

A Study of Second Peter

Introduction to 2 Peter (2 Peter 1:1-2)

"Few times in history has revealed religion been forced to contend with such serious problems of truth and word, and never in the past have the role of words and the nature of truth been as misty and undefined as now." ~ C. F. H. Henry

I. An Introduction to 2 Peter

While considered one of the most neglected letters of the New Testament, Second Peter cries out for our attention. In an age where doubt is applauded, the core of the Christian faith is questioned, and traditional values of morality are eroding, this small epistle is extremely relevant to our present day culture. The apostle Peter will pen this letter prior to his death. As we will observe in this study, Peter's parting words stress the importance of the apostolic message, warn of false teachers, and call for the saints to cling to God's promises and live for Him.

II. Overview of 2 Peter

A. Author

Despite the author identifying himself as "Peter," the authorship of this letter is the most contested of the New Testament writings. Most modern biblical scholars do not believe the apostle Peter penned this book.

Arguments against Petrine authorship include:

- *The original language of the book (i.e., Greek) is very distinct from 1 Peter. For example, nearly 60 words are found nowhere else in the New Testament.*

And yet . . . Peter could be utilizing a particular literary style which was becoming fashionable at this time frame (see Green, *The Second Epistle of Peter*, 18). We must also recognize the context of this letter. These are Peter's final words prior to his execution. This scenario would undoubtedly affect the writing style (compare Paul's final letter, 2 Timothy, with the rest of his writings).

- *Peter's reference to a collection of Pauline letters in 3:15-16 could not have transpired during Paul's lifetime. He certainly would not have referred to Paul's works as Scripture.*

And yet . . . the New Testament writers considered their own words to carry the same authority as Scripture (e.g., 1 Cor 5:3; 2 Cor 10:11). In addition, it is very likely that Paul's works would have been circulated, copied, and collected during this time frame.

- *The letter is not strongly attested in the early church.*

And yet . . . there does exist references to 2 Peter among early Church writings (e.g., Eusebius). As aptly noted by one scholar, "no book of the Canon is so poorly attested among the Fathers." At the same time, "no excluded book has nearly such weight of backing as 2 Peter" (Green, *2 Peter*, 13).

“The very fact that 2 Peter was accepted as a canonical book, then, presumes that the early Christians who made this decision were sure that Peter wrote it” (Carson and Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 663).

B. Date and Occasion

Based upon Peter’s statement in 1:13-14, it would appear that his death is imminent. Since Peter’s death as a martyr occurred during Nero’s persecution of Christians in Rome, the letter must be penned prior to AD 65. Peter wrote primarily to Gentile Christians living in north-central Asia Minor (modern Turkey). These Christians faced false teaching—a teaching that was eroding truth within the Church.

While we can debate which school of thought these heretical teachers adhered to, the characteristics of their teaching is clear (2:1-3:13). Note the following:

- *They are skeptical of prophecy.* These teachers applaud doubt and are dogmatic concerning their uncertainty.
- *They deny any future judgment.* These teachers seek to strip Christianity of so-called “embarrassing” teachings of the Church.
- *They applaud freedom and hold to a truth-set determined by each person for himself/herself.* For these teachers, truth is infinitely pliable and ultimately unknowable in any objective sense.
- *They endorse a lifestyle that fulfills personal desires while wearing a cloak of religiosity.* These teachers have redefined right and wrong in terms of subjective feelings and personal experiences.

C. Structure

Second Peter’s structure is typical of first-century epistolary literature. We can outline the letter as follows:

Opening/Greeting (1:1-2)

Body: A Warning Against False Teachers (1:3-3:13)

A. The Certainty of Christ’s Return (1:16-21)

B. The Call to Recognize and Resist False Teachers (2:1-22)

C. The Need to Cling to God’s Promises (3:1-13)

Closing (3:14-18)

D. Major Theological Themes

1. This epistle reminds us of the seriousness of deviating from the faith. One’s theology and one’s ethics go hand-in-hand.
2. This epistle warns of impending judgment that awaits humanity.
3. This epistle exalts the value of truth—both in doctrine (orthodoxy) and in duty (orthopraxy)!

III. The Opening (1:1-2)

v. 1 - "Simon Peter" - Simon was the most popular Palestinian male name in the first century, AD. While a Greek name, it was adopted from the biblical name Simeon, one of Joseph's sons (Gen 29:33). The second name cited was given to him by the Lord (Mk 3:16; Lk 6:14). "The combined name 'Simeon Peter' recalls the earliest memory of the fisherman who became foundational for the life of the church (Matt. 16:16-18)" (Green, *2 Peter*, 172).

Peter identifies himself as a slave and an apostle. Various biblical characters and writers refer to themselves as a "servant of God" (see Neh 10:30; Rom 1:1; Phil 1:1). As for "apostle," the title highlights Peter's authority—an important issue in his attack against the false teachers and in his defense of his own teaching.

"granted a faith just as precious as ours" - Rather than equate their faith with the faith of the apostles, Peter is most likely writing to Gentiles and the common bond they have with Jewish Christians (Eph 2:12). The passive voice highlights both the sovereignty and grace of God in relationship to their salvation.

Note that Peter indicates that their faith is accomplished through the Lord's righteousness. This term, "righteousness," "normally refers to the act by which God puts sinners in a right relationship to him" (Moo, *2 Peter & Jude*, 35).

"our God and Savior, Jesus Christ" - This grammatical construction of this phrase indicates that Jesus is explicitly God (see Titus 2:13). This verse is one of the clearest descriptions of the deity of Jesus in the New Testament (see John 1:1, 18).

v. 2 - Typical of other New Testament writings, "grace and peace" are included in an opening prayer (see Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:3; Eph 1:2; Phil 1:2; Col 1:2; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:2; Titus 1:4; Philem 3; Rev 1:4). These two elements constitute the heart of the Gospel. In addition, both grace and peace are necessary for growth and stability in faith.

This prayer for knowledge is both a call to recognize Christ's saving work and a need to grow in their awareness of Him. One scholar writes, "The knowledge in question is no doubt both a theoretical acknowledgment and a personal knowledge of God and Jesus Christ . . . the reason for our author's emphasis on the fundamental Christian conversion-knowledge and its ethical implications is the danger of apostasy through ethical libertinism [hedonism] (2:20-21) which his readers faced" (Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 170).

"'Knowing God' does mean having a warm, intimate relationship with our Creator; but it also means understanding who he is, with all its implications . . . The biblical writers demand a 'knowledge of God' that unites head and heart." ~ Douglas Moo

For further thought . . .

Based upon our study this morning, you may want to spend some additional time this week reflecting on the following:

In *God, Revelation, and Authority*, Carl Henry pens this important message: “Christianity contends that revelational truth is intelligible, expressible in valid propositions, and universally communicable. Christianity does not profess to communicate a meaning that is significant only within a particular community or culture. It expects men of all cultures and nations to comprehend its claims about God and insists that men everywhere ought to acknowledge and appropriate them” (1: 229). Henry’s words speak to the importance of God’s truth and our need to contend earnestly for the faith.

In light of Henry’s quote, read Jude 3. How do we “contend earnestly for the faith”? More specifically, what particular steps can you take in your own life to grow in your knowledge of God’s truth?