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**Day 355 – December 21**

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## **Christ's Church and the Apostles (30-100 CE)**

### ***First Letter by Peter***

**Readings: *1 Peter 1:1-5:14***

#### ***Reflections:***

- **First Letter by Peter:** It is apparent that Peter and Paul's paths crossed along the way even though he is not mentioned again in Acts after the council in Jerusalem in Acts 15. Peter wrote this letter to many of the churches Peter had established. Peter mentions. He references both Silas and John Mark as key leaders. Church tradition indicates that Peter left Jerusalem and became an overseer of the house churches of Rome and died a martyr in 64 CE. If this is the case, then this letter was most likely written prior to this when persecution was severe. The theme is what we would expect: encouragement to Christ-followers to remain faithful even when faced with severe suffering.
- **Salutation:** Peter refers to himself simply as an apostle. He writes to his readers encouraging them to see themselves as living as strangers and aliens in their own countries. They are citizens of another kingdom. Persecution always clarifies our ultimate loyalties. Peter also reminds them that the purpose of the power of the Spirit is to enable us to live obedient lives to Jesus. The forgiveness we have in Jesus opened the way for this inside out transformation. Grace (Greek) and Peace (Hebrew) are both used to affirm the full nature of community and our experience of God in our midst.
- **The blessings of redemption – praise for a living hope:** Peter opens with a prayer of praise to God. He reminds his leaders of the new birth they have in Jesus (see John 3:3-7). He also emphasizes the resurrection, our eternal life, and the hope we have in Jesus' return. These are key truths for those who are suffering.
- **Suffering before salvation:** Suffering refines our true motives. It forces us to trust God and what he says even when things don't line up. Pain has an amazing way of clarifying what is really important.
- **Faith in unseen:** Peter used to walk with Jesus. He saw the resurrected Jesus. The Christ-followers he is writing to never saw Jesus but they have fallen in love with Christ because of the power of his teaching and the Spirit filling their lives. We see that for Peter love is the fundamental aspect of our relationship with Jesus (see John 21).

- God's grace foretold: We see again that the Spirit is the prime mover in revealing and advancing God's work in the world. It is interesting that Peter refers to the Spirit's work in Israel's prophets as the "Spirit of the Messiah" or the "Spirit of Christ." Both Luke (Acts 16:7) and Paul (Philippians 1:19) refer to the Spirit of Jesus. Again throughout the New Testament the lines are blurred between God as Father, Son and Spirit. Although there is no clear passage that describes this relationship the early writers all indicate the inter-relationship and mystery. Peter also confirms here that the angels are not fully aware of the unfolding mystery of God's story and purposes. As we have indicated before, it appears that both angels and demons are in the audience watching the unfolding drama of God's story.
- The nature of redemption – holiness responsive to grace: We see the importance of our minds being fully prepared and aligned with the purposes of God. As Paul reinforced over and over, we must internalize God's truth so that it shapes the mental habits that dictate our lives. This passage in many ways parallels Romans 12:1-3. This life aligned to God's truth means that we will actively resist those desires that distract us from the life God has for us and we intentionally focus on a life that is set apart (holy) for God. This counter-cultural approach to life will ultimately lead to us living distinct lives as foreigners, citizens of a different kingdom. Peter ends by reminding them of the final judgment. Even Christ-followers will be judged to determine the level of reward they will receive for how they have lived. Living in "reverent fear" doesn't mean we are afraid of God. We know that as Christ-followers our lives should be characterized by deep security, not fear (see Romans 8:15; 2 Timothy 1:7; 1 John 4:18). We should better understand this as a deep respect and desire to honor God.
- Christ as ransom: The empty way of life that was handed down was the way of the Torah, the way of religion. Religion is empty and Peter makes it clear that the gift of redemption we were offered in Jesus came at the highest price possible, his own blood. Peter refers to Christ being chosen before the creation of the world (see Philippians 2:5-11). Peter believes he is living in the last days. It makes sense that he would believe this as the signs predicted by Jesus were finding their fulfillment (see Luke 21:5-38). As we look back on these events, we see they were preparatory to the destruction of Jerusalem rather than the final judgment of all people. Peter reminds them that the focus of their faith in God is clearly rooted in the resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus is the hinge of the Christian faith.
- New creatures: We are transformed from the inside out by putting into action. A true trust relationship with God will result in action. This obedience helps us work God's love through every fiber of our being. As we experience this love we must direct the love we experience towards loving others. God's love for us should not make us more selfish but more other-centered. Peter uses one of Jesus' phrases, born again (see John 3:3-7), to describe the eternal life we enter into through Jesus. As we embrace God's word, the "imperishable seed", we are conceived again as God births something completely new within us (see James 1:18 for a parallel text).

- Spiritual maturity: Peter in encouraging them to put off self-saving, self-centered ways of living, also challenges them to feed on the basic truths (“pure spiritual milk”) as the starting point of maturity. It is interesting to note the decidedly feminine portrayal of Jesus as our mother. Milk is a common image for the basic truths of the faith (see 1 Corinthians 3:2; Hebrews 5:12).
- Strength and access: Peter uses the image of the temple in terms very similar to Paul in Ephesians 2:19-21. Religious buildings are replaced by community. It is our relationship with God that matters. Religious holy men are replaced by women and men who serve the world as mediators of God’s grace. Religious rituals are replaced with acts of kindness and service to people in need.
- Christ the cornerstone: Peter now quotes Isaiah 28:16, Psalm 118:2 and Isaiah 8:14 and draws parallels to Christ. Psalm 118:2 particularly is widely quoted in reference to Jesus in the New Testament (see Matthew 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17). Luke records that Peter actually used this same passage in Peter’s message in Acts 4:11. Jesus actually causes some to stumble because of the irreligious message he proclaims. His life and teaching scandalizes many. Peter makes it clear that all those who reject Jesus are destined to disobey.
- God’s chosen people: Peter now reminds them of their identity and mission in the world. Christ-followers now are God’s new Israel (chosen people), mediators for the world (royal priesthood), a kingdom (holy nation), and God’s children (a people belonging to God). The calling of all Christ-followers is to live in such a way as to give God a good reputation. Our transformation is like going from stumbling around in the dark to walking freely in the light of day.
- Glorifying God for redemption – in conduct: Peter reminds them as counter-culture Christ-followers to keep in mind the impact their lives can have on spiritual seekers. As we choose God’s approach to life and relationship our lifestyle is self-validating.
- As a citizen: Peter now clarifies that living for God means honoring authorities, even evil ones. There are few examples of governments more evil than the Roman Empire at this time. Yet, like Paul wrote in Romans 13, it is important we show proper honor and respect for all leaders, including governmental leaders.
- As a slave: Peter now encourages those Christ-followers who are most disempowered, slaves. Again we see a clear parallel to Paul’s teachings, particularly Ephesians 6:5-8. The emphasis of the early Christ-followers was not rebelling against unjust social structures but working to win the respect from within the structures. Peter points to the example of Christ as one who became like a slave, suffered unjustly and through his faithfulness set an example for all those who suffer from injustice. Peter pauses to share his own summary of the suffering of Jesus leading up to his crucifixion. Peter explains again the understanding of the first Christ-followers that Jesus’ died for the sins of humanity to open a way for them to be reconciled to God. The cross is called a tree again paralleling Paul’s use of this image in Galatians 3:13. Peter also quotes Isaiah 53:5, a prophetic passage regarding the sufferings of

the Messiah. Peter also refers to Jesus as the shepherd and alludes to Jesus' teaching in John 10:1-18.

- As a wife: Peter affirms wives, again those who had little power, to submit to their husbands and to seek to be changed from the inside out rather than to simply attempt to sustain outward beauty. This teaching applies to both men and women as we are reminded that inner beauty is what matters. As people without power, we should not give in to fear but rather remain committed to do what is right.
- As a husband: Peter like Paul wants to make sure men are serving their wives as well and respecting them. Those with power must serve those who are more vulnerable. It is interesting that Peter points out that failing to serve our wives can hinder our prayers and intimate friendship with God. Our relationship with others impacts our relationship with God. This is how God designed it.
- In love and unity: Peter concludes by emphasizing again the importance of living a life governed by love and humility, particularly as we love our enemies and those who wound us. Peter quotes Isaiah 8:12 to remind his readers that God is searching for people who have the same heart he does.
- Steadfast in persecution – confidence in trials: Peter now encourages them to be courageous even when faced with opposition and suffering. In all we do, we should work to be other-centered. We should be ready to share, when people ask about our faith rather than forcing the conversation on our time. We should offer people respect and be gentle which has a double benefit. The person who is asking us questions feels valued. Also the people who want to put us down will not have any ammunition to use. The fruit of the Spirit always produces the best results in relationships.
- Efficacy of Christ's death: Peter reminds his readers of the hope of their salvation and the purpose of Christ's death and the power of the Spirit who brought Christ back alive. Now Peter throws in a very strange sentence about Jesus when he was dead and buried, going to preach to spirits held in prison from the time of Noah. Some theologians have speculated if this is some reference to a Jewish interpretation of the Genesis passage about the "sons of God" having sex with the "daughters of men." There is a Jewish tradition around this passage that is pretty wild (see notes on Genesis 6). To restate, this interpretation goes back to the Jewish books of Enoch, Jubilees, and Grigori. This is the basic storyline they suggest. Some fallen angels had sex with female humans and their offspring were some form of weird hybrid called the Nephilim. God had to wipe these demon-people out with the flood. Some of the spirits from these hybrids were held in a spiritual prison and others were left to roam the earth with a desire to re-inhabit people. This second group is the demons that torment people. Other ancient Jewish writings, particularly "The Conflict of Adam and Eve with Satan", propose a second interpretation that seems more plausible. That the "sons of God" were the descendents of Seth and the "daughters of men" were the descendents of Cain. The Nephilim were present before and after this intermarriage and were just tall

warriors (see notes on Genesis 6). If this is the case and it seems so, then what does Peter's verse here teach? We should note that the Greek word used here for Jesus "proclaiming" to these "spirits in prison" is not "evangelize" but rather "announce". Peter is comparing the present suffering of the minority of Christians to that of Noah and how only eight were saved. He is drawing connections to baptism as a sign of passage through to God's salvation even as Noah passed through the waters in the ark. So Peter is most likely saying that Jesus at his death announced his victory to all creation, even to all those who rebelled at the time of God's last global judgment. Jesus is Lord of all.

- Meaning of baptism: Here Peter connects baptism waters with the flood and points out that baptism is not about the externals (removing dirt from the body) but about the internal transformation (the pledge or response of a clean heart). Jesus' resurrection established him as we said as Lord of all and in his complete authority and power we can rest, even during times of suffering and pain.
- Suffering without sin: Suffering, when we are fully submitted to God, refines our motives so that we increasingly only want the will of God. Self-centeredness that focuses on perpetual self-indulgence is what appeals to most people and so being willing to suffer for a cause seems ridiculous to most. Peter says this is why the message of Jesus was preached to those who have died as martyrs of Christ. Even though they have died, they will live by God's Spirit. This message of hope is very encouraging to those who are faced with their own death.
- Brotherly love: Peter now gives priorities for people who are suffering. First, protect your ability to pray and hear God speak. Make that your top priority through keeping your focus on him and living an uncompromised life. Second, love relentlessly because love covers over a lot of the failures and short-comings tough times expose. Last, serve each other and take care of each other. Use the gifts God has given you and hang out together regularly. In summary, speak God's heart to each other and serve each other through God's power at work in your weakness. In this way we bring glory to God even when everything seems to be going wrong.
- Suffering as Christians: We see Peter restating the teachings of Jesus in Matthew 5:1-12 as he encourages Christ-followers to anticipate and celebrate even as they suffer. Like Paul wrote in Philippians 3:7-11, our suffering can draw us more closely in our relationship with Christ. Suffering is like a refining fire that God uses to continue his transforming work.
- Responsibility of elders: Peter does not use his authority to lord over the other house church leaders but appeals as a fellow elder. Servant leadership means coming along side, not standing over top. Peter uses the term "shepherds" or "pastors" to describe the basic role of a house church leader. No doubt he is reflecting on Jesus' teaching in John 10:1-18 on the role of a good shepherd. He warns against the desire to use leadership positions as a means to financial gain. One of the consistent markers of false leadership is the desire to acquire wealth through serving as a spiritual leader. Paul refers to his people as his crown of reward

(see Philippians 4:1; 1 Thessalonians 2:19). People are ultimately our highest reward and I wonder if this again represents a parallel teaching between Peter and Paul.

- Respect and humility: Paul first appeals to the young adults to offer those in leadership a true submission. It is sometimes tempting for young leaders to be impatient, judgmental or subversive to older leaders they may not agree with. This kind of disrespect and pride goes directly against the heart of Christ. Peter then challenges all of his readers to cover all aspects of their lives and relationships with humility. As we have witnessed throughout the entire narrative of God's story, God stands against the proud but comes along side those who are humble. We can humble ourselves under God's powerful care and know he will rescue us at the right time. We can give him all of our fear (see 1 John 4:19) because of his great love for us. Again in times of suffering and pain, we can find in Christ all of the love, security and hope we need.
- Exhortation for persecution: Peter ends where Paul ends in Ephesians. A key to enduring persecution is to understand the spiritual battle at hand and the role of the enemy to try to intimidate ("roaring lion") and destroy ("devour"). The way a lion kills a prey is to separate them from the pack and then attack them. As we stand firm we must remember to remain firmly interconnected within community. Peter's final word is to trust in the grace of Christ. God's grace is sufficient (see 2 Corinthians 12:9) as his power is shown to be complete in our weakness.
- Concluding thoughts – benediction: Peter acknowledges Silas who helped him write this letter. Babylon most likely refers to Rome. Paul used code language as a way to protect Christian activity in that city and possibly mask his whereabouts. This is the first time that Rome is called Babylon in Christian writings but it will later be used by John in Revelations as a code name for Rome, drawing parallels to the evil Babylonian empire of the past that persecuted Israel. Peter affirms Mark as well, a recognized leader. Church tradition says that it was Mark's time with Peter that led him to write the book of Mark based on what he learned from Peter. The kiss of love is like a hug today, it was a common greeting. Peter's final word is the call to peace. Even when persecuted, we as Christ-followers are called to lives of peace and peacemaking.