

Keeping *the* Faith

When Things Get Tough



Peter's
Letter
to
Jesus
Believers
Scattered
Everywhere

*Bite-Sized
Studies Through
the Book of
First Peter*

Jeff Doles

Keeping the Faith When Things Get Tough

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Introduction ~ Keep the Faith, Change the World

When times are hard, it can be very tempting to hold on to the world and let go of the faith. The apostle Peter certainly knew what that was like when he denied Jesus three times, mere hours after pledging unshakeable faithfulness. However, with the reality of the resurrection and the power of the Holy Spirit, he learned how to do just the opposite—to keep the faith and change the world!

In his letter to Jesus believers who were scattered abroad and experiencing persecution and hardship, he reveals not only how to keep the faith in difficult circumstances but also how to change the world by the new life that comes from Jesus, a life of loving, giving and serving.

This book is a study of that letter. It comes from a series I taught on First Peter in the Bible study group I have lead for the past ten years. Teaching it live inspired me to expand on it in a series of posts at my blog (www.TheFaithLog.com). And now I have collected those posts together and edited them into this present form (I believe in “retasking”).

These are “bite-size” studies to help guide you through Peter’s letter a little at a time. For the most part, they retain the shape and style of the blog (minus all the typos). At the end of each study, I have added

some focus questions to help you think further about the truths Peter brings. I have left them open-ended to allow for maximum personal reflection and group discussion.

My intent with this book, as with my blog, is to encourage you and stir up your faith to receive the wonderful promises and walk in the divine destiny God has for you. For many years now, my favorite verse, the one I come back to again and again, is Isaiah 50:4. “The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of disciples, that I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word. He awakens me morning by morning, He awakens my ear to listen as a disciple” (NASB). That has been my desire with this project and, indeed, with all my writing and ministry—to sustain the weary one with a word.

A Letter from Rocky

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ. (1Peter 1:1)

The name *Peter* comes from the Greek word, *petros*, which means “rock.” It is the name Jesus gave Simon Bar-Jonah when he received a very important truth from God.

When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, “Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?”

So they said, “Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”

Simon Peter answered and said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

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. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” (Matthew 16:13-19)

Simon did not come up with this on his own. It was a revelation he received directly from heaven. It was the sudden, divine realization that the one to whom he was speaking was the promised Messiah, the Anointed One who would deliver Israel and set the whole world right. It was the heaven-induced recognition that Jesus was not merely human but divine.

Jesus called him Rock because he had received this foundational truth. On this revelation, Jesus built His Church, and the “gates of hell”—even death itself—are not able to overcome it. Peter had found a rock to build his life upon, and now God would use him to lay that same foundation in others. That is how an apostle functions. An apostle is someone who is sent as the messenger and representative of another. As an apostle of Jesus the Messiah, he serves on behalf of Jesus. His function is to prepare the way, to break the ground, lay foundation. Paul speaks of the Church as being “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:20).

Now, Peter was an impetuous sort of person, not a very stable trait for a leader. He threw himself into whatever he did but was often in over his head, and sometimes his boldness left him stranded.

- ☞ He was the only disciple who, seeing Jesus walking on the waves, asked Him to bid him come (Matthew 14:28). That was bold. But he stepped out on the water and ended up sinking into the stormy sea because of his lack of faith (Matthew 14:30-31).
- ☞ On the other hand, he failed spectacularly! He was the only disciple willing to get out of the boat and, after all, he *did* walk on the water for at least a little while (Matthew 14:29).
- ☞ He was the one who boldly declared the revelation he received from the Father concerning Jesus the Messiah (Matthew 16:16).

- ☞ But just a few verses later, when Jesus spoke of being killed at the hands of elders and priests and scribes, Peter rebuked Him—rebuked the Messiah, the Son of the Living God!— saying, “Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!” At this, Jesus said, “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 16:20-23).
- ☞ On the night Jesus was betrayed, He said to the disciples, “All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night.” Peter audaciously answered, “Even if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble.” Jesus answered, “Assuredly, I say to you that this night, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times” (Matthew 26:31-34), which is exactly what happened.
- ☞ On the third day, when the disciples received the report from Mary Magdalene, Peter was the only one who ran out with John to see the empty tomb (John 20:1-4).
- ☞ Fifty days later, at the feast of Pentecost in Jerusalem, where the Holy Spirit filled the disciples in the Upper Room, so that they all spoke with other tongues until observers accused them of being drunk, Peter stood up in the boldness of the Holy Spirit and proclaimed Jesus as Messiah and King (Acts 2).
- ☞ When Peter and John went up to pray at the temple and saw a lame man begging alms, Peter extended his faith and said, “Silver and gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk,” and the man was healed (Acts 3:1-10).
- ☞ Then when brought up before the magistrates, Peter declared, “Let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here

before you whole” (Acts 4:10). And when admonished not to preach Jesus anymore, Peter and John answered, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19-20).

- ✧ Peter discerned the lie of Ananias and Sapphira and how satan filled their hearts. He was not afraid to call it what it was, and they both fell down dead (Acts 5:1-11).
- ✧ Brought before the council again for preaching the name of Jesus, Peter answered, “We ought to obey God rather than men,” and did not relent (Acts 5:29).
- ✧ Peter broke ground for the preaching of the gospel to the nations, going to Cornelius, a Gentile, after receiving a vision from God (Acts 10).
- ✧ Then he stood before the leaders of the Church at Jerusalem and testified how God was making no distinction between Jews and Gentiles but was purifying both by faith in Jesus the Messiah (Acts 15).
- ✧ But then, it was also Peter whom Paul rebuked for hypocrisy at Antioch, when Peter backed away from fellowship with Gentile believers after a certain group of Jewish believers came from Jerusalem (Galatians 2:11-21).

Though his temperament at the beginning was “rocky” and tumultuous, God eventually smoothed him out and made him a pastor who was able to lay a good foundation for others and lead them to stability in Jesus Christ. Thirty years on from the Resurrection and Pentecost, Simon the Rock, writing in the AD 60s, now penned this letter of encouragement and instruction to converts going through difficult times of persecution where bold faith was required.

Focus Questions

1. What happened that brought Peter to a place of stability, boldness and follow-through in his faith?
2. Even after Peter was well into his ministry, he apparently still had moments of intimidation — at least one, when he backed away from table fellowship with Gentile believers because of a particular group from Jerusalem. and Paul rebuked him for it (see Galatians 2:11-21). Did that disqualify him from the ministry of apostle? Should it have?
3. What did Peter learn from that experience?

A Letter to Scatterlings

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)

Peter writes this from “Babylon” (1 Peter 5:13), which may be a code name for Rome. In the Old Testament, to which he frequently alludes, Babylon was the place of exile for the Jews, and Rome was quickly becoming a place of intense persecution for Jesus believers. Or this letter could possibly have been written from the city of Babylon, in the Egyptian delta (not the Babylon of Israel’s ancient

captivity). Persecuted Jews had long found refuge in Egypt, and many early Christians also ended up there. Mark, author of the book that largely represented Peter's account of the Gospel, established a church in Alexandria and was martyred there (see *The African Memory of Mark*, by Thomas Oden).

Peter writes to people who are “pilgrims,” “temporary residents” (HCSB), “strangers” (KJV), “those who reside as aliens” (NASB), “exiles” (ESV). They were probably not actual exiles in the technical sense of being displaced from their homeland. But they had embraced faith in Jesus the Messiah, and with that a new way of life. Their true citizenship was, as Paul would say, in heaven (Philippians 3:20). They did not fit in with the surrounding culture and were consequently ostracized. Then, too, persecution of Jesus believers was heating up in Rome, under Nero, and news of it would have been reaching the outlying regions.

These believers were *diaspora*, scatterlings dispersed throughout five Roman provinces in Asia Minor, in what is now Turkey. The scattered ones James wrote his letter to were mostly Jewish believers, of the “twelve tribes,” spread out among non-believing Gentiles (James 1:1). These to whom Peter writes are a blend of Gentile believers in Jesus, as well as some Jewish ones, who were displaced, geographically or socially, because of their faith in Jesus the Messiah.

Peter calls them “elect,” chosen “according to the foreknowledge of God.” They are the people of God and part of His eternal plan. Whatever they are going through, it has not taken God by surprise and, more importantly, He will not let them down but will see them through.

They are sanctified, consecrated, set apart by the Holy Spirit as God's own. It is why He has chosen them, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood. This is an allusion to Exodus 24:7-8, when God first made covenant with the children of Israel. The people

answered, "All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient." Then Moses took the blood of sacrifice and sprinkled it on them, saying, "This is the blood of the covenant which the LORD has made with you according to all these words." In Jesus the Messiah, we are joined to God in a new and better covenant, which is established on better promises (Hebrews 8:6). At the Last Supper, Jesus took the cup of wine and said, "This is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you" (Luke 22:20). The obedience here is the obedience of faith, committing ourselves to Jesus our Messiah.

Though Peter does not develop a theology of the Trinity here, notice how he identifies the three persons of the Godhead: the Father in His foreknowledge and gracious choice, Jesus the Messiah in the shedding of His blood, and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

Then there is the benediction, the words of blessing, "Grace to you and peace be multiplied." A common Jewish salutation was "Greetings and peace," but the apostles altered that. The Greek word for "greetings," *chairein*, means to be well and full of cheer. But the apostles used a related word, *charis*, the word for "grace." In their usage, it signifies the grace or favor that comes from God. The Greek word for "peace" is *eirene*, but being Jewish, Peter no doubt had in mind the Hebrew *shalom*, which speaks of the wholeness that comes from God. The addition of "be multiplied" is found only in Peter's letters and the epistle of Jude. It speaks of the fullness of divine favor and wholeness being revealed. God does not withhold His blessing from us, but as we grow in grace and come to know the Lord Jesus more and more (2 Peter 3:18), we experience more and more the fullness of His grace and peace.

This letter was to be copied and circulated especially to the churches in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, although it has, of course, come to the whole Church in the canon of Scripture.

Some commentators take it as a catechism, instruction for converts, or a letter of exhortation and encouragement for the newly baptized.

Focus Questions

1. How is it possible that a person can be chosen by God but persecuted in the world?
2. The Holy Spirit has set apart believers in Jesus as God's own people. In what ways does this manifest in the world?
3. Besides being a reference to the new covenant with God through Jesus, what might be another reason Paul speaks to these scattered believers of the "sprinkling of the blood of Jesus"?

The Abundant Mercy of God Revealed in Jesus the Messiah

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Peter 1:3-5)

Peter uses a very Jewish form of prayer: "Blessed be God." The object of his praise is the One who is the Father of our Lord Jesus,

in whom are fulfilled the promises of God to the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament. Jesus is King and Messiah for the sake of both Jewish and Gentile believers, and Peter, addressing both groups without distinction, calls Him *our* Lord.

In Jesus the Messiah, God has displayed His abundant mercy. Though writing in Greek, Peter would have most likely had the Hebrew word *hesed* in mind, the word used so often in the Old Testament for the faithful love and mercy God promised to show His covenant people. Peter then details some of the ways this divine love and mercy are revealed to us in the Lord Jesus.

- ✧ *Through the new birth.* God has begotten us again through faith in the Lord Jesus, so that we would have the right to become children of God (John 1:12). This new birth is from above, by the Spirit of God (John 3:3-6). We are born again of the Spirit but also of the incorruptible seed of the Word of God (1 Peter 1:23). God, who called the world into existence by His Word, gives us new birth by that same Word.
- ✧ *Through a living hope.* The biblical use of “hope” does not refer to wishful thinking or to things that are tentative. It speaks of a positive expectation, a joyful anticipation. In Jesus the Messiah, we have a *living* hope. It is the joyful anticipation of divine life and fellowship without end. In Ephesians, Paul prayed that God would give us wisdom and revelation by the Holy Spirit so that we would be able to know what this hope is all about (Ephesians 1:17-18).
- ✧ *Through the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah from the dead.* Here is the direct reason we have a living anticipation: Jesus has been raised from the dead. Paul calls Him “the firstborn from the dead” (Colossians 1:18) and spends a great deal of time in 1 Corinthians 15 talking about what that means for us who believe in Him. The

Jews expected that there would be a resurrection of the just at the end of the age, but in the resurrection of Jesus, the end of the age has broken into the midst of this present age as the firstfruits, the surety of what is to come for all who trust in Him.

- ✧ *Through an inheritance that is indestructible and undefiled.* Inheritance speaks of family and fatherhood. Through the new birth, we have God as our Father and are part of His family, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ (Romans 8:17). In Adam, we inherited death and moral corruption (Romans 5). In Jesus the Messiah, we inherit life and purity. In his second letter, Peter says that God has given us “exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust” (2 Peter 1:4). This inheritance will not fade away, as flowers do, but is carefully guarded for us in heaven. It is from heaven but it is not just for heaven, for in the resurrection, our life will be on earth, and heaven and earth will be finally and fully joined together as one (Revelation 21).
- ✧ *Through the coming revelation of salvation.* This is the ultimate unveiling of what God is doing in us. We enter into the family by faith in the Lord Jesus, and God is currently maturing the life of Jesus in us through work of the Holy Spirit. One day it shall all be revealed. John said, “Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure” (1 John 3:2).

End of Preview

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In his letter to Jesus believers scattered abroad, Peter reveals not only how to keep the faith in difficult circumstances but also how to change the world by the new life that comes from Jesus—a life of loving, giving and serving. This book is a study of that letter. In it you will learn about:

- ∞ The new birth, the new mind, and the new life believers have in Jesus
- ∞ The new kind of people we are called to be in Him
- ∞ The incorruptible Word by which we have come to know Him
- ∞ The indestructible inheritance He has for us
- ∞ What it means to be holy
- ∞ What true freedom is and how it transforms relationships
- ∞ How to walk in fervent love and find exuberant joy beyond words
- ∞ How to arm yourself with the mind of Jesus
- ∞ How to manifest the glory and dominion of Jesus
- ∞ How to stand firmly against our true adversary
- ∞ ... and more

These are “bite-size” studies to help guide you through Peter’s letter, a little at a time. At the end of each study are focus questions to help you think further about the truths Peter brings. They are open-ended questions to allow for maximum personal reflection and group discussion.

JEFF DOLES is a Christian writer, blogger and Bible teacher. His books include *The Kingdom of Heaven on Earth: Keys to the Kingdom of God in the Gospel of Matthew*, *God’s Word in Your Mouth: Changing Your World Through Faith* and *Praying With Fire: Change Your World with the Powerful Prayers of the Apostles*. He and his wife Suzanne live near Tampa, FL.

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