

Major Themes *in 1 and 2 Peter*



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Isa. 53:5, 6, 9; Lev. 16:16–19; Lev. 11:44; Rom. 13:1–7; 1 Cor. 14:40; 2 Tim. 3:16.*

Memory Text: “He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed” (*1 Peter 2:24, NRSV*).

First and 2 Peter were written for practical purposes. In 1 Peter, the big issue Peter confronted was the persecution that Christians were facing. In 2 Peter, the great issue was false teachers. Peter wrote forcefully and authoritatively as he sought to encourage his readers, as well as warn them in regard to the challenges before them.

What is significant is that Peter responds to both issues in theological terms. The sufferings caused by persecution led Peter to meditate on the sufferings and death of Jesus, which had resulted in our salvation. The false teachers are going to face the judgment. This judgment will take place after Jesus returns to this earth with the saved after the thousand years in heaven have ended. These are some of the themes that Peter deals with in his two letters.

This final week's lesson will look in more detail at five of the themes Peter wrote about: the suffering of Jesus that led to our salvation; our practical response to the knowledge that God will judge our actions at the last judgment; the hope we have in the soon return of Jesus; order in society and in the church; and the role Scripture has in providing guidance in our lives.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, June 24.

Suffering, Jesus, and Salvation

Read the following passages, and note what each reveals about salvation:

1 Pet. 1:2 _____

1 Pet. 1:8, 9 _____

1 Pet. 1:18, 19 _____

1 Pet. 2:22–25 _____

1 Pet. 3:18 _____

When Peter mentions salvation, it is usually in the context of Jesus' suffering as a Substitute for sinners. For example, in 1 Peter 2:22–24, when Peter writes about the suffering of Jesus, he is using language that reflects Isaiah 53:5, 6, 9. “[Jesus] bore our sins in His own body” on the cross and “by whose stripes you were healed” (*1 Pet. 2:24, NKJV*) reveal the ideas of substitution and sacrifice.

In many of the sacrifices described in the Hebrew Bible, sinners brought their offerings to the temple and laid their hands on them. This act symbolically transferred the sin from the sinner to the animal, which then died in the sinner's place (*Lev. 4:29, 30, 33, 34; 14:10–13*). The uncleanness of sin that accumulated on the altar was cleansed and removed on the Day of Atonement (*Lev. 16:16–19*).

The blood of the sacrifice played an important role in atoning for sin. Christians have been ransomed by the precious blood of Jesus (*1 Pet. 1:18, 19*). Paul, too, expressed the same idea of substitution: Jesus, who knew no sin, became sin for us (*2 Cor. 5:21*). As 1 Peter 3:18 states, Christ suffered for sins, the righteous (Jesus) for the unrighteous (us).

Like Paul (*Rom. 3:21, 22*), Peter emphasizes the need for faith. As he says to his readers: “Although you have not seen him, you love him . . . for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (*1 Pet. 1:8, 9, NRSV*). Salvation is not earned by godly behavior, but it is granted when we believe in what Jesus has done for us and accept Him as our personal Savior. Our assurance is found in Him, not in ourselves. If it were in ourselves, what real assurance would we have?

**Why is Jesus, as your Substitute, the Great Hope of salvation?
What comfort can you draw from this wonderful truth?**

How Should We Live?

A theme that Peter returns to more often than any other is posed by the question he asked in 2 Peter 3:11: “Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness?” (NRSV).

Read the following texts. What does Peter say about Christian behavior? *1 Pet. 1:15–17, 22; 1 Pet. 2:1; 1 Pet. 3:8, 9; 1 Pet. 4:7–11; 2 Pet. 3:11.*

Peter considers Christian behavior at many points in his two letters, and a number of themes keep recurring. First, Peter twice emphasizes the link between the judgment of God and Christian behavior (*1 Pet. 1:17 and 2 Pet. 3:11*). God will judge everyone’s actions. Thus, a Christian should live a life of holiness.

Second, several times Peter mentions that Christians should be holy. In the Hebrew Bible, things that are holy are set aside for use in the temple (*Exod. 26:34; 28:36; 29:6, 37*) or for God’s purposes (for example, the Sabbath in Genesis 2:3). In fact, God’s plan was that His people should be holy, just as He is holy, a theme Peter touched on, too (*Lev. 11:44; 19:2; 1 Pet. 1:15, 16*). The process of setting something aside as holy is called “sanctification,” and Peter’s desire is that his readers become sanctified by the Spirit and be obedient to Jesus (*1 Pet. 1:2*).

Third, Peter has provided some specifics as to the kind of behavior appropriate to those who are sanctified. They should rid themselves of malice, guile, insincerity, envy, and slander (*1 Pet. 2:1*). They should have unity in spirit, love for one another, and a humble mind (*1 Pet. 3:8, 9*). They should have goodness, godliness, and love (*2 Pet. 1:5–7*). Indeed, they must maintain constant love (*1 Pet. 4:7–11*). Finally, Peter urges his listeners to cast their anxiety upon Jesus (*1 Pet. 5:7*).

How can we learn to encourage one another in ways that are not judgmental, to live the kind of life that Peter is calling for in his epistles?

Hope in the Second Coming

Read the following texts, and note what is said about future events:

1 Pet. 1:4 _____

1 Pet. 1:17 _____

1 Pet. 4:5, 6 _____

1 Pet. 4:17 _____

2 Pet. 3:1–10 _____

One of the crucial issues facing those who first read and heard 1 Peter was persecution. Peter comforts his readers with the thought that, even though their lives may be hampered by persecution, there is a future reward waiting for them in heaven, a reward that cannot be taken away. Very early in 1 Peter, he mentions that Christians have an imperishable inheritance kept in heaven for them (*1 Pet. 1:4*).

Peter highlights two things that will take place in the future: the last judgment and the fiery destruction of evil. In other words, he shows that although there is persecution now, justice and judgment will be done, and believers will receive their eternal reward.

Peter mentions judgment on three separate occasions (*1 Pet. 1:17; 4:5, 6, 17*). He says that God the Father judges all humans impartially according to their deeds (*1 Pet. 1:17*). He notes that Jesus Himself stands ready to judge the living and the dead (*1 Pet. 4:5*). He also makes the intriguing observation that judgment starts with the household of God (*1 Pet. 4:17*).

Peter also emphasizes that “the godless” will be destroyed in a worldwide firestorm (*2 Pet. 3:7*).

Peter spends some time dealing with problems that arose about whether or not Jesus is indeed coming back (*2 Pet. 3:1–10*). He points out that the “delay” of Jesus’ second coming is to allow more people to repent and be saved. He also points out that the certainty of a future reckoning should convince everyone to live a holy and blameless life.

Thus, however focused Peter is on the here and now and on practical Christian living, he still keeps before his readers the future hope that awaits them. In short, whatever the circumstances at the moment, they need to press on ahead in faith and obedience.

Why, too, must you press on ahead in faith and obedience, regardless of your circumstances? What other option is there?

Order in Society and in the Church

Read the following passages. What does Peter say in these texts about the importance of both government and church leadership and how Christians should respond to both? How should his words be applied to our situations today, regardless of where we live?

1 Pet. 2:11–21 _____

1 Pet. 5:1–5 _____

Peter lived at a time when Christians occasionally were persecuted by government and by religious authorities. This makes all the more significant what he and Paul have to say about the proper role of government authorities (*1 Pet. 2:13–17, Rom. 13:1–7*). For both Peter and Paul, government authorities have been put in place by God Himself to act as a check against those who would do evil. Of course, there are times that ruling powers can be the problem. Christians faced this in Peter's time, and it would only get worse for many years.

But, generally, the idea is that good government would preserve law and order and safety. Even today there are examples in which law and order have broken down, and one can see the desperate need for reasonable government. It is true; good government is one of the blessings of God that He has given to humanity.

Peter would no doubt share Paul's conviction that good church governance is important, too. Paul insists, "Let all things be done decently and in order" (*1 Cor. 14:40*) in church worship services. Peter likewise asks the church leaders to "tend the flock of God that is in your charge" (*1 Pet. 5:2, NRSV*). They are to do so with humility and care. Local churches need to be led well. Good leaders provide vision and coherence and enable others to exercise their spiritual gifts for the glory of God.

First Peter 5:5 says that you should clothe yourself with humility toward one another. How can we learn to do that? What can you do, yourself, to apply this in your own interaction with others?

The Primacy of Scripture

Read the following passages. What do they say about the Bible that could help us to understand today what its role should be in our lives and faith?

1 *Pet.* 1:10–12 _____

2 *Pet.* 1:16–20 _____

2 *Pet.* 3:2 _____

2 *Pet.* 3:16 _____

In his second letter, Peter confronts false teachers. He directs his readers to two sources of authority when he says, “You should remember the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets, and the commandment of the Lord and Savior spoken through your apostles” (2 *Pet.* 3:2, *NRSV*). Today we have the same recourse to the words of “holy prophets”—that is, the Old Testament. The living apostles are no longer available to us, of course, but in a sense we have something better: their inspired testimony, as revealed in the New Testament. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John left us the definitive story of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. In the Acts of the Apostles, we have been left accounts of the apostles’ activities. And indeed we can read the inspired words of the apostles themselves. Paul writes strongly about the authority of God’s Word (2 *Tim.* 3:16). Peter, then, is directing his readers to Scripture as the source of doctrinal and moral authority.

In 2 Peter 3:16, Peter warns his readers and listeners that even though Scripture is the source of truth, without careful attention to the message that the Holy Spirit would have us understand, the source of truth itself can be misunderstood, and this can lead to terrible consequences.

His words should be a good reminder to us now about basic principles for studying the Bible. We should read a passage of Scripture prayerfully. We should read it with regard to its contexts within the chapter, the book, and the entire Bible itself. What was the author specifically talking about when he wrote? We should read it in the light of the historical circumstances in which it was written. (In the case of 1 and 2 Peter, this would be the Roman Empire of the first century.) We should read it seeking spiritual insight and with the knowledge that the salvation brought about by the sacrificial death of Christ is the center of the biblical message (1 *Pet.* 1:10–12). Finally, we should read it in the context of our own lives. What truth does God wish us to receive? How can we apply the Written Word to our own lives in a way that will make a positive contribution to the kingdom of God?

Further Thought: Even amid the heavy theology, Peter's letters put a strong emphasis on Christian life and how we should treat one another. In other words, yes, we need to know the truth as it is in Jesus. But even more important, *we need to live the truth, too*. Early on, we get these grand words: "Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart" (*1 Pet. 1:22, NKJV*). Notice how he links the purifying of our souls with obedience to the truth. The truth changes us, making us into people who love one another fervently and with "a pure heart." Obedience, purity of heart, and love—all three are related to one another. This is the ideal we should be striving for. Can you imagine how different our lives and our churches would be were we to follow this charge? Think what it would do for the sense of church unity, if nothing else. "Brethren, will you carry the spirit of Christ with you as you return to your homes and churches? Will you put away unbelief and criticism? We are coming to a time when, more than ever before, we shall need to press together, to labor unitedly. In union there is strength. In discord and disunion there is only weakness." —Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 2, pp. 373–374.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In 2 Peter 3:12, the apostle wrote that we should be "looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat" (*NKJV*). What does he mean that we should be "hastening" the day of God? How can we hasten the day of God; that is, the Second Coming?
- 2 We say that nature is God's "second book." Unfortunately, as with God's first book (the Bible), this second book can be misinterpreted. For example, for many people the message of design and purpose has been expunged from nature, replaced by the Darwinian notion of random mutation and natural selection. The world, we are told, isn't really designed; rather, it just looks that way to us. How, then, are we to read and interpret this second book in the right way? What are the limits of what the second book can teach us about God? What help can we get from the first book that can aid us in understanding the second one correctly? What happens when our interpretation of nature, the second book, contradicts our interpretation of the first one, the Bible? Where is the problem?