

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Peter: First Recipients and Message

PETER, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the strangers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace unto you, and peace, be multiplied. (1 Peter 1:1–2, KJV 1900)

Aside from speculative traditions regarding where each of the apostles labored after the Book of Acts closes, our primary—and only reliable—resource is the letters that some of them wrote and the Holy Spirit included in our New Testament. To say the least, the popular tradition that Peter went to Rome and became the leader of that church is highly overstated. Surely, if Peter were in Rome at the time Paul wrote his Romans letter, we would see some mention of that fact in Romans, but we see none. Since John wrote the Book of Revelation to churches in the southern coastal region of modern Turkey, and since he was imprisoned off the coast in that area, it seems reasonable to consider that he likely labored among those churches. Acts records Paul's entrance into Greece where he started a number of churches, and we see his letters to some of those churches in his New Testament. Paul's pattern of laboring in a region and writing letters to churches where he labored is the clearest example we have in the New Testament. I suggest that Peter's letter to Christians dispersed throughout the northern region of modern Turkey may well give us more reliable indications of where he labored than corrupted and unreliable traditions. To say the least, Peter surely spent significant time with these suffering saints, had a knowledge of their trials, and a passionate love for their spiritual well-being, all of which we gather from his first letter. For purposes of our present study, this conclusion is sufficient.

The common reaction to Peter by contemporary Christians is interesting. Peter suffered from what we, tongue-in-cheek, might call "Foot in mouth disease." The New Testament frequently mentions Peter saying and doing things before giving them adequate and wise thought. Thus, we identify with the man's frail humanity. I find it ironic that the man whose human frailty is most obvious in the New Testament record of Jesus' followers is held up by the Roman Church as the first man after Jesus who supposedly rose above his humanity to the presumed ability of ruling over all churches, not just one, without error. A simple and wise rule will safely sort out the many traditions that often become so accepted that people believe them as if they appeared in Scripture, even though they often contradict Scriptural information. When Scripture

and anything else contradict each other, go with Scripture—period. Just be sure that you have the correct interpretation of Scripture and not a private opinion or skewed interpretation.

As we attempt to sort out the various regions where each apostle labored after the closing of the Book of Acts, the sixteenth chapter of that book contains several worthwhile clues. Paul and his companions are travelling across the region of modern Turkey in a northwest direction. Somewhere near the middle of this trek, we read:

Now when they had gone throughout Phrygia and the region of Galatia, and were forbidden of the Holy Ghost to preach the word in Asia, After they were come to Mysia, they assayed to go into Bithynia: but the Spirit suffered them not. And they passing by Mysia came down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night; There stood a man of Macedonia, and prayed him, saying, Come over into Macedonia, and help us. And after he had seen the vision, immediately we endeavoured to go into Macedonia, assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us for to preach the gospel unto them. (Acts 16:6-10 KJVP)

Consider Paul's location and what we now know about both John's and Peter's writings. John is a leading figure to the south of where Paul and his company were located at this time, and Peter wrote his letter to believers to the north of Paul and his companions. We find strong comfort in the obvious point that the Lord directed Paul to go where He wanted Paul to minister, Greece, while He was also ministering to His people in other regions by Peter to the north and John to the south of Paul's location at the time. Later Paul would be influential in the southern region, but not now. Rather than this passage restricting the spread of the gospel, it sheds light on how broadly the Holy Spirit worked to ensure that the gospel went to many regions.

Who were these "...strangers scattered..." throughout this region? Given that Peter was God's assigned apostle to the Jews, and given that Jews who were dispersed throughout the Roman Empire were referred to as the "Diaspora," or dispersed—or scattered, many commentaries use these two

words to make their case that Peter wrote to predominantly Jewish Christians who were living in these regions. The conclusion is logical. Based on Peter's own words to Cornelius (Acts 10:34-35), a person's "Grace standing" is of far greater significance now than a person's "Race standing." Regardless of their race or culture, these people were believers whose faith had so isolated them from the sinful world around them that they lived as "...strangers and pilgrims on the earth." (Hebrews 11:13) Immediately following, in the second verse of the letter, Peter's focused description of his audience in spiritual terms and not racial or cultural terms should suffice our interest and our "Need to know" who they were.

In the pagan culture of the first century Roman Empire, being a Christian defined a person as a "...stranger and pilgrim." Within roughly two centuries, a major controversy erupted within Christianity regarding how the faithful should treat believers who had abandoned their faith under the heat of persecution. The faithful referred to those who so abandoned their faith as "Traitors" to the faith. One group of Christians effectively refused to accept these "Traitors" back into the faith, and the other faction favored restoration.

Our culture has made being a Christian less difficult from a purely cultural perspective than most other cultures through Christian history. In some ways we should rightly view this phenomenon as a blessing, but in another way it has proved to be a curse to a vigorous faith. The question that divided early Christians into these two camps remains at the heart of the Christian conscience of our day. What does it mean to be a Christian? May we live any way we wish six days a week, and call ourselves a "Christian" because we go to church on Sunday? May we develop sinful habits and lifestyles in our routine decisions, but call ourselves a "Christian" because we have some sense of belief in God? You see this attitude in the fact that most surveys in our country that ask the generic question, "Are you a Christian?" report that some sixty to eighty percent of respondents say they are Christians. However, similar surveys that deal with some of the major moral questions of our day reveal similar percentages of respondents giving answers to the moral questions that contradict the teachings of the New Testament. So after twenty centuries, people are still divided on that same question. **What does it mean to be a Christian?**

If we reshape the question somewhat, we shall find that Peter gives us a wealth of information on the question. How should a faithful Christian react to unfair or sinful circumstances in their lives?

One writer has identified five major motifs in 1 Peter. These are the believer's behavior, the believer's unfair circumstances, the believer's deference, the believer's motivation by Christ's example, and the believer's anticipation of future

glory. These are certainly important emphases in this epistle.

Putting these together he has stated the message of 1 Peter as follows. "The behavior of believers when they encounter unfair circumstances reflects a spirit of deference in all relationships as they follow Christ's example and anticipate future glory."⁸

This is a very fine statement of what the Holy Spirit has said to us through Peter in this epistle. However, I would add one more important motif. It is the believer's resource of God's grace. This is not an incidental motif but one that underlies all of what Peter called on his readers to do. We must understand and apply what he wrote about God's grace as our resource to follow his exhortations.

It seems to me that Peter stated the message of this epistle clearly: stand firm in the true grace of God (5:12).¹

Many students of First Peter rightly observe that Peter focuses more clearly on the problem of persecution, of suffering as a Christian, than any other New Testament letter. True, but the idea doesn't go far enough. The greater question deals with how godly, faithful Christians should react to ungodly, hostile-to-the-faith people and events that invade our lives on a fairly regular basis. We need not live in a culture where open and life-threatening persecution prevails to gain needed spiritual instruction from First Peter. If you live your faith, really live it in the trenches of life where you spend most of your time, you need Peter's message. You shall surely come to think of yourself as a "...stranger and pilgrim," as a "...scattered stranger" in a distinctly unfriendly-to-the-faith world.

Aside from the political haggling, a growing number of people in our country possess dual citizenship. They retain citizenship in their native country, and they have gained legal citizenship in our country. This situation undoubtedly creates emotional tension at times; likely more than just emotional tension. Every faithful Christian lives daily with the tension of dual citizenship. We are citizens of the country in which we live, but we are also citizens of heaven. The tension behind the towering question of First Peter reduces to a simple question. Which citizenship do we favor? When the two "Countries" come into conflict, where do our loyalties lie? Which country attracts our strongest allegiance? Before you read far into First Peter, he will answer this question. Will you agree with him? Agree both in words and in actions?

⁸ 8. James R. Slaughter, "The Importance of Literary Argument for Understanding 1 Peter," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152:605 (January-March 1995):80.

¹ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible*, Jas 5:20 (Galaxie Software, 2003; 2003).

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Worship service each Sunday
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10:30 A. M.
Pastor