

KNOWING GOD THROUGH 1 PETER

Is there anything in your life worth dying for? Almost 2,000 years ago, a man named Peter wrote an open letter to a group of troubled people who needed an answer to this question. They were having second thoughts about paying the high price their faith was costing.

In the following pages, Herb Vander Lugt, RBC senior research editor, helps us understand the letter God uses to encourage His children. Peter's insights about knowing God are rich and deep. The troubles of this life truly look different when we know the God for whom we suffer.

Martin R. De Haan II

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DEFINING MOMENTS

The date was AD 63 or early 64. A man in his late sixties was talking slowly enough for his friend to write down his words. Together they were composing a letter to believers in Christ who had become targets of religious persecution. The man dictating the letter was Peter, the passionate, impulsive, unpredictable disciple of Christ described in the New Testament Gospels.

Dark clouds of persecution had broken on believers scattered throughout Asia Minor in the area north of the Taurus Mountains. Peter longed to encourage them and decided to do so by writing a letter that they could circulate among them. Silas, a dedicated, well-educated, and gifted man who had proven his trustworthiness as Paul's companion (Acts 15:22-32) and co-writer (1 Th. 1:1; 2 Th. 1:1), gave Peter secretarial and editorial help (1 Pet. 5:12.)

Peter had earned the right to encourage his readers. He knew what it was like to be overcome by fear and discouragement. Years earlier he had temporarily abandoned Christ when times got difficult. He too had been afraid. He too had been unprepared for the hostility he experienced as a follower of Christ. Along the way, however, he learned that God is never more real, or more reassuring, than in those moments when He is all we have. So, Peter dictated:

To God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to

Jesus Christ and sprinkling by His blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance (1:1-2).

Peter had a high view of these displaced refugees. Even though they were “strangers in the world,” they were known to God, and God had a plan for them. They were to show the world that real life does not consist in the abundance of material possessions. In fact, it doesn’t even begin until we possess something worth dying for.

This truth echoed through the halls of history to rest in the soul of Jim Elliot, who in 1956 was speared to death by the South American Indian tribe he was trying to reach with the gospel. Not long before his death, Jim wrote, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” —Jim Elliot

Peter’s regard for these people came through in the first words of his letter (1:2). He longed for them to recognize, in the middle of their trouble, those defining moments that would prove to them they were among the most privileged people in the world. He desired that they be so overwhelmed by the love of God they would consider it an honor to suffer for the One who had done so much for them.

THINKING RIGHT IN ORDER TO SEE RIGHT

Even though we are persecuted, poor, and despised in the sight of others for following Christ, in reality we are rich because of what God has done for us in Christ. Peter started his letter by emphasizing the true wealth of all followers of Christ:

THE WEALTH GOD HAS GIVEN US

A Second Birth (1:3)

An Undying Hope (1:4)

A Guaranteed Inheritance (1:4-9)

An Awesome Rescue (1:10-12,17-21)

A High Honor (2:4-12)

An Inspiring Teacher (2:21-23)

A Life-Changing Lord (2:24-25)

A Pre-Announced Victory (3:18-22)

THE DISTINCTION GOD WANTS FOR US

Then, in the light of all God has done for us, Peter urged his readers to distinguish themselves as God's people. We are to be identified in the world by these distinctions:

A Family Love (1:22-2:1; 3:8-12)

A Spiritual Thirst (2:2-3)

An Enlightened Submission (2:11-18)

An Admirable Endurance (2:18-20; 3:13-17)

A Healthy Home (3:1-7)

An Eternal Perspective (4:1-19)

A Unifying Relationship (5:1-11)

KNOWING GOD THROUGH 1 PETER

THE WEALTH GOD HAS GIVEN US

As Peter began his letter, a spontaneous exclamation of praise flowed from his lips: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!” The anticipation of what he was about to say so overwhelmed Peter that just thinking about it caused him to worship.

Let’s examine the reasons for Peter’s enthusiasm:

A Second Birth (1:3). As a messenger of good news, Peter exclaimed about God, “In His great mercy He has given us new birth.” This was an important place to start. The apostle wanted believers to realize that there is more to life than what is immediately apparent—especially in their circumstances. Instead of focusing on their troubles, Peter called attention to one of the most important truths Christians need to keep in mind: Our spiritual heritage is of more worth than all the earthly wealth of the Kennedys or Bill Gates. Our true identity is far more impressive than if we had been born into the royal family of Great Britain. We have been born into the family of heaven: Our roots and inheritance are not limited to this world.

As defined by Peter, this new birth occurs whenever someone turns from self-sufficiency and trusts Christ (Acts 16:31; 17:30-31). Peter made this clear: “Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of

imperishable, through the living and enduring Word of God” (1:22-23).

Peter emphasized this spiritual birth because many of his readers were considered to be expendable by their own families for turning their backs on the religious faith of their fathers. They were often seen as spiritual turncoats. They were also considered bad for the community because they would not worship the neighborhood gods. And because they would not worship the emperor, they were seen as unpatriotic. For these reasons and more, followers of Christ needed assurance that they had been permanently born into the family of heaven. Rejection by this world only heightens the importance of what God has done for us.

People who live in the shadow of persecution and death need a hope worth dying for.

An Undying Hope (1:4). People who live in the shadow of persecution and death need a hope worth dying for. So Peter reminded his readers that they had received “a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” Because Jesus rose bodily from the grave, those who believed in Him can be confident that they share in His undying life.

This confident anticipation of life beyond the grave is important for people living in any age. God has built into us a strong self-preservation instinct. He also has given us close family ties that we are reluctant to break. This makes us uneasy at the thought of dying—until God prepares us to be called home.

When my mother was told that she had only a few weeks to live, she became despondent. She wanted to spend more years with her family and friends. God graciously extended her life another 12 years, and her attitude about death changed. A few days before she was called home to be with the Lord, she told me she was content, ready to leave this world and join those who had gone before.

In my 50 years of pastoring, I have worked with hundreds of dying and grieving people. Repeatedly I have seen the difference this living hope makes. Believe me, our living hope changes everything when we encounter death, whether our own or that of people we love. This living hope is what Peter offered to believers confronted with their own mortality.

A Guaranteed Inheritance (1:4-9). To people facing the possibility of death, Peter did more than offer a living hope; he also described an inheritance guaranteed by God:

- This inheritance can never “perish” (be destroyed by outward forces), “spoil” (be destroyed by internal decay), or “fade” (wear out).
- It is “kept [reserved] in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded [protected from harm] by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time” (vv.4-5).
- It will be ours to receive after “a little while” of spiritually profitable suffering (v.6).
- It will, upon possession, bring us “praise, glory, and honor” (v.7).

Peter went on to assure all who are “in Christ” that we can have certainty about this wonderful inheritance without actually seeing it. He wrote:

Though you have not seen Him, you love Him; and even though you do not see Him now, you believe in Him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls (vv.8-9).

The fact that these persecuted believers had not seen Jesus when He was on earth did not stop them from loving Him. Neither did they stop loving God because He had not delivered them from their enemies. Without seeing God, they believed He loved them and were filled with “inexpressible and glorious joy.”

What we can touch and see is easier to love than what is invisible.

When one of my grandsons was 5 years old, he asked me, “Grandpa, how can I love God? I can love Mom and Dad and Grandma and you, but I can see you. How can I love God when I have never seen Him?”

My grandson asked a profound question. How can we be sure enough about God to actually love Him? I wanted so much for that little 5-year-old to know what I knew. I wanted him to have the assurance that Peter wrote about. I wanted to tell him in a moment what God Himself must show each of us over time. I could tell him that we learn to love God as we learn to see how much He has first loved us (1 Jn. 4:19). I could tell him that loving God is a part of getting to know Him. I could tell him that God gives those who believe in His Son a heart to love Him. But what I couldn't explain in that moment is that we must also learn to walk by faith rather than by sight.

What we can touch and see is easier to love than what is invisible. But the visible world becomes less important to us as we realize how temporary circumstances are and how elusive relationships can be. That was a truth Peter's persecuted readers had learned from God and for themselves.

An Awesome Rescue (1:10-12,17-21). The kind of rescue God provided had been a mystery that Old Testament prophets and even angels had been unable to understand. Prophets like Isaiah and Daniel had a vague idea that God's Messiah would not only rule the world, but would also suffer for the sins of His people. But no one could understand what it actually meant or how it would be possible until after it happened.

The New Testament explains far more than the Old Testament prophets understood. Even so, we still have only a small understanding of the wonder of God's love, the mystery of the God-man Jesus Christ, the depth of the agony He endured for our salvation, the enigma of grace, and the glory of heaven. We still have reason to tremble with fear and awe when we sense the immensity of the issues of life and death Peter wrote about.

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After being away for 7 months to receive treatment for an aggressive and deadly cancer, Pastor James Van Tholen talked to his congregation about the wonder of this salvation. He knew that he had only

months to live and he admitted being afraid. He wrote, "How could this be so? How could I have believed in the God of grace and dreaded to meet Him? Why did I stand in this pulpit and preach grace to you over and over, and then when I myself needed the grace so much, why did I discover fear where the grace should have been? I think I know the answer now. . . . The answer is that grace is a scandal. Grace is hard to believe. Grace goes against the grain. The gospel of grace says that there is nothing I can do to get right with God, but that God has made Himself right with me through Jesus' bloody death. And that is a scandalous thing to believe" (*Christianity Today*, May 24, 1999, p.58).

In the face of the unfathomable wonder of a salvation we do not deserve, this 33-year-old pastor experienced a reverent fear and wonder of what God has done for us. This is the same awe and wonder the apostle Peter wrote about as he said to his troubled readers:

You know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through Him you believe in God, who raised Him from the dead and glorified Him (vv.18-21).

The simplicity of the gospel! The concept that we are delivered from the punishment we deserve because Jesus died in our place is so simple that even children can place their trust in Him.

The profundity of the gospel! When we try to imagine God truly coming to earth in the person of Jesus Christ to be the sacrifice for our sins, we encounter mind-stretching truths about our loving, triune, perfect, infinite, and eternal God.

The disturbing gospel! It reminds us that we are so weak and depraved we can do absolutely nothing to save ourselves.

The comfort of the gospel! It assures us that by His grace alone, God provided a complete salvation that we can receive by faith alone.

Anyone who is in Christ can be despised on earth while being highly honored in heaven's eyes.

A High Honor (2:4-12). As Peter composed his letter to displaced, persecuted people, he spoke of the irony of the Christian's circumstances. Earth despised the people whom heaven honored. Peter used terms like "living stones," "a spiritual house," "a holy priesthood," "a chosen people," "a royal priesthood," "a holy nation," "a people belonging to God" to show the heavenly value of persecuted, rejected people. Whether or not we ever experience the trouble Peter's first-century readers endured, it's important that we try to understand the high honor that belongs to those of us who have entrusted ourselves to Christ:

- We are "living stones . . . being built into a spiritual house" because of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, "the Living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God" (2:4).
- We are a "spiritual house" because our bodies

are temples in which God dwells just as truly as He did in Israel's material temple (2:5).

- We are “a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God” (2:5) because we can come directly to God with three sacrifices: (1) daily devotion of ourselves to Christ (Rom. 12:1), (2) expressions of sincere praise and thanksgiving (Heb. 13:15), and (3) deeds of kindness and generosity (Heb. 13:16).
- We are “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God” (2:9) because God has chosen to make us instruments designed to “declare the praises of Him who called [us] out of darkness into His wonderful light.”

Think about it! God has given to us, for all time and eternity, roles not even the holy angels can fill. A remarkable honor for undeserving sinners!

An Inspiring Teacher (2:21-23). When followers of Christ run into difficulty because of our faith, we need a mental picture of how to respond. Peter painted this picture by showing how Christ Himself endured pain for us.

- He suffered innocently, yet without resentment. “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in His mouth” (v.22).
- He suffered without retaliating. “When they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats” (v.23; Mk. 15:16-20,29-32 tells the story).
- He suffered trustingly. “Instead [of making threats], He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly” (v.23). Interestingly, the word translated “entrusted” carries the thought “to

hand over.” Paul Rees comments, “Just as Judas in betrayal ‘delivered up’. . . his Lord to the soldiers, just as the Jews ‘delivered’ Him to Pilate, and just as Pilate ‘delivered’ Him to the soldiers, so He at the last ‘delivered’ Himself with unshattered confidence into the keeping of the Father who judges with perfect equity” (*Triumphant In Trouble*, Revell, 1962, p.63).

Inspired by this example and through the enabling presence of the Holy Spirit, thousands of Christian martyrs have likewise suffered and died with great courage and grace. In the spirit of their wonderful teacher and Savior, they “entrusted” themselves (literally handed themselves over) into the hands of the God they knew they could trust to keep His promise of ultimate salvation and life everlasting.

**When we turn to Christ we enter into
a relationship with Him, and we
become members of His family.**

The day came when Peter himself was killed because his faith in Christ put him at odds with those who held the temporary reins of power. Although the exact time of his death is uncertain, early writers placed it during the time of persecution under the Roman emperor Nero. All writers agree that Peter died by crucifixion. Origen says that by his own request Peter was crucified upside down because he didn't consider himself worthy to die in the same manner as his Lord. All indications are that Peter was himself deeply impressed by the example of his own friend and teacher.

A Life-Changing Lord (2:24-25). In addition to describing Jesus as our perfect sacrifice (1:18-20) and flawless example (2:21-23), Peter wanted his readers to know that God made Christ our life-changing Lord (2:24-25). So he dictated to Silas, “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 [literally “welts”] you have been healed.”

Not only is Jesus’ death the basis for our forgiveness, it’s also the foundation for our transformation.

The purpose of Christ’s death is “that we might die to sins and live for righteousness”(2:24). Some see this statement as being in conflict with other Bible passages which declare that Christ died to pay the penalty for our sins. These people forget that the death of Christ had more than one result. Not only is His death the basis for our forgiveness, it’s also the foundation for our transformation.

When we turn to Christ we enter into a relationship with Him. We become members of His family through the new birth of which Peter spoke earlier (1:23). Jesus is not ashamed to acknowledge us as His brothers and sisters (Heb. 2:11-14). As our brother and living Lord, He continues to care and intercede for us (Heb. 5:10), fulfilling His promise, “Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Mt. 28:20). In addition to all this, from His place in heaven after His ascension, He, together with the Father, “poured out” the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:33) who now lives in every believer (1 Cor. 6:19). Through His

death for our sins, His resurrection, His outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and His continued presence as our brother and Lord, He equipped us for a higher quality of life.

Most of Peter's readers knew the pain of a scourging, and to that extent could identify with Christ's physical suffering on their behalf. Borrowing from Isaiah 53:5, Peter assured them that by being wounded for them (2:24), Jesus provided spiritual healing for our sin-diseased souls. In this connection, many commentators have quoted third-century preacher Theodoret: "A new and strange method of healing: The doctor suffered the cost, and the sick received the healing!"

By dying for us, Christ restored our relationship with God. So Peter wrote, "You were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls" (2:25). In this he echoed Isaiah 53:6, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way."

**"A new and strange method of healing:
The doctor suffered the cost, and the
sick received the healing!" —Theodoret**

Even though Peter's first-century readers were scattered across the Middle East and Southern Europe like lost sheep, he wanted them to know that they were not lost to God. On the contrary, they were being led and protected every step of the way. They were being shepherded by One who wanted to show the world that the quality of a person's life is not determined by physical circumstances. The

very fact that these people were living in difficult material conditions gave them a chance to show that they had found wealth far more significant than anything the world had to offer. Their material poverty became a frame for the picture of Christ within.

A Pre-Announced Victory (3:18-22). Much of what Peter wrote to troubled believers probably made sense to them in principle. But he also wrote some things that caused considerable confusion for his readers in the centuries that followed. For example:

It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built (3:17-20).

What Christ suffered for us is far greater than anything we suffer for Him.

Peter's point was clear when he said that it is better to suffer for following Christ than for committing crimes against society. He also made sense when he said that what Christ suffered for us is far greater than anything we suffer for Him. But what was Peter's point when he talked about Jesus preaching "to the spirits in prison"? And why was it important enough to include in his letter to persecuted followers of Christ?

Some early Church Fathers taught that Jesus went to hell during the time between His death and resurrection to finish His task of paying the full price for our sins. The Apostles' Creed, dating back to the third or fourth century, expresses this concept in the words, "He descended into hell." The Reformers, however, did not agree with the idea that Jesus went to hell after His death. They pointed to Jesus' sixth statement from the cross, "It is finished" (Jn. 19:30), as evidence that when He died He emptied the cup of God's wrath against sin. They interpreted the statement in the Apostles' Creed to mean that in the des-

The ark is an ancient symbol that pointed forward to our rescue in Christ.

olation that caused Him to cry from the cross, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Mt. 27:46), Jesus "suffered the torments of hell." Many Reformation theologians did not believe that Jesus ever visited hell or the underworld. They interpreted Peter as saying that Jesus was resurrected by the same Holy Spirit through whom He, as the eternal Word, had preached to Noah's contemporaries while the ark was being built. The spirits of these people are now in prison in the underworld where they await resurrection and final judgment.

Some Bible scholars today see Peter's statements in another way. They believe Peter was describing Jesus' descent into Hades, the spirit realm of the dead. They say He went there not to pay for sin, but to announce that He had once and for all time defeated sin and death. If this view is correct, our Lord's

entrance into Hades was a part of His exaltation, not His suffering.

I believe this explanation fits Peter's purpose of encouraging persecuted people. But then he made another statement that has been the source of much discussion through the years. Speaking of Jesus' descent into Hades, Peter alluded to Noah's ark and made a statement about baptism that is often misunderstood. He said, "In it [the ark] only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (3:21).

**On the cross, Jesus experienced the
flood of God's wrath against our sin.
But He was not destroyed.**

To understand these words, visualize the swirling flood waters that came upon the world in the days of Noah. They were destructive to everything outside the huge boat Noah built. However, those same waters worked in favor of the ark. They gradually buoyed it up, lifting its occupants to safety.

Now ask, "What saved Noah and his family, the water or the ark?" The answer is obvious. It was the ark. Had they been outside of it, they would have died. The raging water was by its nature destructive. The ark, however, withstood its wrath, and the water could do nothing except lift it up to safety.

The ark is an ancient symbol that pointed forward to our rescue in Christ. On the cross, Jesus experi-

enced the flood of God's wrath against our sin. But He was not destroyed. He endured until He could say, "It is finished" (Jn. 19:30). Then He let Himself die, only to rise from death on the third day, the victor over sin and death.

When we believe and trust Jesus Christ, we are united with Him, and He becomes our ark of safety. That's why believers are referred to as "in Christ" more than 60 times in the New Testament. In Romans 6:1-14, Paul declared that baptism depicts the nature of the oneness with Christ that occurs when we believe. The new believer—having heard the gospel, having been convicted of sin, and having received spiritual cleansing through faith in Jesus—enters the waters of baptism (which symbolizes God's judgment against sin) to declare his or her death to the old life and resurrection to a new life. As Jesus entered Hades to announce victory over sin, so by a symbolic act of baptism we announce to the world that our victory over sin is assured even though there are still forces of evil at work.

Peter knew that his troubled readers, more than anything else, needed to see who God is, what He had done for them, and how joyful they soon would be. What was true for first-century believers is just as true for us. Our lives find meaning and perspective only as we see God and ourselves in light of what He has done for us through Christ:

Therefore, since Christ suffered in His body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because He who has suffered in His body is done with sin. As a result, He does not live the rest of His earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God (1 Pet. 4:1-2).

SEEING GOD

- In Peter's concern for his persecuted readers, we see God's concern for them and for us.
- In Peter's words of encouragement, we see what God has done for us.
- In God's gift of the new birth, we see His willingness to bring those who believe in Christ into His own family.
- In His guarantee of an eternal inheritance, we see how generous God has been to us.
- In His fathomless rescue, we catch a glimpse of God's immeasurable love and wisdom.
- In the high honor God gives to us, we see the extent of God's purposes for us.
- In the example of Christ's suffering, we see that pain suffered for God's sake results in great gain.

SEEING OURSELVES

- In Peter's concern for his readers, we can see our own need for renewal and for the right perspective in times of trouble.
- In Peter's words of encouragement, we see what our focus should be.
- In God's gift of the new birth, we see our own family ties to God.
- In God's guarantee of an eternal inheritance, we see our own great blessing because of Christ.
- In the high honor God has given us, we see that we have been called to live a life of distinguished service.
- In the example of Christ's suffering, we see that we too are called to suffer.

THE DISTINCTION GOD WANTS FOR US

As Peter dictated his letter to encourage persecuted, displaced followers of Christ, he understood what they were enduring (1:6). Although the future for his readers was bright, the present was dark and difficult. He knew that their problems were causing them to be impoverished and feel abandoned by God, even though God Himself was at work in all of these circumstances.

But what was God doing? Why would He do so much for His people while at the same time allow so much distress and disappointment? Through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Peter knew what his readers needed to hear. God wanted the best for those who were in Christ. He wanted His people to know Him, the eternal God. He wanted them to know the incomparable experience of embracing what is not temporary. God wanted His people to find comfort and peace and joy in knowing Him. He wanted His people to discover something far more valuable than “gold which perishes” (1:7).

**God wanted them to know the
incomparable experience of
embracing what is not temporary.**

The problems Peter’s readers had—the “various trials” which “for a little while” troubled them—were actually a part of God’s solution. They were His way of leading them to a purified faith that is more valuable than gold (1:7).

Peter wanted his readers to know God’s goodness, so he urged them to separate themselves from anything that would keep them from experiencing God’s

best. Without apology, Peter asked his readers to give themselves wholeheartedly to God Himself. This is what Peter meant when he asked Silas to write:

Prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy" (1 Pet. 1:13-16).

Today's readers are apt to misunderstand what Peter meant by "holy living." Some suppose that when Peter called repeatedly for "holiness" of life that he was expecting perfection. That's not what Peter had in view. The Greek word translated "holy" in 1 Peter 1:15-16 means "set apart" for a specific use and purpose.

Great harm has been done to the concept of holiness by those who confuse it with self-righteous arrogance.

Others think that to be "holy" means to be a religious fanatic set apart from the "unclean" masses. Great harm has been done to the concept of holiness by those who confuse it with self-righteous arrogance.

Remember that Jesus, the most holy person of all, was called a "friend of sinners." No one took more heat from arrogant religionists. No one was less pretentious. No one showed more love, more mercy, more compassion.

Peter repeatedly urged readers to embrace faith in a way that would distinguish them as the people of God, to show the world, even in the middle of all their troubles, that the new life they had found was far better than the life they had inherited from their fathers. Peter then listed several ways to do this. In the process, Peter also gave us timeless principles that can help us check up on our own faith and test our relationship to God. The kind of “holy distinction” God wants for us involves habits of the heart that make life worth living.

**“By this all men will know that you
are My disciples, if you love
one another.” —Jesus**

A Family Love (1:22–2:1; 3:8-12). One distinguishing mark of those God has “set apart” for Himself is authentic love for one another. “Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart” (1:22).

Peter learned this kind of family love from Jesus Himself. At the Last Supper, just after Jesus had washed His disciples’ feet and just before He performed the greatest act of love ever known, He said this to His disciples: “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn. 13:35). Peter hadn’t forgotten those words. He probably replayed that moment a thousand times in his mind. Jesus had urged His disciples to show their relationship to Him by loving one another. That same night the disciples had been arguing about which of

them was the greatest. A few hours later, Judas betrayed Jesus, the disciples scattered to protect themselves, and Peter repeatedly denied that he was one of Jesus' followers.

Loving fellow believers is so important that Peter mentioned it again: "Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil, or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing" (3:8-9).

Peter's instruction to love brothers and sisters who hurt us is important. His reminder to not repay evil with evil or insult with insult can help us avoid unrealistic expectations. We expect hostility from enemies, but not from fellow believers! Yet, once again, Peter understood human weakness. Over time, brothers and sisters will disrespect and insult one another. So God does not ask us to love only those who are always considerate, but to love one another as He loved us—in all of our own failure and foolishness. We are to show the watching world that we are a family shaped not by our own self-centered "love," but by the true love we have learned from our Father in heaven.

A Spiritual Thirst (2:2-3). To know God, we need to communicate with Him in prayer and to listen carefully and thoughtfully to what He has said. To hear God, we need attitudes that won't block out what He is saying. So Peter wrote that we should lay aside "all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. 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" (2:1-3).

The answer to the fears of those being persecuted would not be found in natural human instincts for self-protection. The solution to their problems was not to hate their persecutors, to envy those in better circumstances, or to lie in order to survive (as Peter had done when he denied the Lord). The answer to their dilemma was to crave to hear God speak through His Word, the way babies crave their mother's milk.

The word picture of babies crying for nourishment tells us a lot about what God wants for us. Nursing infants are not satisfied very long with one feeding. As regular as a clock, they cry again and again to be fed. Hunger is not a pleasant experience, but it is good because it drives a baby to cry for its mother.

Believers need God's Word as much and as often as a baby needs its mother's milk, for it is the source of all that is infinite, eternal, and good.

Believers need God's Word as much and as often as a baby needs its mother's milk, for it is the source of all that is infinite, eternal, and good. The Word of God reminds us that God is with us in all circumstances: "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you" (Dt. 31:6).

Peter pointed his readers back to the Word of God because of its permanence: "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" (1 Pet. 1:24-25).

An Enlightened Submission (2:11-18). Even in the unfair circumstances of the first century, Peter encouraged believers to submit “for the Lord’s sake” (v.13) and “as servants of God” (v.16). In a day when the Roman Caesar was worshiped as a god, and when economic slavery was a way of life for many followers of Christ, Peter called for submission to authorities in government (vv.13-14) and in the workplace as well (v.18). He reasoned that submission is proper even when the authorities are harsh and unkind (vv.18-20).

From other parts of the New Testament, we learn that our submission is not to be passive or mindless. The early apostles showed that there is a time to “obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29) and it is when authorities tell us to disobey God, or when we do not have an opportunity to legitimately improve our circumstances (1 Cor. 7:21). Peter reminded his readers to make certain that any punishment they received was for doing good not evil. He didn’t want them causing trouble by failing to respect or love someone. He wanted them to do everything possible to put the gospel of Christ in a good light (2:11-12,15).

An Admirable Endurance (2:18-20; 3:13-17). The natural response to unfair treatment is resentment and retaliation, but Peter wrote that the follower of Christ “bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God” (v.19). To endure “deserved” punishment merits no praise: “If you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God” (v.20). By doing this we follow the example set by Jesus (vv.21-23).

To a persecuted people strengthened by God, Peter said, “Do not fear what they fear [the things they are threatening to do to you]; do not be frightened.” In-

stead, “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” (3:14-15).

The implication of Peter’s loving counsel is that if we are distinguishing ourselves as the Lord’s people, we will be asked about our faith. We need to be ready to speak, but without forcing ourselves on listeners who would rather not hear. If we speak belligerently or hatefully when we are mistreated, we do more harm than good.

A Healthy Home (3:1-7). The distinction of a “set apart” people needs to be evident at home. If we fail to be Christlike within our own families, we will lose other opportunities for good and for God outside of our families as well.

If we fail to be Christlike within our own families, we will lose other opportunities for good and for God.

With a concern not only for families but also for the reputation of Christ, Peter first addressed wives, telling them to be submissive to their husbands, encouraging them to give more attention to their attitudes than to their attire, and giving the biblical example of Sarah’s relationship with Abraham as a model (3:1-6) (who, interestingly, was not always submissive).

Why did Peter lay this burden on women? Weren’t wives going through enough trouble outside of the home without being subjected to unreasonable pressure from their husbands? Couldn’t he have ap-

pealed to the principles of Christ to lift the burden of these wives?

Let's take a closer look: (1) Peter was addressing women in a society that did not give women equal status with men. (2) He had a special concern for Christian women whose husbands did not yet believe. (3) He was not being critical of external appearance, but was encouraging followers of Christ to give more attention to their hearts than to their attire. (4) The relationship of Abraham and Sarah was as complex as any marriage. On one occasion Abraham actually followed Sarah's lead. (5) The fear to which the wife was not to succumb—"do not give way to fear"—was probably the fear instilled by the pagan husband who pressures her to revert to paganism and emperor worship.

Submission is a loving, purposeful, enlightened submission. It is not a blind, passive attitude that cowers without character or reason.

We can be sure that the "submission" Peter asked for is a loving, purposeful, enlightened submission. It is not a blind, passive attitude that cowers without character or reason.

Peter's words to husbands, though more brief, were just as comprehensive and challenging (3:7): (1) The husband, aware of the emotional and physical differences between men and women, is to be "considerate," going the extra mile to make his wife's life as pleasant as possible. (2) He is to treat his wife with "respect," viewing her as an equal heir

of a relationship with God. (3) The husband, according to Peter, also needs to realize that his relationship with God depends on how he treats his wife (3:7). If he is inconsiderate and disrespectful, the wrongs he inflicts on his wife will come between his prayers and God.

An Eternal Perspective (4:1-19). God also wants His people to distinguish themselves with an eternal perspective. So Peter wrote, “Those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good” (4:19).

Believers, therefore, are people who see their present troubles against the backdrop of the future.

- They see themselves as objects of grace and destined for glory. They realize that the unbelievers who are angry with them will one day be judged for their sins. Then the tables will be turned (vv.5-6).
- They see the approaching “end of all things” and live with it in mind. Therefore, they are “clear minded,” making wise decisions that will prepare them for their meeting with Christ (v.7).
- They see that suffering with Christ now will enhance their joy when they share His glory (v.13).
- They see that suffering innocently for Christ’s sake will bring on them “the Spirit of glory and of God,” a foretaste of what awaits them (vv.14-16).
- They know that suffering now is a means by which God gives His people a chance to distinguish themselves as the people of Christ.

A Unifying Relationship (5:1-11). People “set apart” for God have a sense of oneness with all who share a relationship with God through Christ.

Peter placed upon spiritual leaders a great deal of responsibility to promote this sense of oneness (vv.1-4). He addressed the church leaders and told them how they were to fulfill their role as “shepherds” and “overseers”: (1) “not because you must, but because you are willing”; (2) “not greedy for money, but eager to serve”; (3) “not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.” The meaning of each charge is so clear that no explanation is needed. By referring to himself as a “fellow elder” instead of reminding them of his apostolic authority, Peter practiced the “oneness” he preached.

Believers are people who see their present troubles against the backdrop of the future.

Then before taking the pen from Silas (5:12) to sign the letter and write closing words of affection, Peter made one last effort to encourage the kind of unity that would enable his readers to grow in their knowledge of God. As one who had learned so much the hard way, Peter assured his troubled readers that by caring for one another they could entrust themselves and their final well-being to the Eternal One, who had in so many ways proven His love for them.

Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” 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. 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 sufferings. 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 (1 Pet. 5:5-10).

SEEING GOD

- In God's call for a life of distinction, we see that He wants us to follow His example in Christ.
- In God's requirement of a self-sacrificing love, we see a reflection of His own loving character.
- In God's encouragement to hunger for His Word, we see the importance He puts on truth, which has its source in Him.
- In God's principle of submission, we see His willingness to assure the ultimate well-being of those who entrust themselves to Him.

SEEING OURSELVES

- In God's call to distinction, we see our own inclination to follow the crowd.
- In God's appeal for love, we see our own tendency to care only for ourselves.
- In God's encouragement to have an eternal perspective, we see our inclination to be blinded by the fog of present circumstances.
- In God's call to humility, we see our own tendency to proudly rely on ourselves rather than on Him.

WHAT DO YOU CONSIDER WORTH DYING FOR?

Two thousand years and the experience of millions have confirmed the wisdom of Peter's first-century letter. The persecutions that came into the lives of his readers with such blinding and deafening impact have long since been replaced by the goodness of an eternal God. The eyes of those who first read and circulated this letter now see what we are still learning.

Although Peter was a member of Jesus' inner circle, the lessons he learned did not come easy. He knew the feelings of fear. He is the one who repeatedly denied his friend and teacher after Jesus was betrayed in the Garden of Gethsemane by Judas. But Peter came to the place where he could say:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In His great mercy He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time (1:3-5).

This is the life worth dying for. Nothing is more important than to know God through a personal faith in Jesus Christ (see Jn. 3:16; Rom. 3:23; 4:5; Eph. 2:8-9). Nothing is more important than to be able to cast all your cares on Him, "because He cares for you" (1 Pet. 5:7).



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