do not know of a single example.”

There is certainly nothing to suggest that the church would ever have accepted 2 Peter if she had any inkling that Peter had not in fact written the letter. *She knew that forgeries abounded, and she was not about to be duped!* That’s enough of that. But be sure that there are almost always satisfactory replies to the skeptical bias that so many biblical scholars bring to their investigation of the Bible. It has never been remotely the case that anyone has *proved* that Peter didn’t write 2 Peter. What some scholar thinks, even what many scholars think, and what is actually the case very often have little to do with one another! Again, and again skeptical biblical scholars have either been proved wrong by the discovery of additional evidence or their arguments have been answered to the satisfaction of devout Christian scholarship. The fact that the early church came universally to acknowledge 2 Peter as canonical is, therefore, proof that she had made sure that Peter actually wrote it. [Carson and Moo, 663]

As 2 Timothy is Paul’s last letter, written as the letter itself attests when Paul was daily waiting his death sentence, the persecution of Christians under Nero being in full sway, so 2 Peter was written in similar circumstances – as Peter himself tells us in 1:14-15. He knew the end was near, perhaps because Paul had already been executed, though we don’t know that for sure. That is all I need say in introducing the letter to you. Now just a few comments on the first two verses of the letter, what is called the epistolary introduction.

### Text Comment

The opening of the letter conforms to first century practice. The author comes first, then the recipients are identified.

- v.1 Since I want to talk about Peter this evening, a word on that word “apostle.” If “servant” expresses Peter’s humility, “apostle” expresses his authority. An apostle was an agent, a person who had been invested with the authority of another to carry his message. But in the context of the New Testament it has a very specific meaning. Here is Charles Hodge’s definition of an apostle.

“What then were the apostles? It is plain from the divine record that they were men immediately commissioned by Christ to make a full and authoritative revelation of his religion; to organize the church; to furnish it with officers and laws, and to start it on its career of conquest through the world.” “The apostles...stand out just as conspicuous as an isolated body in the history of the church, without predecessors and without successors, as Christ himself does. They disappear from history. The title, the thing itself, the gifts, the functions, all ceased when John, the last of the twelve, ascended to heaven.” [What is Presbyterianism? 53, 60]

In other words, apostles were commissioned delegates of Jesus Christ, authorized to speak and act in his name, hence not only their miracles, but their standing to write books and letters that were to become the Word of God. This is important in the context because

an apostle had the authority to define the doctrine and life of the Christian faith. The teachers who were troubling these Christians to whom Peter wrote his letter had no such authority.

It seems likely that when Peter says in 3:1: “This is now the second letter that I am writing to you...” we should understand the previous letter as our 1 Peter. No one can be absolutely sure of that, but it seems most likely. 1 Peter, as we saw, was written to mostly Gentile Christian churches in the north-central part of Asia Minor and, if 2 Peter is his second letter to them, so was 2 Peter. But in the second letter, a new problem had to be addressed: the inroads of false teaching and the influence of the teachers who had brought it. But notice the description Peter gives of these Christians, of any Christian: they have obtained a faith of equal standing or as precious as *ours* – he may mean by “ours” Jewish Christians or first-generation Christians – but he is beautifully reminding us that every Christian has the same salvation: genuine faith will take anyone and everyone to heaven! There are no second-class citizens in the kingdom of God; the truth of which we must constantly remind ourselves.

- v.2     Such a blessing is typical of the letters of Paul as you know. Grace and Peace are so commonly found together in the New Testament that we have churches named “Grace and Peace” in our PCA.

Now, as we begin our consideration of 2 Peter, as we begin to attend to it as the Word of God, the Lord’s instruction to us, what he wants us to know and how he wants us to live, think with me about this man Peter who, as he wrote the letter, was perhaps a few months, perhaps only a few days from his execution in Rome. Think about this man’s life as an example of the Christian life. After all, as he reminds us in v. 1, we have the same faith he did and ours is equal to his or as precious as his.

We know almost nothing of Peter’s early life. Was Peter raised in a pious, believing home, a home such as Joseph and Mary’s or Zechariah and Elizabeth’s? We simply don’t know. Peter was a disciple of John the Baptist before he was a disciple of Jesus and that certainly may suggest that Peter was already a devout young man, since John the Baptist’s ministry was not conducted in Galilee, Peter’s homeland, but in the south. That is, Peter would have heard of John’s ministry before he encountered it personally and he left his father’s fishing business to travel south because he wanted to hear the great preacher. I don’t think that many Christians usually think of Peter, James, and John at least among the twelve apostles as the products of believing homes, as already believers before meeting John or Jesus, but it is certainly possible if not likely. In other words, his faith began as it has in the case of many of you, in your home, at your mother’s breasts.

Among the Twelve disciples or apostles all the Gospel writers acknowledge that Peter was the leader. By dint of personality his was the more commanding personality among those twelve men. Though there was, as we know from the Gospels, from time to time some petty jealousy on this point, the eleven apparently found it natural to defer to Peter. I’ve known men like that; I’m sure you have as well: natural leaders. Without even thinking about it or intending to, they command the attention of others and people naturally and without thought defer to them. There

are men who assume leadership because they are given a post or an assignment that carries with it a certain authority. Though we know that many people who occupy those posts are not really leaders, certainly not naturally leaders. Some grow up into the job; a great many men and women do not. There are other men who are natural-born leaders and need no formal office or position in order to wield authority. Peter was such a man. Given Peter's role among the Twelve through the years of the Lord's ministry, after the Lord's resurrection it seems natural to us that it was Peter who took the initiative to replace Judas among the Twelve and then it was Peter who preached the sermon on Pentecost that brought 3,000 more into the fledgling church. Similarly, though John was with him when the lame man was healed at the temple gate, it was Peter who addressed the crowd that gathered after the miracle. It was Peter who offered their defense before the Sanhedrin when Peter and John were arrested. It was Peter who rebuked Ananias and Sapphira at which rebuke each in turn fell down dead. Such was Peter's power and prestige in Jerusalem in those early days that people came to believe that his mere shadow would heal the sick. Again, when Peter and John traveled to Samaria in the aftermath of Philip's gospel preaching there, it was Peter who stood in the forefront, rebuking Simon Magus. It was to Peter that the Lord gave the vision of the animals, reptiles, and birds in the sheet let down from heaven and to Peter that Cornelius was directed in a vision, no doubt precisely because only a man with Peter's authority could persuade other Jewish believers that Gentiles were to enter the church *as Gentiles*; that is, they would not be required to become Jews in order to become Christians. After Herod Agrippa arrested and executed James, the brother of John, in order to court the favor of the Jews he arrested Peter also, no doubt intending to do the same to him. But Peter, unlike James, was delivered from prison by an angel. God had more work for him to do.

Simon or Simeon was Peter's Aramaic name, the name by which he was addressed by other Jews; Peter was the name given him by the Lord Jesus (Mark 3:16). Peter is the Greek form of the Aramaic word *kepha*, which means "rock," hence his other Aramaic name in Greek transliteration, "Cephas." The Lord plays on that name in his famous remark in Matt. 16: "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church." And, while the remark applies to Peter only *primus inter pares*, that is, it was also true of all the other apostles as the Lord later makes clear, it was true of Peter first of all because of his leadership among the Twelve.

We know a good bit about Peter during the days and years of the Lord's ministry and of his ministry immediately after the Lord's ascension – he is the chief figure in Luke's narrative in the first part of Acts (at least through chapter 12), but otherwise we know comparatively little about his life and work as an apostle of the Lord Jesus. We know that like Paul he conducted an itinerant ministry for most of those years. He does not seem to have been often in Jerusalem. He was not there, for example, when Paul visited Jerusalem after his 3<sup>rd</sup> missionary tour, the visit during which he was arrested. Paul once mentions by the way the interesting fact that Peter's wife accompanied him on at least some of his missionary travels. Wouldn't it be fascinating to know something about that woman! Few women in that time and place would have lived such an adventurous life. And where was she when Peter wrote 2 Peter: had she already died, was she about to be widowed, if so would she return to live out her years in Galilee or had she become too much a part of the Gentile church to leave it. I imagine her as the kind of woman Edith Schaeffer was, a true partner in her husband's ministry. Was she present with Peter in Antioch when years before Paul had rebuked Peter publicly for his kowtowing to the prejudices of the Judaizers in Antioch? As a loyal wife what did she think of that and what did she think of Paul in

the years that followed? Did she struggle not to harbor a grudge toward the man who had replaced her husband as the intellectual leader of the Christian church?

We need to be cautious in asking such questions. Paul had first met Peter a few years after his conversion; indeed, he seems to leave the impression in Gal. 1:8 that his chief purpose in making the trip to the Jerusalem three years after his conversion was to meet and get to know Peter. Paul knew that Peter was the chief among the apostles. Peter, of course, had been with the Lord for upwards of three years. He had much to tell Paul and no doubt Paul was grateful to hear everything that Peter could tell him. I suspect the men became friends then, if not necessarily bosom buddies. They were different men, different personalities with different backgrounds. This is the romance of the New Testament, barely hinted at in the text itself, but sufficient to indicate that there were personal relationships, friendships, and, alas, also antagonisms that animated and complicated the life of the earliest church as such things have marked the church's life ever since. For example, in the early verses of 1 Cor. 15, summarizing the appearances that the Lord made to his disciples after his resurrection, Paul mentions that he had appeared on that first Sunday to Peter by himself. No doubt Peter had told Paul all about what happened that first Easter Sunday when the two men sat down and talked, no doubt for days, about all that Peter had seen and heard of the Lord Jesus. Can you see the two men sitting in a quiet room talking: Paul asking his questions, Peter replying, Paul furiously writing notes? Paul also says that the Lord appeared to James, no doubt a reference to the Lord's brother. We know this only from Paul and Paul says in Galatians 1:19 not only that on that first visit to Jerusalem he had stayed fifteen days with Peter but that he had seen none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother. Paul knew Peter and James better than any of the other leaders of the Jewish Christian church. On a second visit to Jerusalem some years later, a visit Paul mentions in Galatians 2, he met Peter again to clarify the boundaries of their respective ministries, about which they came to full agreement.

Little as we know for sure about Peter's later ministry, there are some hints in the New Testament. If you remember, one of the parties in the divided Corinthian church, according to Paul in 1 Cor. 1 followed "Cephas," that is, Peter. Why would it be the case that a group of Christians in Corinth considered Peter their leader *unless Peter had visited the city and conducted some ministry there*? Some followed Apollos and we know that Apollos had visited Corinth and taught the Christians there. Dionysius, bishop of Corinth in the later 2<sup>nd</sup> century claims that both Peter and Paul were the founders of the church in Rome! [Cited in F.F. Bruce, *Peter, Stephen, James, and John*, 44] So it seems Peter was also on the move as Paul was during the years of his ministry. Paul is such an intellectual titan and such a consequential figure in apostolic Christianity and Luke, of course, knew Paul and had accompanied him on some of his journeys and was witness to much of his ministry, that even Acts seems to cast Peter somewhat into the shade. He disappears from its narrative and never returns. And ever since readers of the New Testament have, as we say, robbed Peter to pay Paul. In other words, we don't give Peter his due.

Peter was also associated with the church in Rome, though almost certainly he was not its founder. Almost no event in early Christian history is so well attested as Peter's death in Rome. He was executed during Nero's persecution of Christians in the mid-60s of the first century, as

was Paul. There is a later report in a not terribly reliable work that he was crucified upside down, so as not to compete with Jesus. [Michael Grant, *Saint Peter*, 153]

All of that simply to refresh our collective memory of the life of this extraordinary man whose life, in some ways, was more extraordinary than that of any other human being. Unlike Paul Peter never became Christianity's defining intellect. But Peter had had what Paul had not: several years of intimate association with Jesus himself. He had witnessed his miracles, heard his sermons, and enjoyed many conversations with the Lord. Imagine him in later years recollecting for this group of Christians and for that group what he had seen and heard of Jesus Christ. He could remember the sound of the Lord's voice, see the astonishment and joy on the faces of those who had been healed, and remember as if it were yesterday his first sight of Jesus after his resurrection and the words Jesus spoke to him after Peter had betrayed the Lord so terribly three nights before.

But I want us tonight to consider the fact that your faith and mine are of equal standing with Peter's, or as one commentator translates the phrase, "of equal privilege with ours" [Bauckham, WBC, 165] or, as the NIV has it, "a faith as precious as ours." For Peter there is but one gospel and every Christian shares it equally. We haven't had his experiences of course, but we have come to know the same Savior, have committed ourselves to the same life of obedience and service, and await the same glorious inheritance. We may justly envy Peter for the remarkable privileges of his life – though we might also shy away from its difficulties and its violent end – but at bottom his was the same life we are living today. And we too have our memories, or soon will, of what the Lord has done in our lives, our experiences with him, and of what we have learned of him. Peter struggled with his sins as we must and do. That Peter's falls are recorded for us in Holy Writ is immensely encouraging, as encouraging as is Paul's admission of his own continuing struggle with sin. But Peter also served the Lord as we are striving to do. His life was lived in fellowship with other Christians as ours is today. By the end of his life his address book or the contact list in his cell phone must have been chock-a-block with names. He and his wife were making friends wherever they went – and they went to lots of different places – as Acts and his letters prove and as we have likewise in our Christian lives. He worshipped on the Lord's Day as we do. Somehow, he made a living, though we don't know how. Perhaps he continued to draw a salary from the family fishing business back in Galilee. Who can say? But somehow or another, he lived his life year after year, loving and serving the Lord and building the church.

My point is that in more ways than not Peter was a man like us, with a life like us; different as it was in many ways, it was fundamentally the same. Have you thought about this? Your faith, your experience of God's grace, your inheritance with the saints is the same as Peter's, as Peter's is the same as that of any Christian, at any time, in any place. Different as our world is in some ways from that of Peter, in all essential points it is the same. Sin, divine grace, the reality of heaven and hell, the summons by our Creator and our Savior to live lives of obedience to him, the nature and experiences of believing life; all these things are far more fundamental to the meaning of human life than the cell phone, the television set, or space travel.

We Christians are people of the ages, always have been, always will be. Why? Because nothing about our particular time, its technology, its scientific progress, its politics is fundamental to the nature of human life or of the knowledge of God or of salvation. Those things are as they have

always been and will always be. And here we are, in Tacoma, WA in the year of our Lord 2018 sharing faith and life and the experiences that belong to them with a good man who lived 2000 years ago and yet knew all about us as we know all about him. This is wonderful, and it is essential to a genuine Christian understanding of the authority of the Bible and all its parts. From Abraham to Moses to David to Peter and Paul and finally to us: Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today, and forever. That's why we can see ourselves in Peter as he could see himself in every other Christian and why his letter, written so long ago in a world superficially so different from our own, can tell us precisely what we need to know in our own time and place.