

One Useful Stone (1 Peter 1:1)

It's time to begin a new preaching series. After a considerable amount of prayer, I feel like the Lord is leading me to explore the First letter of Peter. There is much here for us. I want to begin by reading just the first two verses, but I won't get any farther than verse 1 in my exposition this morning. In fact, I'm only going to get through part of verse 1. (I'm certainly not going to rush things.) But I'll read the first two verses, as it is all one sentence. We'll get to the rest of it, Lord willing, next week.

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To the pilgrims of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace be multiplied. (1 Peter 1:1-2)

This is a letter written by the Apostle Peter. He was born Simon Bar-Jonah, which means Simon, the son of John. He was a fisherman by trade, a small businessman. He owned his own boat. He probably was reasonably successful, a middle-class guy living in his own house in the province of Galilee.

Simon was first introduced to Jesus by his brother Andrew. We read in John how Andrew heard the Baptist declare Jesus as the Lamb of God.

He first found his own brother Simon, and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus. Now when Jesus looked at him, He said, "You are Simon the son of Jonah. You shall be called Cephas" (which is translated, A Stone). (John 1:41-42)

Jesus gave Simon a nickname. Cephas is that name in Aramaic, which is probably the language Jesus commonly spoke. In Greek, the name is rendered Peter, or actually *Petros* (*Πέτρος*) It means "a piece of rock" or a "stone"

It is interesting that Jesus chose that particular name. If I were kind, I suppose I would say it was because Peter was rock-solid, immovable, a good foundation, but that's really not the case. If it were, Jesus would have used a different word: *Petra* (*πέτρα*)—a mass of rock, or a rock outcropping. *Petros*, in contrast is a small chunk of rock ... even a pebble. Could Jesus have been needling him just a bit? "Man, you are a bit of a rock-head." In fact, Peter was impetuous. He would often speak before engaging his brain. John MacArthur describes him as a man with a foot-shaped mouth.

But Peter was also a natural leader and in the lists of Apostles, Peter is always mentioned first. He was one of Jesus' closest associates, perhaps His closest friend. Along with James, John and sometimes Andrew, Peter was part of our Lord's inner circle. Despite His many failings, Peter would be extremely useful in establishing the Church of Jesus Christ. He was **one useful stone**.

But he was a rock that needed to be polished and Jesus spent considerable time knocking off the rough edges. Before Peter could be useful for the kingdom, he had to be humbled. He would have to experience failure. He would have to be emotionally crushed and then Jesus would have to lovingly restore him.

It was Peter who gave that wonderful, faith-filled response after Jesus asked if the disciples wanted to abandon Him:

But Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." (John 6:68-69)

What a beautiful confession! It is a confession that is right on the mark and if you are to be a Christian, saved from an eternity in Hell, it must be your confession as well.

Later, when Jesus asked the disciples who they thought He was, it was Peter who said:

"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Matthew 16:16)

He basically repeated his earlier confession and Jesus commended him for it.

Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. (Matthew 16:17-18)

Peter had to be feeling pretty good about himself at that point. I'd like to receive that sort of "attaboy" from Jesus. I want Jesus to be please with me. I'm sure Jesus' commendation meant a lot to Peter. But then, so very shortly after, Jesus explained that He would need to go to Jerusalem to be murdered.

Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!" But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men." (Matthew 16:22-23)

What an emotional roller-coaster that must have been!

And then, on the night Jesus was betrayed, Peter staunchly declared his heart-felt loyalty to his Lord.

Peter answered and said to Him, "Even if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble." (Matthew 26:33)

Jesus said "Pete, Pete, you won't even make it until morning. You're going to deny even knowing me, not once, but three times."

Peter said to Him, "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You!" (Matthew 26:35)

Whatever. We all know how that worked out, don't we? He couldn't even stay awake while Jesus prayed in the garden. Oh, he did swing a sword at Malchus' head when the mob came to arrest Jesus ... and Jesus had to tell him to cease and desist. A few short hours later, despite all his bravado, he denied his Lord in His most difficult hour. Peter was absolutely crushed by his failure.

So Peter went out and wept bitterly. (Luke 22:62)

Well, you know, there are worse things than being absolutely crushed by your failure. In fact, you need to come to realize just how helpless you are with regard to spiritual things. You have to understand that you cannot get to God on your own. Your very best behavior will always fall infinitely short because God demands perfection. You cannot get there on your own; even your righteousnesses are as a filthy rag in God's sight. It is good to understand the depth of your sin. It is good to understand your total depravity. It is good to understand that the just wage of your sin is eternal death. It is good because in your failure, you can find God's grace.

That's exactly what Peter found.

After Jesus rose from the dead, He appeared to the disciples on the beach at Galilee. In fact, He cooked them breakfast. But He also called Peter aside, and asked the fisherman some pointed questions:

So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?" (John 21:15)

The word Jesus uses for "love" is *agapaō (ἀγαπάω)* It's self-sacrificial, unconditional, godly love. He asked Peter if he *agapao(d)* Him more than any of the other disciples. Peter's answer is telling:

He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." (John 21:15)

But Peter uses a different word for love: *phileō (φιλέω)*. It means to be fond of, or to be kindly affectionate toward. It is not self-sacrificial; it is not unconditional, but rather it is dependent on how the object of your affection makes you feel. Peter is saying, "Lord, I love you, but not nearly as much as you deserve."

He said to him again a second time, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me (John 21:16)

Jesus again uses the word *agapaō (ἀγαπάω)*, but notice that he leaves off the phrase "more than these". In other words, "Pete, if you don't *agapao* me more than the other disciples, do you *agapao* me at all?"

He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." (John 21:16)

Again, Peter uses the word *phileo*. Lord, I can't say I *agapao* you, but I do *phileo* you.

Finally, Jesus asks,

"Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?" (John 21:17)

This time, Jesus uses the word *phileo*. Pete, if you don't love me, do you at least like me?

Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you phileo Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I phileo You." (John 21:17)

Why was Peter grieved? Peter was grieved because he knew he was incapable of loving Jesus the way He deserves to be loved. He finally understood his depravity and here, it's like Jesus is flinging it back in his face.

But when you come to the point of acknowledging your failure, your depravity, your utter inability to serve Christ on your own, that's when He can use you for the glory of the kingdom. Peter denied even knowing his Lord three times. With these questions, Jesus restored him three times, and gave him instructions for ministry. (Notice that I left out a few phrases when we were reading through the account.) Jesus gave Peter a job to do: Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed My sheep.

Peter was going to be one useful rock! He preached at Pentecost and three thousand people came to saving faith! Along with John, he healed a man born lame, which led to another opportunity to preach the truth of the Gospel. Of course, that also got him in hot water with the religious elite, but God saw him through. He had the opportunity to preach to the Sanhedrin. Although they didn't repent, they were blown away:

Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus. (Acts 4:13)

Through Peter, Ananias and Saphira were supernaturally rebuked and killed for their presumptuous sin. He was thrown in prison, but released by the Holy Spirit ... and still he preached powerfully in the Temple. He did so under constant threat of arrest and death, boldly proclaiming the truth of Jesus Christ. Peter was the one God used to call the household of Cornelius, demonstrating that the Gospel was for Gentiles too. Peter was instrumental in finding a positive answer to the questions taken up by the Jerusalem Council, and Gentile Christians were freed from compliance to circumcision and the ritual law. Peter's preaching was codified by John Mark, and became what we know as the Gospel According to Mark.

Peter eventually made his way to Rome, where he continued to preach and he was murdered for his testimony during the reign of Nero, somewhere between 64 and 66 AD. Church tradition says that he was crucified upside down, at his request, because he felt himself unworthy to be killed in the same manner as his Lord.

Peter, of course, gave us this letter. From 1 Peter 5:13, it sounds like it was written from Babylon.

She who is in Babylon, elect together with you, greets you; and so does Mark my son. (1 Peter 5:13)

I don't believe for a moment that Peter was referring to the Babylon that was in Mesopotamia. Rome was a center of godless idolatry at that time, so it would have been perfectly appropriate for Peter to use Babylon figuratively to represent the city of Rome. Church tradition and the second century fathers consistently place Peter in Rome toward the end of his life. Mark was with him, and Mark was also with Paul ... in Rome.

This brings me to the question, "Why 1 Peter?" Why was it written? And why is it important to us?

Peter was written at or very shortly before the outbreak of persecution under Nero. I need to describe the political situation of the times. Nero was certainly a bad guy. It seems that he had a passion for building and he wanted to construct a new palace for himself, a big one ... a huge palace, and significant land in the center of Rome needed to be cleared to make way for it. On July 19, 64 AD the Great Fire of Rome was kindled. Much of the city was utterly consumed by the holocaust. Many Romans believed Nero set it himself, and held him responsible. To deflect blame, he targeted Christians.

Nero ordered Christians to be thrown to dogs, burned, crucified. Christians were easy targets. Christians would not cooperate in emperor worship and flatly denied the many pagan Gods of the Romans. Folks heard about the Communion and misrepresented it as a sort of cannibalistic ritual. And then, of course, Christians were associated with Jews ... and there was great mistrust and hatred of Jews at the time.

A time of great persecution was coming. Peter wrote this first letter to prepare Christians. Hostility was already increasing. They were being persecuted for their lifestyles and their talk of another kingdom. Torture and martyrdom were very real possibilities.

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, (1 Peter 1:6)

That's why it was important for those First Century Christians, but why is this important for us? What's in it for us?

Christians in this country have had a pretty easy time of it for the last several hundred years and we still have it pretty easy. We still are allowed to gather openly for worship and we should be praising God for our freedom daily. We have the freedom to proclaim our faith openly. But that is changing. I believe we need to be prepared for increasing persecution and we need to respond to it in the Biblical way. The answer will not be found in political action. The answer will not be found in the secular courts. The answer is always found in the pages of this Book.

If you belong to Christ, you are not a citizen of this world. You are a member of the family of God. You belong to His kingdom and that is good because His kingdom will never pass away. Satan may rage, be sure of it. The gates of Hades may attack but they will not prevail against Christ's Church. It is a promise uttered by the King of kings Himself.

So, we turn to the First Epistle of Peter. It is a letter written to us and for us. It is a letter written to prepare us to respond to persecution in a way that brings glory to our Lord. It was written by Cephas, Peter, *Petros*, the stone. Peter was a very useful stone, not because of his innate gifts, not because of his own righteousness, but because of his faith in Jesus Christ.

Make no mistake, you have no hope other than Jesus Christ, because you sin and fall short of God's glory. You sin because you're a sinner – it's in your nature and a most holy God cannot be in the presence of sinners. The wages of your sin is eternal death but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Jesus came to earth, lived a perfect, sinless life, then sacrificed Himself on the cross to pay the penalty for your sin. His blood covers you with His righteousness.

For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. (2 Corinthians 5:21)

Do you believe that? Can you embrace that? Would you trust Jesus alone for your salvation? Ask Him for the faith to believe, right now.

*For "WHOEVER CALLS ON THE NAME OF THE LORD SHALL BE SAVED."
(Romans 10:13)*

Jesus had to knock off some rough edges so Peter could be useful to the advancement of the kingdom, to the advancement of the Church. The rock had to be polished. And guess what. When you come by faith to Jesus Christ, He will begin to polish you as well. Sometimes, when He knocks off your rough edges, it's going to hurt. But in the end, you will be polished into a gem that will bring glory to your Lord and Savior. Believe me, it will be worth every bump and grind.