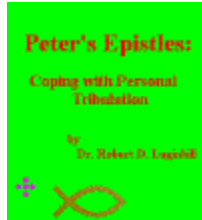


## Peter's Epistles #2

### Peter the Apostle and the Problem of Christian Suffering

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**Review:** First Peter is a call to spiritual growth. In this first epistle, Peter gives special attention to the distraction posed to spiritual growth by the problem of *personal suffering*. The issue of suffering will be in the background for most of our study.

#### **Revised Translation of 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 1:1-2:**

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who, though outcasts dispersed throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, were yet selected in the foreknowledge of God the Father, by means of the Holy Spirit's consecration, for the obedience in and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ. Grace and peace be multiplied unto you!

**Overview of Personal Suffering:** It is often asked, "why do believers suffer?" The question is a good one, and will occupy much of our attention in studies to come as we treat the matter in detail. Nevertheless, we need to keep in mind several key points from the beginning. When we believe in Jesus Christ, we are not transported to heaven immediately. Instead, we are left on this earth . . .

- to learn about *God's faithfulness*.
- to have our faith *tested*.
- to *help* nourish the faith of others.

All three of these purposes are elements in spiritual growth: (1) learning about *God and His faithfulness* – believing what we learn, and applying it to our lives – is fundamental to spiritual growth; (2) *testing* is the process whereby God demonstrates His faithfulness to us

and thereby strengthens our faith, and (3) service is the natural result of spiritual growth as we reach out *to help* our fellow believers advance spiritually as we have. All of these issues are in view in the prologue of 1st Peter (vv.1-2).

**The Apostle Peter:** The Greek word *petros* ("stone", from which Peter is derived) was not Peter's original name. He was first called Simon, a Hebrew name (*Shimon*) which means "Hearing". The patriarch Simeon was the first to bear this name. When God "heard" Leah's prayer (Gen.29:33) and granted her a son, she named him after God's gracious response. Our Lord gave "Simon" the name Peter at their first meeting (Jn.1:35-42). John's gospel tells us that Andrew, Peter's brother, after spending a single day with Jesus, had heard enough to be convinced that He was the Messiah. Andrew then led Peter to Jesus and Jesus pronounced the words "You are Simon, the son of John; you will be called *Cephas*" (Aramaic for "stone").

It is important to note that there is nothing meritorious in Peter's actions here to warrant being awarded this new name. He is led to the Lord by another, and has his name changed before he even has a chance to speak. In renaming Peter, the Lord is telling him and us that Peter's life will be completely changed by his non-meritorious act of believing. As with Peter, the Lord knows all about us in advance too (and all about our strengths and weaknesses). He can see the entire course of our lives at one glance. We have a tendency to get lost in the details of every day existence, and to forget that, since this life lasts only for a moment, we will soon be with the Lord for all eternity. We ought to remember the Lord's pronouncement to Peter and its implications: He is always looking at the "big picture" even if we are not; it is only His final, comprehensive evaluation of our life that matters. Whatever we gain in this life will soon be dust, but the rewards bestowed upon us by the Lord will be eternal (Mt.6:19-20).

**The Pebble and the Rock:** What precisely is the Lord predicting about Peter's life by giving him the name "stone"? One common view incorrectly claims that Jesus meant Peter to be the cornerstone of the church, and its proponents usually cite Matthew 16:13-20 for support. But in that passage, Jesus tells Peter "I tell you that you are Peter (Greek *petros*, a small pebble or stone), and on this Rock (Greek *petra*, a huge rocky crag or mountain side) I will build my church." Now in the context of Matthew 16, Peter has just acknowledged that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the Living God". Jesus is thus underscoring the truth of Peter's statement. By "this Rock", Jesus refers *to Himself* as the cornerstone of the church (a teaching well documented in scripture: see especially Is.28:16; 1Pet.2:6; Eph.2:20), not to Peter (a false notion not supported by any other verse; cf. 1Cor.3:11). Jesus thus uses the near demonstrative pronoun *houtos* ("this") with Rock to refer back to Himself in the same way as in John 2:19 He prophesies the resurrection of His body ("this" temple): "Destroy *this temple*, and in three days I will raise it up" (cf. Jn.6:50).

**Living Stones:** Nevertheless, Matthew 16:13-20 does point the way to discovering the meaning of Peter's name. Jesus is the central support in the church (the universal body of believers in Christ, rather than any particular denomination), but Peter is a part (a stone) in the overall structure. Peter confirms this interpretation in 1st Peter 2:4-6, where he tells us that what Christ proclaimed about Peter himself is also true of all believers. Christ is the cornerstone, and *the* Living Stone chosen by God though rejected by men, but we believers are likewise "living stones", who are being built up into a spiritual temple for God's service. We are all "stones" in Christ's church. Peter was a very special individual with a tendency towards

spectacular successes and failures. It is also true that he and the other apostles played a pivotal, "foundational" role in the establishment of the early church, for it was for that purpose that they had been called (Eph.2:20; Rev.21:14). But the purpose of the new name which Jesus gave Peter is not to call attention to this importance. Rather, the opposite is true. "Peter" means "just another brick in God's house". "Peter" is thus a title which calls attention to the true, Godly humility of its holder in the same way that Paul ("little") does, a title which Peter did eventually live up to. There is no doubt that the apostle Peter accomplished much in his life for the Lord, but the point here is that only if we have this same true, genuine humility – the recognition that we need to be dependent upon the Lord's might and wisdom, not our own – can the Lord make full use of us as He did of Peter (Prov.3:34; Jas.4:6).

**Peter's Apostleship:** The word apostle is derived from the Greek word *apostolos* which means "one sent". Although today, the word apostle is used almost exclusively to refer to "the twelve" (the eleven original disciples of Christ, minus Judas, plus Paul; Eph.2:20; Rev.21:14), in the early church, the word was used for other missionaries as well (Lk.11:49; Acts 14:4; Rm.16:7; Eph.4:11). Peter was one of the twelve "apostles of Christ", a special spiritual gift marked by special requirements, authority, and responsibility. Peter begins his letters with this title (as does Paul) because it is the mark of this authority. Only apostles of Christ could write New Testament scripture (or, occasionally, commission close associates do so as, for example, Mark writing under Peter's authority, or Luke under Paul's). Though a man of true humility, Peter is not shy about emphasizing his spiritual authority. He knew that this authority came from God. True apostles of Jesus Christ shared a number of unique characteristics:

- They never exceeded the number of the original twelve (Mt.10:2ff.; Judas was replaced by Paul, cf. Acts 9:1-19, 22:1-21, 26:12-18). See below for Matthias.
- They identified themselves as apostles (1Pet.1:1; 2Pet.1:1; Rm.1:1, 1Cor.1:1).
- They all possessed special, miraculous spiritual gifts to corroborate their authority (Acts 5:12-16; Heb.2:3-4).
- They all carried specific responsibilities (Acts 9:15-16; Rm.11:13; Gal.2:7).
- They were all first-hand witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus Christ (Acts 1:8; 1:22; 1Cor.9:1).

By making him an apostle, the Lord gave Peter a great responsibility, but He also gave him the authority and ability to carry out his life tasks. God never asks more of us than we can accomplish through the resources He gives us.

**Provision for Spiritual Growth:** God's plan for Peter's life included suffering, persecution, and eventual martyrdom, yet Peter finished the course by making use of the grace support God provided. Peter in turn became part of God's grace provision to us. As we needed the gospel (the message about Jesus) in order to be saved, so we now need the truth (the principles of the Word of God contained in the Bible) in order to grow spiritually. Peter answered all three of

God's calls: to salvation, to growth, and to service. As a result, we too have the opportunity to grow by learning and appropriating the teachings contained in these letters which Peter penned nearly 2,000 years ago.

**The "apostle" Matthias:** On the issue of the "13" disciples, it is true that Peter and company "elected" Matthias to replace Judas, but not everything recorded in the Bible that individuals do is to be taken as ordained of God (obviously). Peter made his share of mistakes ("don't wash my feet", "wash my whole body", etc.). Whenever God makes clear in scripture His feelings about the apostles, there are always 12 (as in the 12 gates of Rev.21:14, and the 12 thrones only in Matt.19:28). Whose names are on the gates? Do we imagine one of them will have the name "Matthias"? Then who will be left out? Remember that the election was held before Pentecost, after which Peter (and his fellows) are suddenly much more effective for God (as one would expect with the coming of the Holy Spirit). Notice too that to "elect" Matthias, they turn to the Old Testament device of casting lots, something Jesus never did and something that is never authorized in the New Testament. Notice that God did not communicate to Peter the need to get a new number 12 (although he did receive revelation when it was time to bring the gospel to the gentiles); and notice that when God decided to choose number 12, Christ appeared to Paul in a very miraculous way that left no doubt as to God's call, God's "election" of Paul as number 12. Matthias was no doubt a fine believer, but he was no "apostle of Christ" – except temporarily in the eyes of men. Finally, in the Greek, Luke hints that the election, while an understandable thing for these men to do in the circumstances, was not divinely sanctioned. He says of the election of Matthias that he was "voted down along with the eleven" (the verb *synkatapsephizo*). The base verb means to "vote down" i.e., defeat, or, better put, "to condemn". It only occurs one other place in all of Greek literature (Plutarch) where it means "join in condemnation"; here we have a passive so on that model it would mean "be jointly condemned with". There may be doubt on the part of some scholars about the precise meaning of the word, but according to all linguistic convention it should have a negative connotation – something that only makes sense if we see Luke here as being careful not to endorse the election of Matthias. This is also evident at Acts 2:14, where Luke mentions "the eleven" instead "the twelve" – not until the calling of Paul, the genuine twelfth apostle, was the full complement again reached. For it is Jesus who picked the apostles, not men, and He did so "through the Holy Spirit":

(1) The first account I produced [for you], O Theophilus, dealt with all the things which Jesus did and taught from the beginning, (2) until the day when Jesus was taken up [into heaven], having given instructions to those apostles whom He had selected through the Holy Spirit.  
Acts 1:1-3

But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man (i.e., **Paul**) is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.  
Acts 9:15 NIV

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