

THE FIRST LETTER OF PETER - PART II

THE INTRODUCTION AND CALL TO HOLINESS

I. The introduction includes a greeting that presents the theme of journeying through life and a blessing that presents struggles in the light of purification and unity with Jesus.

A. The greeting uses a style common in the New Testament Epistles, indicating the author and his title and the recipients and their calling. See, e.g., Rom. 1:1-8; Gal. 1:1-5; Phil. 1:1-2; Titus 1:1-4; ; Jam. 1:1.

1. Here the letter uses the name, or even title, Peter (rock), given by Jesus. See Matt. 16:18; John 1:42.

- Peter identifies himself simply as "an apostle of Jesus Christ." The title apostles (Greek for "ones sent forth") was given to the Twelve by Jesus, indicating their authority as ones sent forth to bring the kingdom of God to the world. See, e.g., Mark 3:14; Luke 6:13. Unlike the title "the Twelve," the title apostle would be handed onto the leaders later called bishops (episcopoi in Greek.) See, e.g., Acts 14:4; 1 Cor. 4:9; 9:6. Thus, Peter is speaking from his authority in the Church more than as a personal witness to Jesus, although the latter aspect is no doubt influential. Compare 1 John 1:1-4.

2. The letter refers to the recipients as "chosen sojourners in the diaspora."

- The notion of being sojourners would imply that we are only in a sense resident aliens here. The letter will later strongly indicate that this notion should not in any way diminish one's concern for one's nation. Rather the idea is that we have an even greater kingdom we are progressing toward.

- The letter then turns to a more specifically Jewish concept of the "diaspora," the Jews living away from their homeland. This concept could either refer to the Jews who had been exiled by Assyria or Babylon in the 8th and 6th centuries B.C. or to the Jews living in the 1st century away from the Holy Land. In either case, the letter is again emphasizing that we are not in our final homeland here. See, e.g., Ps. 39:13, 119:19; Heb. 11:13. There is perhaps a notion of these converts fulfilling the prophesy of Moses that the people of God would again be gathered. See

Duet. 30:4.

3. The greeting also refers to the Trinity in the life of the new Christians.

- The letter says they were "chosen . . . in the foreknowledge of God." The idea is that God has prepared for them to be Christians from all eternity; their coming to the Gospel was not a coincidence or a result of random chance. See Romans. 8:29; Eph. 1:5. We do not first choose God, but rather He first chooses us. See John 15:16; 1 John 4:10.

- The letter then says that the recipients were chosen "through sanctification by the Spirit. " The idea is that the people were made holy to be with God. It is noteworthy that the Spirit here is describing as working in a sense prior to the blood of Christ. It is an indication that, while we do not receive the Spirit in full until we have accepted Christ, see, e.g., John 7:29, 15:26, 16:13-15, Acts 8:14-17, the Spirit is at work in the fact that we come to God in the first place. Semi-Pelagianism is a heresy that denies this truth.

- The letter then says we are sanctified by the Spirit for both obedience to Jesus and a sprinkling with His blood. There is no point in trying to live a Christian life without obedience to the words of Christ. See, e.g., John 15:10, 15. By referring to the sprinkling with blood, the letter indicates that these recent converts are incorporated into the promises for the Jews, but even more so. For, at Mount Sinai, and before the worship of the golden calf, Moses sprinkled the people with the blood of the animal sacrifices, sealing His covenant with them. See Ex. 24:7-8. But then they had to keep a distance from God; and in fact would soon and often turn from God to idols. Now, the blood of Christ brings us into the new covenant in which we are close to God and share in His holiness through Jesus. In addition, the Ark of the Covenant, the dwelling of God's glory on earth and the veil of the Holy of Holies in which it was kept, were sprinkled with the blood of sacrifices that set them apart. See Lev. 4:6, 17, 26, 15:18-19. The letter will later point out that we are that new sacred dwelling place of the glory of God on earth. See 1 Peter 2:4-5.

4. As is common among letters in the New Testament, the letter then asks that grace and peace be to the recipients. See, e.g., Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 1:2. But it adds "in abundance," hinting to the recipients that they perhaps have not asked for the full grace of God available. See also Jude 1:2.

B. The introduction then proceeds onto a glorious blessing that introduces the theme of seeking a permanent and glorious inheritance.

1. As the letter to the Ephesians does, it calls for a blessing of God, who is the Father of Jesus Christ. See Eph. 1:3-10.

- It is curious that we give God a blessing. However, we bless God by giving Him the praise and adoration called for as the source of all blessing. See, e.g., Gen. 9:26, 14:20; Ps. 66:20, 68:20; cf. Catechism 1110.

2. The blessing focuses on the "new birth through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." The idea is that, in joining with the risen Christ, we are given a new birth to a greater life. See John 3:3-6; see also 1 John 2:29, 3:9.

- The birth is to a "living hope," to be contrasted with the hope in dead or mortal things, such as wealth, worldly power, or human institutions. See 1 Thess. 1:9, 1 Tim. 6:17; Heb. 9:14.

3. The letter speaks of the glorious imperishable, undefiled and unfading inheritance, for nothing can destroy it as it is ever new, and purely good. The land of old was the physical inheritance of the ancient Jews, but even that was not as permanent, and certainly not as pure as the new heavens and new earth that Jesus prepared for the children of God. See Joel 2:10; Jer. 2:7. The Book of Revelation describes the heavens and earth vanishing in favor of this new kingdom. See Rev. 16:20, 21:1. The idea is that, if we act as these children of God, we will receive our inheritance in this glorious land.

4. The letter then speaks of the readers as being "by God's power being guarded by faith." The idea is that there are constant threats during this earthly journey, but that the faith shows us the way through them, and its light puts them to flight. See, e.g., Rom. 13:11-14; Eph. 6:10-17.

5. The blessing then concludes saying that this inheritance is not now seen or even fully understood, but will be revealed at the end of all things. The idea is that it is too glorious to be seen now, for our perishable bodies can see only perishable things.

C. Having described the inheritance, the letter then praises the recipients as it switches to the next topic, the struggle that joins us to Christ.

1. The letter calls upon the reader to rejoice in this inheritance even now. Although it is invisible, we even now gain joy from it. This joyfulness in all times of life is a mark of the Christian spirit. See, e.g., Matt. 5:11-12. Rom. 5:3-5; 2 Cor. 1:3-7; Phil. 4:4; Col. 1:24; James 1:2; Rev. 9:17. The joy here is not human happiness, but a thrill, a deep fulfillment in finding the fulfillment of all human desires.

- The commendation likewise concludes with this notion of having an "indescribable joy" in this progress toward salvation. The idea is that there is a passion, an excitement of being with Christ that is beyond words and beyond any earthly happiness, a joy that sustains one throughout all trials.

2. The letter presents the sufferings as proof of faith.

- It dramatically contrasts the faith to "perishable gold." Gold is a symbol of permanence and almost sacredness, and thus the vessels of the temple were made of gold. And yet here is described as pale in comparison to faith. See Rev.3:18

- There is also an implication that if even perishable gold is purified in fire, surely the faith that is all the greater must be purified. See e.g., Prov. 17:3, 1 Cor. 3:12-15.

3. The letter then commends the recipients for already living this life in the imperishable realm. For they have not seen Christ and do not see Him, yet they can love Him and believe in Him. The letter is telling the readers that they are already living in faith and encourages them to do so all the more.

II. The letter then turns to describing the glory of the new Christians, who now have access to the fulfillment of all the longings of holy people and even of angels. It calls for Christians to live accordingly.

A. The letter points out that even the great and glorious prophets had to search and investigate what was to come. They likewise did not experience it or even fully understand it, but rather saw it from a distance.

- The letter indicates that their writings were not for their benefit, for they were already on the path to salvation. But rather their prophecies would help Christians understand what was being given to them. The Old Testament in general should help us understand the new even better.

- But the letter goes even further and says that even the angels did not fully understand the gospel, now so clearly presented to Christians. One gets the image of angels waiting until the time of Christ, as the Chosen People had, eagerly expecting this new mystery to be revealed.
- There is also the implication that, while the Christian must struggle in the world, paradoxically Christ is also the fulfillment of human history, not some departure from it.

D. The letter then begins calling for the Christians to respond morally in mind and body.

1. It calls first for the Christian to "gird up the mind." At the most basic level this call indicates that one's thoughts should not go in random fashion, but rather focused that one may advance.

- The ancients would tighten their long flowing robes that they could travel more easily, for the loose robes would make walking difficult. Likewise, loose flowing thoughts make the ascent to heaven difficult. Luke uses a similar analogy, but more in the context of preparing a home for our Master's return. See Luke 12:35-40.

- In addition, the ancient Jews ate the Passover, with belts girt around them, for they would soon be traveling to the Promised Land. See Ex. 12:11. The letter invokes this image to indicate that we are being freed from slavery to desire and on a journey to the new Promised Land.

2. The letter then contrasts conformity to passions with the obedience of the children of God. As St. Paul does, especially in Romans, St. Peter indicates that we will either be faithful children of God, obeying His commands out of love and being prepared for a glorious inheritance, or slaves of desire, on the road to death. See Rom. 6:12-23. There is no third way of serving no one and nothing.

- The letter says that the readers were controlled by passions because of ignorance. This ignorance likely has two forms. First, as least to some degree, they did not know even right and wrong, and so had no way to rise above their desires. Second, they did not know the way to Christ, and therefore, could not really be free from passions. See Rom. 7:7-25. As St. Paul describes in Romans, the law tells us what is right; but, even as it does so, it cannot free us from sin, but only makes us aware that we are in sin. That knowledge is valuable, for it makes us want to be

free. But it is only Christ who wins that freedom for us. See Rom. 5:12-21, 7:7-11.

3. The letter then invokes the ancient command to be holy as God is holy, for we are in God's image.

- The command is from Leviticus, and picked up by Jesus in the context of forgiveness of sins. Leviticus gives this command three times, once in the context of avoiding unclean foods, and twice in the context of avoiding idolatry and other pagan practices. See Lev. 11:44-45, 19:1, 20:7. Jesus takes the command further and commands love for all, saying "Be perfect as Your heavenly Father is perfect."

- Here, the emphasis is more on avoiding the sin of the world around them, being holy and set aside for God in purity. However, the letter will soon describe the need to love with God's love. See 1 Peter 1:22-23. The overall notion is that the people of God are meant to be separate from the world in practice, even as we are amongst them in life.