

# INTRODUCTION TO 1 PETER

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## **Importance of 1 Peter, 2 Peter, and Jude**

Most readers do not appreciate how important these three letters truly are. Together with the epistle of James and three letters from John, these seven letters are known as the General Epistles of the New Testament. They are authoritative. Peter (also named Simon in Hebrew) was the chief apostle who held the keys over the entire church. James (an English rendition of his Hebrew name Jacob) was probably a half-brother of Jesus. John, together with Peter and James, were called by Paul the “pillars of the Church” (Galatians 2:9). Jude (Judah) was also one of the twelve apostles. These seven letters were written with “general authority” over the Church, and thus they are called the General Epistles.

Peter, being the head of the Church, deserves our highest attention. For several reasons, all readers of the New Testament should give primacy to Peter’s two letters. They give the highest apostolic seal of authority on how to understand and live the gospel of Jesus Christ. After all the work Joseph Smith put in on every page of the Bible, his prophetic conclusion was that Peter gave some of the most inspiring and sublime messages of all in the New Testament.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in two of the four major and earliest New Testament codices (Codex Alexandrinus, and Codex Vaticanus), the seven general Epistles are given priority, being placed right after the four Gospels and the book of Acts, thus coming before all the letters of Paul. But that is not the order in which these letters are found in Bibles today.

## **Outline of 1 Peter**

- 1:1–6 Greeting and blessing
- 1:6–9 Trials refine faith

1:10–12	Prophets of old knew of Christ
1:13–20	Be ye therefore holy
1:22–25	Love one another, being born of God
2:1–3	Grow as a newborn child
2:4–10	Become the people of God
2:11–17	Avoid problems with the government
2:18–25	Advice to servants: Follow the example of Christ’s suffering
3:1–6	Advice to wives: Adorn your relationship with righteousness
3:7	Advice to husbands: Inherit life with your wife
3:8–12	Love one another
3:13–17	Be not afraid to testify of Christ
3:18–22	Christ preached to the spirits in the spirit prison
4:1–6	Sin no more, and do the will of God
4:7–11	Have fervent charity that God may be glorified
4:12–19	In the face of adversity, consecrate yourself to live as a Christian
5:1–4	Counsel to the adults
5:5	Counsel to youth
5:5–11	Counsel to all
5:12–14	Closing words

## Literary and Linguistic Characteristics

Peter was more literate and literarily capable than one might expect of the traditional poor fisherman. When Peter says, at the end of chapter 1, that we should love one another, he is quoting Jesus. The Greek in this letter says, *allēlous agapēsate*, “one another love” (1 Peter 1:22). While Jesus had said, *agapate allēlous*, “love one another” (John 13:34), Peter reverses the word order, which was a common feature used in ancient texts to indicate a quotation because they had no punctuation marks with which to indicate quotations.

Peter had wonderful ways of saying many things. Doctrine and Covenants 18:10 gives a vibrant saying about the worth of souls being great. Peter presented another phrase that communicated the same thing: “The Lord sees every one of us as more precious than anything that can be imagined” (1 Peter 1:7).

In Galilee and in the ten cities of the Decapolis, there were many Greek-speaking people, and Peter came from Bethsaida, a Greek city. His Hebrew was also probably good. Peter spoke in Greek immediately on the day of Pentecost as he spoke to all the Jews who had come to Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost. In 1 Peter, in particular, Peter quotes rather extensively from the Old Testament, so he knew the Septuagint Bible very well.

When Peter and John were before the Sanhedrin because they had healed people in the name of Jesus, the Sanhedrin ordered them to refrain from doing anything in the name of Jesus, who after all was a criminal. They wanted to obliterate his name. Peter and John courageously ignored that order to avoid offending God. Before that trial, Peter was introduced as an ignorant, unlearned man. Of course, that is the view of the leaders in Jerusalem looking down on a Galilean fisherman, but the Sanhedrin marveled at his knowledge and ability (Acts 4:13).

## **The Teachings of Peter**

Members of the restored Church understand much about Peter's teachings that people generally may not see. Latter-day Saints approach all scriptures and spiritual materials from their peculiar perspective. The Prophet Joseph Smith, after teaching a long sermon on the first chapter of 2 Peter, said that Peter penned the most sublime language of any of the Apostles.<sup>2</sup> Joseph saw deeply into the core of Peter's inspired teachings.

The doctrines taught by Peter parallel those found today in the restored gospel. Heavenly Father and Jesus are two personages, and the Holy Ghost is a third. Peter teaches of pre-earth life, of people being foreordained and ordained, and of the ordinances of the holy priesthood. He states that we are heirs of God, which means that we are children of God. He teaches of baptism, resurrection, life after death, and of the gospel being preached to spirits in the afterlife.

People in the ancient world generally viewed temples as holy. The high priest was holy, and all righteous people hoped and strived to be perfected. For Peter, holiness was accessible to all after the coming of Christ. No longer could only the high priest go into the Holy of Holies, for all members of the Church comprise a holy people.

In sum, Peter's two letters encompass many of the most fundamental teachings of the gospel. Monte Nyman summarized the theme of 1 Peter thus: "Through the sanctification of the Spirit and faith in the grace of the atonement of Jesus Christ, members can endure their trials and temptations and attain salvation. This is another way of bringing about the perfection of the saints." Peter gives straightforward exhortations to help his audience attain salvation.<sup>3</sup> Yet his two letters are not read, studied, and quoted as frequently as one might expect.

## **Peter Heavily Drew upon Jesus's Sermon on the Mount**

There is little external evidence for the exact date when 1 Peter was written, but it was written fairly early, probably before any of the four Gospels had been completed. Significantly, even at that time, Peter knew and used many key words and phrases found in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7. Peter knew that text because he was among the earliest baptized disciples whom Jesus had been taken up into a sacred

high place (*eis to oros*) where Jesus delivered that key text to them (Matthew 5:1). Notably, many distinctive words in 1 and 2 Peter come from the Sermon on the Mount. For example:

- “blessed” (1 Peter 3:14; compare Matthew 5:3–11)
- “reviled” (1 Peter 4:14; compare Matthew 5:11)
- “suffer for righteousness’ sake” (1 Peter 3:14; compare Matthew 5:10)
- “reward” (2 Peter 2:13; compare Matthew 5:12, 46; 6:2, 5, 16)
- “good” works (1 Peter 2:12; compare Matthew 5:16)
- “glorify” God (1 Peter 2:12; compare Matthew 5:16)
- “lust” (2 Peter 2:10; compare Matthew 5:28)
- “eye . . . adultery” (2 Peter 2:14; Matthew 5:28-29)
- “hypocrites” (1 Peter 2:1; compare Matthew 6:2, 5, 16; 7:5)
- “deliver . . . [from] temptations” (2 Peter 2:9; compare Matthew 6:13)
- “worry” not (1 Peter 5:7; compare Matthew 6:25, 27, 28, 31)
- “false prophets” (2 Peter 2:1; compare Matthew 7:15)
- God’s “will” (1 Peter 2:15; compare Matthew 7:21)
- “perfect” (1 Peter 1:13, 5:10; compare Matthew 5:48)
- “founded” or “built” (1 Peter 5:10; compare Matthew 7:25)
- “to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever, Amen” (1 Peter 5:11; compare Matthew 6:13)

Significantly, Peter and his audience knew and followed Jesus’s momentous text as a foundational set of covenantal ground rules for the Church from its outset in the meridian of times. This, of course, comes as no surprise to readers of 3 Nephi 12–14, where Jesus presented a related version of the Sermon on the Mount at the temple in Bountiful.

## **Peter’s Personal Background**

Peter had boats and a house, so he was probably a man of above-average substance. Not only did Jesus stay at the home of Peter’s mother-in-law, but the house was probably large enough that meetings were held there. He is often portrayed as a poor fisherman, but owning even one substantial boat was an expensive venture. “Fishing required a considerable infrastructure: boats and the ability to repair them; the manufacture and repair of nets; access to lead for net weights; stone sinkers and anchors; flotation devices for nets; iron or bronze hooks; ropes; baskets or jars for transporting the catch; transport for animals; and processing or sales facilities. . . . Some of these materials were either not locally available or required specialized manufacture. This meant that fishermen were necessarily entangled with other productive and commercial networks and hence, with the craftsmen who worked in those industries.”<sup>4</sup>

As Kloppenborg mentions, Luke says explicitly that Simon Peter and Zebedee were partners, having at least a second ship (Luke 5:7, 10). It appears, like other trades, fishermen formed organizations to pool resources. In addition, in Mark 1:20 we learn that “straightway he called them [James and John]: and they left their father Zebedee in the ship *with the hired servants*, and went after him” (emphasis added).

Peter is considered to have been impetuous but not pompous. In the washing of feet ceremony, he initially refused to allow Jesus to wash his feet, as washing feet was done by people of lower social class for people of higher social class. Peter’s reaction, far from being pompous, was humble in its respect for the Savior. When he realized this activity was another ordinance, he eagerly participated.

### **Peter’s So-Called Denials**

When Peter cut off the ear of the servant of the high priest, the arrest party at Gethsemane wanted only Jesus, so they did not go after Peter at that time. Peter bravely followed the arresting party to Caiaphas’s palace, trying to listen to the proceedings inside but staying outside to remain inconspicuous. Having already cut off a servant’s ear that night, it is possible that Peter feared reprisal. In this vulnerable situation, his so-called denial of Christ occurred. Yet Peter neither denied the divinity of Christ nor His role as the Messiah. He denied only that he knew Him or was one of His disciples (Matthew 26:72).

President Kimball gave a magnificent talk in which he said that as much as Jesus knew that Peter would want to carry the cross and take his place, it is also possible that Jesus might have told him to lie low because he was needed for other assignments.<sup>5</sup> The Lord said, “Before the cock crows, thou *shalt* deny me thrice,” which may have been as much an order or a directive as a prophetic forecasting. In Greek, the future second person plural declarative form of a verb (for example, *you shall do* something) is verbally indistinguishable from the imperative form (for example, *thou shalt do* something). The imperative may well have been what was intended there. While Peter certainly regretted all that was transpiring that night, we can see several reasons why Peter avoided getting too close to any of the problems during those early morning hours. He might have found himself accused and in court. Soon, the resurrected Jesus would affirm Peter’s calling as leader of the sheep three times on the shores of the Sea of Galilee (John 21:15–18). Peter’s bold and open actions shortly after the ascension of Jesus, reported in Acts 1–4, bear wonderful testimony of Peter’s deep, life-long loyalties to the Lord Jesus Christ. If Peter needed to repent because of the so-called denial, he certainly did that and more very soon and throughout his devoted lifetime of crucial Church leadership.

### **Notes**

1 “Discourse, 17 May 1843–A, as Reported by William Clayton,” p. 16, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-17-may-1843-a-as-reported-by-william-clayton/1>.

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3 Monte S. Nyman, “The Sublime Epistle of Peter,” in *Studies in Scripture*, vol. 6, *Acts to Revelation*, ed. Robert L. Millet (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1987), 227.

4 John S. Kloppenborg, “Jesus, Fishermen and Tax Collectors,” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 94, no. 4 (2018): 571–599.

5 Spencer W. Kimball, “Peter, My Brother” (Brigham Young University devotional, July 13, 1971), speeches .byu.edu.

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**Source:** *New Testament Insights: 1 Peter*, by John W. Welch