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“If we can pick up on this theme of being exiles in a godless and hostile world, we will be able to appreciate the main thrust of Peter’s letter.”



OUR PERSONAL MISSION STATEMENT

“What on earth are you doing, for heaven’s sake!” This is one way to put it. Another way to put it might be to ask the question, “Do you have a personal mission statement?” Have you ever formulated a clear and precise statement regarding your purpose in life as a Christian? Have you ever taken the time to spell out in specific terms the various things which you will need to do, as well as the things you will never do, if you hope to fulfill your personal mission in life?

The First Epistle of Peter offers clear guidelines for the believer who is serious about formulating such a “Personal Mission Statement.”

Dr. Martin Luther included this short letter (only 105 verses) on his “short list” of the most important books in the New Testament. His contemporary Dutch authority on the New Testament, Erasmus, called it “an epistle sparse in words, crammed with content.” Lutheran scholar Martin Franzmann, in his *The Word of the Lord Grows*, writes, “Anyone looking for a key book which will unlock the meaning of the whole New Testament would do well to give his days and nights to this book!”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The opening verse of this letter identifies the author as “Peter: an apostle of Jesus Christ.” Originally Peter’s name was “Simeon,” a Hebrew word which means “hearing”— something which Peter wasn’t too good at during his discipleship days. “Simon,” the Greek version of this, was applied to Peter forty-nine times in the New Testament. Shortly after He called Simon to follow Him, Jesus gave him the name “Cephas,” which is the Aramaic word for “rock” (John 1:42) hence, the Greek name “Peter” which also means “rock.” The frequency of the combination “Simon Peter” and the phrase “Simon who was known as Peter” indicates that from early on the new name which Jesus gave him became the popular way of referring to him.

Peter was the son of Jonas (or John). He had grown up in his father’s home in the fishing village of Bethsaida, which is on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. Like his father and other disciples of Jesus, Peter was a fisherman. He also had a home in Capernaum, just a few miles south and west of his “home town” (Mark 1:29–30). Paul mentions (1 Corinthians 9:5) that Peter was married and that his wife often accompanied him on missionary trips.

Peter was one of the first to become a disciple of Jesus. It was at the invitation of his brother Andrew, a follower of John the Baptist, that Peter met Jesus (John 1:40–42). With James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Peter was part of the “inner circle.” This trio of disciples often accompanied Jesus for special experiences (e.g. The Transfiguration, Mark 9:2–8; and in Gethsemane, Mark 14:33).

In the Gospels, Peter comes across as a quick-tempered, highly emotional, undependable, “foot in his mouth kind of guy.” However, following his reinstatement to discipleship at Jesus’ post resurrection appearance (John 21) and

the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost (Acts 2), Peter began to live up to the nickname “Rocky” (taken from the Greek). His forceful preaching on Pentecost (Acts 2:14–40), blessed by the Holy Spirit, led to the conversion of 3,000 people who were “added to the Church” on that one day! (Acts 2:41).

PETER’S MINISTRY AND MISSION

In the beginning, Peter’s ministry seems to have been primarily among his fellow Jews in and around Jerusalem. Yet, by God’s direction Peter ministered to non-Jews as well. In fact, he has the distinction of being the first to receive Gentiles into church fellowship, as the account of the conversion of the Roman Centurion Cornelius and his family reports in Acts 10.

Acts (12:17–18) tells us that Peter made a quick decision to leave Jerusalem in A.D. 44 at the outbreak of persecutions against the followers of Jesus, instigated by the wicked King Herod Agrippa. We aren’t told, however, where he went. Peter does reappear briefly in Jerusalem in connection with the special council (Acts 15). Here, chairman James calls Peter by his Hebrew name Simeon.

The question of whether or not Peter ever made it to Rome has been a subject of debate for many years. Lutheran scholar Dr. Paul Maier writes in the historical notes of his novel *Flames of Rome* that the “current consensus” is in favor of the idea that Peter did make it to Rome. He points to a letter, which Clement of Rome sent to the people in Corinth in A.D. 96. In this letter he ties the martyrdom of Peter and Paul with those of the Christian martyrs who gave their lives during Nero’s persecution in A.D. 64. Maier’s notes also mention, “there are numerous references by Christian authors to the martyrdom of Peter and Paul in Rome.” The date of Peter’s arrival in Rome is likewise shrouded in mystery, but it probably was shortly before his martyrdom.

The actual site of Peter’s execution and burial plot is said to have been in the garden adjacent to Nero’s palace, which was situated across the Tiber River from the main part of Rome. The first Christian Emperor Constantine (ca 280–337) had a chapel erected here in honor of Saint Peter. Today, on this site stands the magnificent renaissance Basilica of St. Peter and adjoining it, St. Peter’s Square.

The legend that Peter was crucified upside down has been pretty well accepted since the time of Origen, the renowned Church Father (A.D. 185–253). Many scholars today question the reliability of this legend because there was no early tradition stemming from Rome itself suggesting that he was, indeed, crucified in this way, and they feel that the claim has “an apocryphal ring” to it.

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THE AUTHENTICITY OF PETER’S AUTHORSHIP

That Simon Peter was, in fact, the author of this letter had early and strong support. The letter was explicitly ascribed to Peter by that group of “church fathers” whose opinions carried tremendous weight in their day and beyond — men such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen, all of whom lived and worked during the latter portion of the second and the beginning of the third century (A.D.). The fourth century historian Eusebius, of Alexandria, in his *Ecclesiastical History* noted that Peter’s authorship of this letter was “universally accepted” by the Church without any doubt.

Nevertheless, there are many modern scholars who are bold enough to challenge this strong witness. At the head of their list of objections is their observation that the quality of the Greek in this letter is much too polished for Peter. It is true that in Acts 4:13 the disciples are referred to as “uneducated, common men.” However, the Greek word for “uneducated” (*agrammotos*) does not mean illiterate. In this context, it very likely means simply that the disciples were without formal training in the Holy Scriptures. They didn’t have diplomas from any of the rabbinical schools.

Without question, the Greek of 1 Peter is a cut or two above that of 2 Peter. Most conservative Bible scholars point to verse twelve of Chapter 5 to explain this difference. Here the apostle Peter states that “By Silvanus...I have written to you.” The Greek word for “by” literally means “through” or “by means of.” Silvanus is regarded as another name for Silas who was the apostle Paul’s faithful co-worker (see Acts 15:22–29; 2 Corinthians 1:19). With Paul, he co-authored the letters which Paul sent to the Thessalonians.

It may very well have been that when Paul was executed in Rome, his colleague Silvanus (Silas) made himself available to assist Peter. Peter was very likely happy to have the assistance of such a competent servant of the Lord, especially since Silas had been with Paul on his missionary trips among the people of Asia Minor for whom this letter was intended. Peter was glad to use him as his “amanuensis,” the person who actually put his hand to the stylus and wrote the words. In this case, Peter would tell Silas what he wanted to say — maybe in Aramaic, his mother tongue. Silas would then put Peter’s thoughts and ideas into words, and grammatically form them into Greek. Even though Silas did the actual composing and writing, it would in essence be Peter’s epistle.

Without going into detail, other objections from modern scholars can be just as easily explained away. We are on pretty solid ground if we follow the testimony of the early church and accept Peter as the author of this letter.

WHEN WAS 1 PETER WRITTEN?

Putting a date on this first letter of Peter may not be quite as simple. However, everything points to sometime during the period of Nero’s reign, which was from A.D. 54 to A.D. 68. It cannot be dated earlier than A.D. 60 since it shows familiarity with Paul’s “prison letters” — Colossians and Ephesians dated A.D. 60. Some scholars feel that since Peter still calls for unequivocal loyalty to the state (2:13–17), it probably was written prior to Nero’s official persecution which began in A.D. 64.

Very likely, it was written shortly after the martyrdom of Paul in A.D. 62, but just before the horrible persecution of Christians ordered by Nero — A.D. 63 or early 64.

WHERE WAS 1 PETER WRITTEN?

In 5:13, Peter designates the place from which the letter was being sent as “Babylon.” There seems to be agreement among Bible scholars that Peter was using this name in a symbolic way (Cp. Revelation 17:9–10) and as a “code word” for Rome. This fits with what we have written above about the date of writing and earlier about Peter’s being in Rome around this time period.

THE INTENDED FIRST READERS

According to verse one, this letter was addressed, first of all, to the Christians in the five provinces of Asia Minor (modern Turkey). You may recall that the apostle Paul focused his missionary efforts in the two provinces of Galatia and Asia — the southern and southwestern portions of Asia Minor. The seven churches of Revelation are all in Asia.

Peter's missionary trips apparently took him to the southeast and the north. You may recall that on his second missionary journey, the apostle Paul "attempted to go into Bithynia, but the spirit of Jesus did not allow them" (Acts 16:7). It may very well have been, that unknown to Paul, his colleague Peter was already ministering to the people in that province.

Some believe that shortly before his beheading, the apostle Paul had encouraged Peter to write a letter of encouragement to all of the Asia Minor congregations — those he himself and Silvanus had served and those Peter had worked with. The purpose of such a "circular letter" would be to warn them all about the anti-Christian movement already underway in Rome, and which would probably soon make its way to Asia Minor. Peter is preparing his readers for a blow that is about to fall, rather than one that has already hit them.

The readers are called "exiles of the Dispersion." Many of the Jewish converts could relate to this term because they were part of the great Diaspora, which found their people fleeing to all parts of the world. However, since most of the Christians in

Asia Minor churches were Gentiles, we can assume that Peter was using this phrase in a figurative sense. He wanted to remind them that like their Jewish Christian friends, all of them should think of themselves as exiles — as aliens and pilgrims who have been dispersed in a godless and hostile world.

A GENERAL EPISTLE

First Peter is classified as a "general" epistle. It is "generic" in nature. It has a message not just for its originally intended readers. It has a message for all believers in all ages.

If we can pick up on this theme of being exiles in a godless and hostile world, we will be able to appreciate the main thrust of Peter's letter. Even though we may not face the horrendous physical and emotional persecutions which Peter's friends faced, in reality the times have not really changed all that much. We would do well to think of ourselves as pilgrims in a hostile world.

The hostility may be masked, but this makes it even more dangerous. Like the people in Asia Minor, we need to be astute enough to recognize the diabolical forces at work to rob us of our precious faith and hope. We need to be prepared. Let this serve as a powerful motivation for each of us to work up a Personal Mission Statement and have a clear idea of what it will take to carry it out.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

1 PETER 1:1-12

Thank You, Father in heaven, for Your great love and mercy, which moved You to do everything that needed to be done for my eternal salvation. Help me to grow daily in my appreciation of this wonderful truth, and fill my heart with joy as I look forward to the blessedness of eternity. Amen.

1 Peter 1:1-9

1. Suppose you have a neighbor who is a Jehovah's witness. One day she says to you "You believe in the Trinity, don't you? Do you know that the word "Trinity" is not even in the Bible?" What do you say to her?

Verse 2 clearly speaks of the "threeness" of the Godhead.

What does the Father do?

What does the Son do?

What does the Spirit do?

2. What led God to bring us into His family of "chosen ones" (v. 3)?

_____ our goodness _____ His mercy _____ our potential

How does the concept of a "new birth" re-enforce this?

3. What three negative "compounds" does Peter use (v.4) to emphasize the durability of the inheritance we will one day receive as members of God's family?

What is Peter trying to get us to understand?

4. Consider Fred who has been a devout Christian all of his life, very active in his church, and always ready to speak to others about his faith. In his later years he has become a victim of Alzheimer's. His diseased mind seems to have, at best, a very blurred understanding of what the Christian religion is all about. He even refuses to take Holy Communion. Can you find something in verse 5 which might help you to console and reassure his wife, who is concerned about his eternal life.

5. According to verse 6, what should you expect might happen to you if you really try to live out your life as a member of the family of God?

What two things should we keep in mind as we deal with these trials? (Romans 8:18; 2 Corinthians 4:17; James 1:2-4)

6. In verse 7, what process in metallurgy does Peter use as an analogy to show believers how to react to trials, which come their way because of their faith?

What invaluable benefits can accrue to the believer who is tested like this?

Have you experienced such testing and blessing?

Please share with the class.

7. What does Peter say should always and in all circumstances be the dominant characteristic in our lives as God's "special people" (v. 8)?

8. According to verse 9, what blessing will be ours if we continue in the faith? How can this give us incentive and courage as well as the capability of maintaining a spirit of joy even when we're feeling the hostility of the world at its worst?

1 Peter 1:10-12

9. In the first nine verses of this letter, Peter has been singing the praises of God for all the wonderful things He has made possible for His "Chosen Ones." He wants them to appreciate how privileged and "special" they really are. What does he point to now, to get them to see that they even have "an edge" over some of God's great people in the Old Testament?

Who else had not been in on the specifics of when and where God would bring fulfillment to His great plan of salvation for the whole world?

What was true of the Asia Minor Christians is true for us, too. How should this make us feel?