

2 Peter 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] 2 Peter chapter 1. Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ, may grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.

For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.

For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these qualities is so near-sighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election. For if you practice these qualities, you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Therefore I intend always to remind you of these qualities, though you know them and are established in the truth that you have.

I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up by way of reminder, since I know that the putting off of my body will be soon, as our Lord Jesus Christ made clear to me. And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things.

[1 : 5 3] For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honour and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the majestic glory, this is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. We ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain.

And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention, as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

Knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of scripture comes from someone's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man. But men spoke from God, as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

As we start into the book of 2 Peter, we should remark upon some of the distinctive qualities of the book and its difficulties at the outset. The first thing to say is that almost anyone who has read the New Testament carefully has noticed that the book of Jude and the book of 2 Peter have extensive similarities. Beyond this, it has a very different style from the book of 1 Peter.

This is something that was recognised back in the time of the early church, Calvin and others have commented upon it, and various theories have been presented for why it might be the case. Not least the possibility that the creative hand of an amanuensis is very much in evidence in this letter. The Hellenistic concepts and language have also provoked debate, people wondering whether a Galilean fisherman would write in such terms.

[3 : 27] The book of 2 Peter also struggled to be accepted as canonical, which might seem strange for a book of genuine Petrine origin. Others have noticed similarities with 1 and 2 Clement, and the Shepherd of Hermas, which date from the end of the 1st century, but are post-apostolic works.

Then there are internal issues as well. Many read chapter 3 verses 2-4 as suggesting that the apostles have already died, which would cause problems, as Peter is clearly one of the apostles himself.

We also know that in the early centuries of the church, there was various pseudepigraphical material going around, material that claimed to be written by a particular author, but was not actually written by that historical character. There were a number of such works that claimed to arise from Peter. In light of such considerations, the vast majority of scholars do not believe that the book of 2 Peter was authored by Peter himself. Richard Borkham, who is one who doubts that Peter is the author, puts forward a theory that somewhat cushions the blow, a theory that need not undermine the authority of scripture. He maintains that the book belongs to a testamentary genre, a genre that was known to be fictional, and so people reading the text would not be deceived, they would know that they were reading a fictional work, and interspersed with it there were things relating to the present day situation of those reading it, so they would clearly know that it was not written by the historical Peter. Rather, a fictionalised personification of Peter was addressing their situation as a faithful, yet fictional construct. Attractive as such a theory may be, as a way of cutting the Gordian knot of the questions of the authorship and dating of the book, it is not ultimately satisfying. Thomas Schreiner has raised a number of problems with this theory, observing that the early church was far more hostile towards pseudepigraphical works than Richard Borkham's theory would suggest. Such works were not merely regarded as pious fictions, but as actual misleading of people. While this might be slightly overstating the situation, it is noteworthy that of all the books that claimed to be written by Peter that were clearly pseudepigraphical, none of them actually found their way into the New Testament, except for the book of 2 Peter, if it were in fact pseudepigraphical, written by someone other than the person it purports to be written by.

Then there is the question of the testamentary genre. Is it in fact the case that this genre is always fictional? We seem to find examples of this sort of material at various points in the Old Testament, for instance at the end of Jacob's life, or the end of Moses' life, or the end of David's life. Are there established norms of genre that make clear that these are in fact fictional? It is not clear that there are. As for the relationship with the book of Jude, various theories have been put forward. Some have suggested a common source for the two books, others have suggested that Jude borrowed from the book of 2 Peter, but the most likely explanation to me seems to be that 2 Peter uses a lot of the material of Jude, Jude being the earlier of the two texts. As for questions of literary style, we are working with very little material, and it is tricky to judge on such a limited basis. It is even more difficult to judge when we consider the possibilities of different secretaries being involved, and the possibility in both books of the use of extensive prior material. In the case of 1 Peter, there is suggestion that there might be extensive liturgical material included into the book, and in the case of 2 Peter, the use of material from the book of Jude. Thomas Schreiner has also noted the possibility of allusions to material from the book of 2 Peter back in works from the end of the 1st century AD, referring his readers to scholarly research that has been done on the subject. The claims that the book of 2 Peter suggests that the apostles have already died is not compelling. The letter begins with a familiar form of introduction, a style that we find both in Pauline letters and in other secular letters of the time.

Peter introduces himself as Simeon Peter, a name used of him elsewhere only in Acts chapter 15. He refers to Jesus Christ as our God and Saviour. Now that could be read as our God and our Saviour, but it seems most likely it should be read as our God and Saviour. Usually when such a distinction is intended, it's far more clear within the Greek. At the very outset then, we would have a very high Christology. The faith of the Christians to whom Peter is writing is no less precious than that of the apostles themselves. Their faith is described as being of equal standing, seemingly with the apostles themselves. He goes on to talk about the basis of our salvation, relating it all to his divine power, which in the context would seem to be a reference back to Christ.

[7 : 58] We have come to know Christ by his effectual call to glory, and through coming to know Jesus, we have been granted divine power that gives us everything that we need for eternal life. Christ, through his glory and goodness, has given great promises to his people, promises that make them partakers of the divine nature, releasing them from the corruption of this present world on account of sinful desire. In speaking of being partakers of the divine nature, Peter is using Hellenistic language. We should think about this in terms of what theologians have talked about as God's communicable and non-communicable attributes. God's non-communicable attributes are things like his infinity, his aseity, his omnipotence, his omniscience. No creature can take on these attributes.

However, God's communicable attributes can be taken on by creatures in an analogical sense. So God's holiness, God's humility, God's kindness, God's love, and all these other characteristics are things that we can take on, and in the process become more godlike. We can become godly, being conformed to the image of God in Christ, taking on something of his character and his glory.

Our faces shine as we reflect his glory. In the light of the fundamental fact of our salvation in Christ, we have an imperative of growth. Verses 3 to 4 present our salvation in its most comprehensive and fundamental character as a gracious work of God and of his own initiative, and a gracious work that has sufficiently provided us with everything that we need.

Faith must become fruitful, however, maturing into something fuller. The fundamental posture of trust in God must work itself out into a fuller and richer set of qualities that derive from it.

In this, however, we will be growing from the rich soil that God's grace has provided for us, not from our own resources. As verses 3 and 4 make clear, God has given us everything that we need.

[9 : 51] He presents a chain of qualities, but it's not necessarily a sequence. We don't need to develop these one by one in succession. Rather, we should be developing them all at the same time.

However, the movement from faith at the beginning to love at the end is probably significant. Love is the capstone of everything. It is the theological virtue that's prized over all the others, in 1 Corinthians chapter 13, for instance. Because Christ has given us everything that we need for life and godliness, we must pursue such growth. Peter singles out virtue, which we might understand as moral courage. Knowledge, which will be a deep apprehension of God's truth in Christ.

Self-control. Self-mastery in the book of Proverbs, for instance, is a mark of maturity. Steadfastness, or patience. Godliness, a God-fearing character and a life that is oriented to and around God. Brotherly affection, a concern for each other in Christ. And then, as the culminating quality, love. We must pursue these qualities and seek to increase in them, lest we become ineffective or unfruitful. That is the key danger, that our faith is not actually growing. There's a danger of forgetting sins that we have been forgiven, and the new life that we have been brought into.

He charges them to confirm your calling and election. The calling and election stresses God's unilateral action. However, God's unilateral grace to us must be confirmed in our faithful response.

Peter's point here is not dissimilar from that which we find in Philippians chapter 2 verses 12 to 13. Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence, but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. The salvation that we have been given is not just a sort of spiritual life insurance. Rather, it is something that brings us into a new form of life and fellowship. And we confirm this by actually living the life that we have been given, living out the salvation that has been granted to us. To be given a life and not to live it is a mockery. And so we are called to live out what God has given us, thereby confirming his unilateral work of grace towards us. There is a last judgment according to works. And in God's judgment upon our works, our initial justification will be confirmed. This will not be a matter of us adding to what God has given us, as if there needs to be some works to complement God's grace, as if God's grace was not enough. As Peter has already said, God has given us everything that we need. Rather, this is the form that

[12 : 24] God's salvation takes. This is the path that God has furnished for us. And so those who receive God's salvation enter into it fully by living it out. This is how God's calling and election is confirmed in our lives. Peter is shortly about to die. And this gives its book some of its testamentary character.

He notes that Jesus had told him about the manner in which he would die. In John chapter 21 verses 18 to 19, Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted.

But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go. This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.

And after saying this, he said to him, follow me. Peter wants to make preparation for them in the future. He is writing not merely for the present, but for the time when he leaves, to ensure that they are prepared for what will come. And to confirm them in what they have been taught, he talks about the event of the transfiguration. In the transfiguration, Peter, James and John saw something of the glory of Christ, a glory that was a reality filled sign of the glory to come in the great unveiling of Christ at the end. Also a glory that confirms the Old Testament teaching. The transfiguration is the unveiling of Christ as the majestic king and of his kingdom rule in his father's glory. The transfiguration, Douglas Harrink argues, is an anticipatory apocalypse, much as that experienced by John on Patmos or Saul on the road to Damascus. He writes, because the apostles at the transfiguration have, for a moment, already seen and heard Jesus Christ enthroned at the end of the ages in his divine majesty and glory, they are now also already certain that he will in fact come to judge the earth and its inhabitants and set up his eternal reign over all things and all peoples. The transfiguration, then, is a guarantee of the coming realisation of all of the prophetic promises. It's the prophetic word made more sure.

It's also important to recognise that, for Peter, the future coming of Christ is framed less by the times and dates for some future divine action than it is by the person of Jesus Christ. The future coming of Christ is the coming revelation of the glory of Christ, a glory that he already possesses and which Peter saw for himself. What we look forward to is not so much a series of eschatological events, but the revelation of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, as Peter proceeds to argue in verses 20 to 21, the transfiguration serves to validate and confirm the prophetic word of scripture. It demonstrates that it is not of human origin or will. It's given by the inspiration of the Spirit of God. And in the transfiguration, both the unifying origin, Jesus Christ, the one who speaks God's word, and the referent, the one to whom it points, Jesus, the glorified Son, of the prophetic word of scripture is disclosed. The scriptures find their coherence in their common spirit-inspired witness and revelation of the glory that is seen in Jesus Christ. The prominence that the transfiguration is accorded within the second epistle of Peter, then, merits closer attention. In his commentary on the epistle,

[15 : 39] Haring suggests that, for Peter, it is the transfiguration, rather than the cross or the resurrection, that is put forward as the decisive Christological event. This revelation of the glory of Christ is the revelation of the final truth and reality of all things. The same light that first illumined the world is the light that will dawn in the coming final day. It's the light witnessed on the holy mountain. Haring remarks, By recalling the glorious apocalyptic event of the transfiguration of our Lord, Peter directs a strong word against the theological rationalisms, reductionisms, and relativisms of his age and ours, while he offers a vigorous apologia for the truth of the gospel, he does not appeal to a foundation in universal rational first principles, available to everyone everywhere, or to an a priori universal religious sense, variously modified by historical and cultural experience, the standard post-enlightenment modes of apologia for religious truth. Instead, Peter goes directly to his and the other apostles being eyewitnesses of an apocalypse of the truth of Jesus Christ. That apocalypse of the truth of all things is itself the origin and criterion of all claims about God and the beginning and end of all things.

A question to consider, how might we retell the story of scripture in a way that presented the dazzling glory of Christ seen on the Mount of Transfiguration as the centre of the entire thing?