

From Peter

We come this morning to the first of what will be a lengthy series of messages from the book of I Peter. If you recall, last week I mentioned that the book contains five chapters, 105 verses in all. My challenge to you was to read a chapter a day as part of preparing yourself for everything Peter said in this book. I'm very appreciative for those of you who have accepted my challenge and are reading a chapter a day for as long as we study the book. You will be enriched as you do so.

I've titled this series of messages, "Comforting Words for Suffering Christians." I've chosen this as the title specifically because of the Apostle Peter's words in verse six where he wrote, "...Though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials."

The theme of suffering for the sake of Christ is represented throughout the book. He knew that the recipients of his letter were undergoing persecution and affliction for no reason other than identifying themselves as followers of Jesus Christ. Hence, his desire was to encourage their faith, strengthen them spiritually and assist them in various practical aspects of dealing with the hostility that was directed against them. And although in our day we are not paying the same price they paid for following Christ, we all know suffering; thus we all benefit from Peter's words of comfort and encouragement.

But there's more. What we'll also come to see as we work our way through the book is that Peter had a lot to say about living the Christian life in general. He spoke of God's sovereignty in salvation. God's call for us to live holy lives, the nature of authority in society, the church and the home, as well as the characteristics of the enemy we face as we seek to live godly lives. These are all topics we'll spend considerable time on in the weeks ahead. That's part of the reason why I encourage you to read a chapter a day.

Now with all that in mind, my intent today is to provide us with a general introduction to the book. In the weeks ahead, we'll flesh out in greater detail the specific topics and themes Peter developed. No doubt we'll spend more than a single week on several of the subjects Peter addressed. That's because Peter's blend of significant theology and practical advice is far too valuable for us to deal with in a passing or hurried manner. Are you ready to begin? Let's dig in together.

Now the basic rule when beginning a study of a book of the Bible is to deal with three important things at the very outset. First, who is the author? Second, to whom did he write; and third, why did he write?

Take a look at the first two verses of the book with me as we seek to address these issues. Peter wrote, "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who are elect exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ and for the

sprinkling with his blood. May grace and peace be multiplied to you." It shouldn't be at all difficult for us to identify the author of the book simply because he identified himself in the very first word he wrote.

I consulted all the major English translations of the Bible and in every one of them the first word of the book is "Peter." This is indeed the Peter we know from the gospels, as well as the book of Acts. The first reference to him is in Matthew 4:18. "While walking by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus saw two brothers, Simon who is called Peter and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.'"

From that point on, Peter is everywhere. Next to Jesus, he's the most prominent character throughout all the gospels. He's mentioned 65 times in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Further, several of the most important things Jesus taught were directed specifically to Peter. Do you recall the question Jesus asked the disciples in Matthew 16:13? He asked, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" It was Peter who responded, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." To which Jesus responded, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

We see in Matthew 17 that Peter was on the mount of transfiguration with Jesus. It was he who said, "Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." It was Peter who said that he would never deny Christ and who that very day denied him three times. His spirit was bitterly broken as a result. If you recall, after the resurrection Jesus asked Peter three times, "Simon Peter, do you love me?" Immediately following each question Jesus said, "Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep."

There's more. Peter dominated the first fifteen chapters of the book of Acts; his name being mentioned 52 times. In the first chapter of Acts, Peter took the lead in telling those who gathered together of the need to select another apostle to replace Judas, who had betrayed Christ and hanged himself. On the day of Pentecost after the Holy Spirit rushed upon those who were gathered together, Peter delivered a sermon to the assembled crowd that contained these words: "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know -- this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it... Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified."

You know the outcome of that sermon. Acts 2:41 tells us that those who received his words were cut to the heart, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. I'd say

that's powerful preaching from a man who had never preached before. Peter is the dominant figure and voice of the first fifteen chapters of the book of Acts. He is clearly the established leader of the infant church in Jerusalem. After Acts chapter 15, we see his name mentioned four additional times, twice by Paul in the book of Galatians, and once each in I and II Peter as he identified himself of the author of these books.

Make no mistake, next to Jesus and Paul, Peter is the most dominant character and voice in the entirety of the New Testament. And whereas Paul authored more of the New Testament than Peter, Peter, unlike Paul, spent a significant amount of time in Jesus' presence.

There's something else I want to mention as it relates to Peter. I want you to keep something in mind regarding what we've seen about him. As Jesus did with all the apostles, has done throughout the course of church history and still does today, Peter was snatched out of nowhere, perhaps the most unlikely of men, to become the most prominent, well known, important and leading voice of the early church. That thought always speaks to me; and for this reason. Each time I reflect on that, I can't help but wonder if there are Peters among us.

You see, Peter's willingness to immediately follow Christ's invitation for him to become fishers of men did not come out of nowhere. And although we know little about his mother and father or how he was raised, it's not too farfetched to assume that he was raised to be sensitive and available to God's call when and however it came. Oh, that we might raise our sons and daughters with similar sensitivity to the voice of God and similar faith to leave their nets and follow Jesus.

Who wrote the book? Simon Peter, the man we have become familiar with throughout the gospels. But there's more to it than that. Not only did he identify himself as Peter, he also acknowledged what he understood his ministry to be: Peter, an apostle. The words "apostle" or "apostles" appear a total of 77 times in the New Testament. The word itself means messenger or one who has been sent forth with specific orders.

Now we know the exact names of the original twelve apostles from the record provided in Matthew 10. It reads; "And the names of the twelve apostles are these: first Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alpheus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him." Thus we know the names of the apostles. But more than that, we know their mission and message. We know the specific orders Jesus gave them when he departed from them. In Matthew 28, Jesus told them that they were to go and make disciples of all nations.

I believe there's something we can derive from that. Based on the overall New Testament record of their activities, it's very clear from the gospels that the apostles were a very select group. They were hand-picked by Jesus to spend three years with him prior to his

death. They were eye-witnesses to his life, works, crucifixion and resurrection. They were there at the foundation of the early church on the day of Pentecost. They were uniquely used by God as his designated messengers of the gospel of Christ.

As a means of amplifying how exclusively and seriously the term apostle was as used in the New Testament, even Paul, who wrote a large portion of the New Testament and called himself an apostle, was quite hesitant to embrace that designation fully. In first Corinthians 15:9 he said, “For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle.” He felt unworthy to be called an apostle for two reasons. First he had been a severe persecutor of the church. And second, he knew that the role of apostle was a sacred calling. In first Corinthians 12:28, he made reference to this when he said, “And God has appointed in the church, first apostles...” Thus in Paul’s mind, he was unworthy to be called an apostle. He was humbled by the high calling and severe responsibility such a designation involved.

Now as it relates to Peter, there’s something more to this as well. In identifying himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ, Peter reflected his understanding that what he wrote was the true word of God. He understood that his words would be viewed and embraced as containing full apostolic authority, equal in authority with the prophets of the Old Testament. I trust you see from this that when we consider the seriousness of the office of apostle, we also understand that there are no apostles in our day.

I mention that because there are groups, even in this community, that claim apostolic authority, voice and ministry. That’s a significant misuse of the office, how the term was used, and what it involved based on the model presented to us in the New Testament.

Let’s move on now. We know the author, Peter. Further, we know that he identified himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ, a hand-picked delegate and messenger of Christ. Further, we know he understood his mandate, to go into all the world spreading the gospel. In chapter five he wrote that he was declaring the true grace of God.

Peter was also quite straightforward as it relates to the recipients of the letter and his purpose in writing. Take a look at the text: “...To those who are elect exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia.” Now the first thing to note is the exact geography Peter referred to. The areas Peter mentioned are regions that were not evangelized by Paul or by any other known apostle. This general area is known as Asia Minor. It encompassed an area approximately the size of California. It’s primarily what we know today as present day Turkey. In Peter’s day, it encompassed an enormous diversity of land, people and cultures. It was characterized primarily by small cities that were few and far between.

Isn’t it interesting that God chose this very unlikely geographic region to be, at least to some degree, the cradle of Christianity? I did some research on this and was fascinated to learn that from the region Peter addressed his letter emerged some of the most important names of

the early church. From Pontus came Aquila, the Jewish tentmaker and husband of Priscilla mentioned in Acts 18. Further, there's a long list of names linked to Asia Minor including Marcian, a very important second century believer; several prominent translators of the Greek version of the Old Testament; Eusebius, an early church father; Basil, an early bishop; and Gregory, a staunch defender of the faith. Who but God uses suffering and persecution as the means of equipping his most ardent and faithful representatives and defenders of the gospel? That's a pattern we see throughout church history.

But there's something else I want us to note in the text. Pay particular attention to the unique combination of words Peter used in addressing the recipients of the letter: "elect exiles." The word "elect" appears fifteen times in the Bible, exclusively in the New Testament. The word "exiles" appears 36 times in the Old and New Testaments. But this is the only time in the entirety of scripture where we see the words combined. That's significant from both a theological and practical standpoint. Here's why. The word "elect," which as I mentioned occurs only in the New Testament, literally means "one who is chosen, one who is selected and picked out by God."

Keep that in mind. We'll be seeing this in future messages, because the portrayal of God as an electing God is one of the most prominent theological themes throughout the Bible. Peter mentioned it specifically on several occasions in the book. But pay attention as well to the word "exile" which means stranger, alien or foreigner. Put the words together: "elect exiles." Peter is presenting his readers with the theology of their situation.

In other words, he wants them to know that their present circumstances as aliens or foreigners, as well as the suffering they are experiencing, is part of what God elected and purposed for them. They were chosen for this reason, both to suffer for Christ's name and to reside as strangers in the lands where they lived. They weren't literal foreigners like the exiles in the Old Testament who were dragged away to Babylon; Daniel, Shadrack, Meshak and Abednego are good examples of that. No; Peter's use of the word "exile" describes their relationship to the world by virtue of their faith in Christ.

This is incredibly practical for us; for you see, we are to adopt the same attitude. Peter put it this way in the next chapter. "Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh which wage war against your soul." The picture of Christians as aliens is reinforced throughout the New Testament. In various places, we are told that Christians are in the world but not of the world. Peter's good friend and fellow apostle, John, put it this way, "Do not love the world or the things in the world."

The Apostle James was even more direct. He wrote, "Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God." Peter wanted his readers, and us as well, to know that we are

strangers, temporary residents of this world. As such, we are to be unaffected by the values, influences, goals and desires it represents.

But here's a major consideration inherent in Peter's use of the phrase "elect exiles." Those to whom Peter wrote may have been foreigners with respect to the values of the society in which they lived; but with respect to God, Peter wanted them to know that they were chosen to be so. Their current situation was *because of* their relationship with God through Christ. *They were elected and chosen by God for that very purpose.* Such truths have important implications for us in our day as well.

Let me now seek to summarize what we've noted in this introductory message. The Apostle Peter, the closest human associate with Jesus himself, inspired by the Holy Spirit, wrote to a very needy group of people dispersed throughout the region of Asia Minor. In the midst of their suffering, he wanted them to know that they had been chosen by God unto salvation; and just as certainly, to the suffering that resulted from their following Christ. He wanted them to know that there's comfort in the midst of suffering precisely because they had been elected by God for this very purpose.

He wanted them to know that their suffering was proof of their identification with Christ and their rejection of the values and mindset of the world in which they lived. And as he moves ahead in this precious and practical book, he provided for them and us numerous and stunning words of relief, encouragement and comfort; words such as, "He has caused us to be born again to a living hope to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you...Therefore, prepare your minds for action, being sober-minded... Set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation..."

"For you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light...Have no fear or be troubled, but in your hearts regard Christ as Lord, always prepared to make a defense for the hope that is in you. And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you into his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen and establish you...I have written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it."

Indeed, Peter has great words of comfort and encouragement, practical words to live by for those in his day and ours as well. Would you consider accepting my challenge? It's not too late. Start tomorrow reading a chapter a day. Find what you consider to be the key verse of each chapter. Memorize it and watch how God will bring great blessing and encouragement to your hearts as it did the people of Peter's day.