

# 1 Peter: Introduction

## Lesson 1: The Message of an Apostle

### Introduction:

Many ancient secular documents are lost to us. Some of the finest were destroyed when famous libraries, such as those at Alexandria in ancient Egypt, burned. Yet God, in His providence, preserved for His church those books that we speak of as “the prophetic and apostolic Word.” **1 Peter** offers such an apostolic message. Hence we do not read it like a work from Plato, who was not an apostle. We study this epistle as material that addresses us directly through the working of the Holy Spirit, bringing us to faith in Jesus Christ or enriching the faith in which we already live by Baptism.

### The Salutation

In the days of the apostle Peter people wrote letters in a way somewhat different from our modern-day practices. It was customary for the writer to name himself first and then to indicate to whom he was writing. These two items were followed by a greeting—and sometimes also a prayer-wish or even a thanksgiving.

*Identify these three parts of a salutation:*

- Acts 23:26
- James 1:1
- 1 Peter 1:1-2

## The Author

In this epistle the author used the name that Jesus gave him (see **Matthew 16:18** and **John 1:42**). At home he had been known as Simon, the son of John (bar-Jonah). As an apostle, however, he preferred to be called Peter (Cephas), the rock man. He had, with his confession of faith, been chosen and created as the person whose name would head the list of the Twelve and so mark the beginning of the new Israel, just as Abraham had been selected to be the rock from which Israel of old had been hewn (see **Isaiah 51:1-2**).

## The Recipients and the Greeting

After naming himself, Peter described himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ and then went on to describe the first recipients of this letter. Then, instead of the usual 'greetings,' the apostle wrote, "Grace and peace be yours in abundance (v. 2). Here he followed a pattern established by the Jewish High Council in Jerusalem. When this body of men wrote to a synagogue, they concluded their salutation with the words, "May peace be multiplied to you." Peter added the New Testament word *grace* in his salutation to fellow Christians in Asia Minor.

## The Conclusion

From the salutation we move, for a brief moment, to the conclusion of this epistle (5:12-14). There we note the mention of Silas (Silvanus) as the person who delivered the apostle's letter to the churches mentioned in the salutation. Some authorities believe that Silas may have served as Peter's scribe in the same sense that Tertius and Tychicus related to Paul (see **Romans 16:22** and **Ephesians 6:21**).

## The Body

Between the salutation and conclusion, of course, is the body of the letter. Its wording indicates that the apostle was writing mainly to persons who either had just been baptized or were about to take part in this sacrament. In essence, Peter was addressing himself to the question that every new convert had, and still has, to ask: Is it really worthwhile to be a Christian?

At **1 Peter 4:11** Peter breaks into a doxology. Some commentators suggest that the first part of the epistle, either up to **4:6** or **4:11**, is a baptismal homily directed to newly baptized people, followed by more general words of exhortation and direction to the congregations as a whole. We might, therefore, liken the first part to a confirmation sermon. The unity of the document is not affected by calling attention to these two major sections. It would help to account for the liturgical quality of the main body of the letter.

## The Sequence

Epistles were not written to be outlined. Yet, as a rule, determining movements in the author's thinking will help the reader understand more fully the individual passages of an epistle.

There are, roughly speaking, three doctrinal sections, each one of which is followed by some ethical applications:

- **1 Peter 1:3-12**: what the triune God has done for our salvation (doctrine)
- **1 Peter 1:13-25**: the kind of lifestyle that such an action on God's part call for (ethics)
- **1 Peter 2:1-10**: the means of grace at work in the priesthood of believers (doctrine)
- **1 Peter 2:11-3:17**: living to the glory of God (ethics); this section includes what we call a table of duties (**2:13-3:12**)

- **1 Peter 3:18-22**: how Christ established His lordship over the total universe (doctrine)
- **1 Peter 4:1-5:11**: the new way of life in response to the awareness that “the end of all things is near” (ethics)

## The Occasion

Commentaries suggest various dates for the writing of this epistle, all the way from 63 AD to 112 AD. Anyone who argues for a date beyond the sixties of the first century thereby implies that the epistle was not really written by Simon Peter. Yet the letter explicitly claims to have been written by him.

Peter did not date the letter. Therefore we must try to derive our conclusions from internal evidence. Two things stand out very clearly: 1) the people to whom the apostle was writing were suffering some kind of social harassment (see **4:12; 3:14; 1:6**); and 2) they were new converts and were being received into the church or had just become members (see **1:22**). The members of the congregations named in the salutation were shaken up by what they were experiencing, wondering whether God’s children should really be expected to stand for suffering (**2:21-23**).

When may this have happened? It probably took place in connection with the persecution of Christians following the burning of Rome in 64 AD. Peter probably wrote this epistle from Rome, which the early Christians often referred to as Babylon (see **5:13**). He dispatched the epistle by Silas to the churches in Pontus, etc., (v.**1:1**), to reassure them in their puzzlement and distress. Shortly after writing this letter of comfort Peter was crucified.

## **The Purpose**

1 Peter has a twofold purpose, as indicated in the conclusion (5:12): 1) to offer consolation and encouragement; and 2) to add the apostle's personal testimony to the truth of God's grace and, therefore, of the church's proclamation. On the basis of these stated purposes, Peter ask his readers to stand fast.

## **Discussion:**

1. What do you recall about Peter the person and Peter the Christian that will help you read and understand better his first letter?
2. How would you compare yourself with the people who first read this letter?
3. In your own words summarize Peter's purpose for writing this letter.