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2 Peter 1:1–2



SIMON PETER, A servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours: ²Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

Original Meaning

SECOND PETER OPENS with those elements that we would expect to find at the beginning of a letter and which, in fact, are typical of the openings of New Testament letters: (1) an identification of the writer of the letter; (2) an identification of the recipients of the letter; and (3) an introductory greeting.

The author of the letter, we learn first, is “Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ.” Double names like “Simon Peter” were common in the ancient Near East. Many people used both the name they were given in their native language and a Greek name, since Greek was so widely spoken. Thus “Simon,” one of the most common Jewish names at that time, comes from the Hebrew, while “Peter” comes from the Greek. This double name is frequently used in the New Testament. But only here and in Acts 15:14 is the name “Simon” spelled the way it is here (*Symeon* in place of the usual *Simon*; note the RSV, NRSV, REB, and NJB spelling “Simeon”). This form of the name is a fairly exact transliteration of the Hebrew, and since it is so rare, we would not expect someone writing in Peter’s name to use it. But it makes perfectly good sense for Peter himself to spell it this way, since it would have been the form natural to him from birth.¹

In calling himself a “servant . . . of Jesus Christ,” Peter is, of course, conveying his sense of humility in relationship to his Lord. The word translated “servant” is not the Greek *diakonos*, the “household servant,” but *doulos*, which can also be translated “slave.” It is not Peter, in himself, who possesses any particular authority; his authority stems entirely from the master whom he serves. But the title “servant” also carries with it a sense of honor. Great figures in Israel’s past had similarly been called “servants” of God—especially Moses (e.g., Josh. 14:7; 2 Kings 18:12) and David (e.g., Ps. 18:1; Ezek. 34:23). Naming himself a “servant,” therefore, also conveys to his audience that Peter

1. See, e.g., Bigg, *The Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude*, 248-49.

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is claiming to stand in the line of these significant figures in Israel's religious history.

Peter's right to speak authoritatively to these Christians is emphasized even more clearly in the second title, "apostle." This word (Greek *apostolos*) can mean simply "messenger" and is so used occasionally in the New Testament (e.g., 2 Cor. 8:23; Phil. 2:25). But the word more often has a technical sense, denoting those men chosen specially by the Lord to be his authoritative representatives. They form, as Paul puts it, along with the prophets, "the foundation" of the church (Eph. 2:20). They were commissioned not only to proclaim the good news but also to develop and guarantee the truth of the gospel message. Peter, of course, was one of the most famous of the apostles. He, along with James and John, formed a kind of "inner circle" among the Twelve (see Mark 5:37; 9:2; 14:33). Peter was the outstanding spokesperson for the Christian message in the early days of the church, as Luke makes clear in Acts 2–12. Being an apostle gave Peter the right to tell these Christians—and us!—what they should believe and how they should live.

If Peter's description of himself sets up the letter by establishing his right to address them, his description of his readers also anticipates some of the points he is going to make in the letter. First, these Christians, who are Gentiles, have "received a faith as precious as ours." Peter may be comparing the faith of these Christians to that of himself and other apostles.² Certainly in 1:16–18, when Peter describes the Transfiguration, he distinguishes between apostles ("we") and these other Christians ("you"). But the emphasis here is not on revelation (as it is in vv. 16–21), but on faith. And this makes it more likely that Peter wants to assure these Gentile Christians that they have a status in the new covenant community of believers fully equal to that of himself and other Jewish Christians.³ By breaking through all ethnic barriers, the gospel message has enabled Gentiles, who were at one time "foreigners to the covenants of the promise" (Eph. 2:12), to believe in Jesus Christ and so be saved from their sins. Gentile Christians are no second-class citizens in the kingdom of heaven.

Such an assurance was probably important for these Gentile Christians to hear so that they could take confidence in their full status as God's children and not allow the false teachers to sow doubt in their minds on this point. The word "faith," then, we are suggesting, has here its usual active

2. *Ibid.*, 249.

3. See, for instance, Mayor, *The Epistle of St. Jude and the Second Epistle of St. Peter*, 81. Those who think that 2 Peter is pseudonymous often argue that the author is comparing the faith of the original first-generation Christians and that of a later generation (see Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and of Jude*, 296–97).

sense: the act of believing.⁴ To be sure, speaking of faith in this sense as something that is “received” is unusual, and many commentators therefore think that Peter is referring to faith in its passive sense: that which Christians believe, i.e., Christian truth or doctrine.⁵ But the word translated “receive” (*lanthano*) suggests the idea of an appointment or distribution by lot. Faith is itself a gift from God, distributed alike to both Jews and Gentiles.

Peter further describes these Christians to whom he writes as those who have obtained this faith “through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ.” “Righteousness” (*dikaïosyne*) has a broad range of meaning in the Bible. One of its meanings is “justice” or “fairness,” and some commentators think that this meaning fits very well here: It is through the “fairness” of God that Gentile Christians are able to share equally with Jews in the benefits of Christ’s work.⁶ But “righteousness” normally refers to the act by which God puts sinners in a right relationship to him. And this seems to be the more likely meaning here.⁷ What is unusual about this phrase, however, is that this is the only place in the New Testament where we read of “the righteousness of . . . Jesus Christ.” Everywhere else the righteousness is attributed to God. But this reference to Christ is in keeping with the whole tenor of the letter, which consistently puts Christ at the same level as God.

The very wording at the end of this phrase makes this point even clearer. By translating “our God and Savior Jesus Christ,” the NIV makes clear that both the titles “God” and “Savior” apply to Jesus Christ. (Contrast the KJV rendering “of God and our Savior Jesus Christ,” or the NRSV margin, “of our God and the Savior Jesus Christ.”) The NIV translation is almost certainly correct.⁸ Here, therefore, we have one of the few verses in the New Testament where Jesus is explicitly called “God.” This does not, of course, mean that for Peter Jesus Christ has taken the place of the Old Testament God he has worshiped since childhood. It means, rather, that he has now come to understand that Jesus, along with the Father, is God. Nor is it likely that in saying this Peter is giving up monotheism and conceiving of Jesus as another God alongside the Father. While it would be a gross anachronism to attribute to the

4. Along with, e.g., Green, *The Second Epistle General of Peter and the General Epistle of Jude*, 60; Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 168.

5. See Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and of Jude*, 296.

6. Green, *The Second Epistle General of Peter and the General Epistle of Jude*, 60; Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and of Jude*, 297; Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 168.

7. See Calvin, *Hebrews and 1 and 2 Peter*, 327–28; Mayor, *The Epistle of St. Jude and the Second Epistle of St. Peter*, 81.

8. See especially Murray J. Harris, *Jesus as God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992). The book offers convincing exegetical evidence that the New Testament authors call Jesus “God.”

apostle at this point a fully worked-out Trinitarian understanding of God, what he says here, along with other similar verses in the New Testament, provides the building blocks for the later elaboration of that central Christian doctrine.

Verse 2, which follows generally the typical New Testament “greeting” form, continues to sound notes that will be heard throughout 2 Peter. “Grace” and “peace” appear frequently in these New Testament salutations. But only here in a New Testament letter opening do we find a prayer that “knowledge” might be “yours in abundance.” “Knowledge” is a key idea in the letter. Significantly, Peter both opens and closes the letter with a reference to the knowledge of God and or Christ (see also 3:18). He refers to this knowledge again in 1:3 and 8 as the foundation for his readers’ Christian experience. In a similar vein, he claims that the false teachers’ fate will be all the more serious because they had come to know Christ but had then turned away from that knowledge (2:20–21). In its biblical context, “knowledge” involves relationship (see “Contemporary Significance” section). And it was just this relationship with Christ that is the ultimate issue in 2 Peter. Peter’s central purpose in this letter is to encourage Christians to make this “knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord” productive and fruitful (see 1:8).



*Bridging
Contexts*

WE CANNOT APPLY the biblical message until we understand it. But we cannot understand it until we take into account the original setting of that message. In this section, we want to bring up two

matters that will help us accurately to translate into our own day and age the message of 2 Peter 1:1–2.

The first matter has to do with literary form or genre. When God chose to communicate the message of the gospel to the world, he chose human beings as his instruments. And those human beings in turn made use of those means of communication that were available to them in their day. Had God sent his Son into our own world, those entrusted with the good news might well have communicated it through radio announcements, TV “infomercials,” and a “Good News Home Page” on the Internet. In the first century world, the ambassadors of the gospel used synagogue sermons, market-place discussion groups, and standard forms of writing—such as the letter.

Letters were a popular means of communication in the ancient world and ranged from brief “send money” notes from children to their parents to carefully crafted treatises designed for publication. The New Testament letters fall somewhere in the middle of this spectrum. With the possible exception of Philemon, they are more than private notes, since they are written by

public figures (apostles and other accredited messengers) to (usually) a collection of individuals or churches. But they lack the literary polish and general address of most of the ancient treatise-type letters.

Second Peter fits neatly into this middle-of-the-road type of ancient letter. And, like the other New Testament letters, it employs many of the forms usual in ancient letters. We are used to receiving letters that begin with the sender's name and address in the letterhead, then the addressee's name and address, and finally a brief salutation, "Dear Doug." Ancient letters, written in the days before zip codes, usually began more simply: "X to Y, greetings." This is the precise form we find at the beginning of the letter sent by the apostolic council to the churches of Syria and southern Asia Minor: "The apostles and elders, your brothers, To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings" (Acts 15:23).

But the New Testament letter writers, while using the customary form, adapt it to their own needs. They identify sender and receiver, but instead of the word "greetings" (Greek *chairein*), they use a related word that fits better the message of the gospel: "grace" (Greek *charis*). And they expand on each of these items and so begin, even in the letter opening, to communicate something of the message they want to get across. The bottom line: We make a big mistake simply to skip over these verses as if they were a mere formality. They set the tone for what follows by mentioning some of the foundational experiences that writer and readers share in common. "Grace," the grace revealed in Christ, binds them together and is the context in which everything in the letter must be understood.

The second matter to discuss here to understand better the real force of these verses is the first-century relationship between Jews and Gentiles. God, of course, had long ago made Israel his special people, and this was a unique privilege that the Jews were jealous to guard. During the intertestamental period, the Jews put increasing stress on practices such as circumcision, Sabbath observance, and proper diet in order to wall themselves off from Gentiles. Most Jews in Jesus' day looked forward to a messianic kingdom in which Jews would have ruling positions and Gentiles would be either excluded or given only the most menial positions. But, as we know, God sent his Son into the world to bring into being a people who would honor him as Lord from "every tribe and tongue and nation." Luke tells us in Acts 6–15 how the early Christians gradually came to accept this idea of the kingdom.

But the full membership of Gentiles into the new covenant people of God—and the terms on which they would be accepted—was the biggest theological issue the early Christians faced (see, for instance, the book of Galatians). When Peter, therefore, briefly reminds his Gentile readers that they enjoy "a faith as precious" as that of Jewish Christians, he is touching

on a matter that most of us assume but which was of recent and overwhelming significance for him and his readers. And we should not forget that it was Peter himself whom God used to bring about this full inclusion of Gentiles. God sent Peter a vision to help him understand that Gentiles could not be excluded, and God used Peter to bring to faith the first Gentile convert (Acts 10). And it was Peter, with his impeccable Jewish credentials, who spoke out decisively in favor of allowing Gentiles to enter the new covenant on the basis of faith alone (15:7–11). We can better appreciate the phrase “to those who . . . have received a faith as precious as ours” when we hear the echoes of this struggle in the background.



WHAT PETER SAYS in these verses that most requires our attention today is what he says about “knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord” as the means by which we might enjoy “grace and peace in abundance.” It is no accident that Peter returns to this same concept of “knowledge” at the end of his letter (3:17–18):

Therefore, dear friends, since you already *know* this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position. But grow in the grace and *knowledge* of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.

The biblical writers often draw attention to a particular idea or word by “framing” their argument with it (the technical word is *inclusio*). For Peter, in other words, “growing in knowledge” is a key idea in this letter. In the Bible, “knowing” is a very personal activity. The Old Testament writers use the word to describe intimate relations between one person and another, including sexual relations. The New Testament also uses the word this way, as when Paul asserts that “Jesus knew no sin” (2 Cor. 5:21).⁹ Therefore, when Peter begins his letter by referring to “the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord,” he is saying that the readers of the letter will only enjoy “grace and peace in abundance” as they grow in their relationship to God and to Jesus.

But we must be careful not to evacuate the biblical concept of “knowing” of all cognitive value. “Knowing God” does mean having a warm, intimate relationship with our Creator; but it also means understanding who he is, with all its implications. Peter, we remember, is warning his readers about some heretical teachers. To avoid their errors, these Christians must not only have

9. The NIV translates “had no sin,” but the Greek verb is *ginosko*, “know.”

a “warm and fuzzy” feeling toward God; they also need to know some specific things about him, what he has done, and what he demands of us. One of the things they need to know, Peter hints, is that Jesus is God (v. 1; see explanation above).

In our day we are rightly warned about the danger of a sterile faith, of a “head” knowledge that never touches the heart. But we need equally to be careful of a “heart” knowledge that never touches the head! Too many Christians *know* too little about their faith; we are therefore often unprepared to explain how our “God” differs from the “God” of Mormonism or of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Again and again the New Testament makes plain that our very salvation can depend on confessing truth about God and his revelation in his Son. The biblical writers demand a “knowledge of God” that unites head and heart. We must be careful not to sacrifice the head in favor of the heart.

2 Peter 1:3–11



HIS DIVINE POWER has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. ⁴Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

⁵For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; ⁶and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; ⁷and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. ⁸For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹But if anyone does not have them, he is near-sighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins.

¹⁰Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, ¹¹and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.



MOST NEW TESTAMENT letters, following their secular models, feature a thanksgiving immediately after the opening. Peter takes a different tack here. He wastes no time in preliminaries, but instead gets right to the heart of what he wants to communicate to his readers. We have seen in 1:2 how Peter highlights the idea of “knowledge.” That same idea is central in 1:3–11, which forms, in fact, a “mini-sermon.”¹ Its theme is the need for Christians to grow in their knowledge of Jesus Christ (see vv. 3 and 8). Like many good sermons, it has three points:

- (1) God has given Christians all that they need to become spiritually mature (vv. 3–4).

1. The Greek text of v. 3 begins with a conjunction, *hos* (“as”), which does not normally introduce a new paragraph. Some commentators therefore think that vv. 3–4 should be attached to vv. 1–2, with v. 5 initiating a new paragraph (Mayor, *The Epistle of St. Jude and the Second Epistle of St. Peter*, 83).