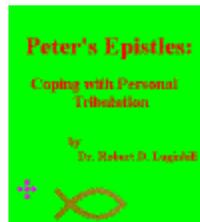


Counteracting the Devil's Strategy

Peter's Epistles #1

Introduction

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Counteracting the Devil's Strategy: 1st and 2nd Peter are best studied together, for both epistles are concerned with the same issue: *Spiritual Growth in the face of Satanic attack*. In these two letters, Peter not only reminds his readers of the necessity for and means of spiritual growth, but also addresses two major dangers which were hindering the spiritual progress of the believers of his day. These dangers, *personal* and *doctrinal distractions* from the Plan of God, still constitute the primary threats to spiritual growth today. Distraction is a central part of Satan's strategy to turn believers away from the Lord. A mature believer whose faith is strong and sure is much less likely to become apostate than someone whose faith has been eroded through personal suffering and false doctrine.

- *In his first letter*, Peter deals with a serious problem and common complication of life which can distract the believer from fulfilling God's purpose for the believer's life of spiritual growth: namely, **suffering**.
- *In his second letter*, Peter addresses another major threat to spiritual growth which can capture the believer and lure him away from the truth: namely, **false teaching**.

Peter's message is that the faithful believer must resist both of these dangers. He must not allow the troubles and temptations of life to make him doubt God or to distract him from His plan. Likewise, the believer must not allow himself to be deceived by false systems of teaching, no matter how appealing they may seem.

How is the Christian to accomplish this difficult two-fold task? By taking in the Word of God (i.e. by hearing, believing, and applying principles of biblical truth) the believer grows

spiritually, and is strengthened in the faith, so that he is able to withstand the tests and trials of life without wavering, and can, at the same time, discern between orthodox and heretical teaching.

Historical Background: Peter wrote these two letters from Rome where he was present from ca. 62-63 A.D. until his martyrdom in ca. 66-67 A.D. We don't know precisely why or when Peter left for Rome. There is much inaccurate tradition on the subject. We do know that his tenure there occurred during the reign of Nero who ruled from 54-68. Tacitus' *Annales* 15.44 tells us most of what little we know of the local persecution instigated by Nero in 64. In an effort to defuse the charge that he had ordered the recent conflagration which had destroyed much of the city of Rome, Nero, Tacitus tells us, seized upon the Christians as scapegoats, and subjected them to an obscene variety of inhuman tortures (including having them crucified, burned alive, and thrown to wild dogs while wrapped in animal skins). Peter himself was most likely martyred well after this savage round of persecution, sometime toward the end of Nero's reign. While there is not much direct evidence that Nero's enthusiastic and wilful persecution of Christians went far beyond the Roman *pomerium* (city limits), this assault on Christians in the capital was bound to have an effect on the provinces, and Tacitus' characterization of our faith as "depraved, degraded, and shameful" gives us some idea of the ignorance, fear, and animosity that confronted our fellow believers throughout the empire. To be a Christian during the first century was to put your lifestyle, and life, at risk.

Pliny (10.96-97), writing nearly 50 years after this time to the emperor Trajan to request instructions about how to deal with Christians gives us an indication of the sort of thing with which first century believers had to contend. Pliny asks the emperor if possession of the "name" of Christian was a sufficient offense for legal action, and Trajan replied that while Pliny should not actively seek out the Christians, once any persons had been identified as such they should be executed if unwilling to recant and sacrifice to the emperor. The letters of Pliny indicate that the legal status of early Christians was quite perilous, and that they were in constant danger of exposure and persecution for any number of malevolent motives, whether personal (as in the case of the jealousy evoked by the response of Gentiles to the Gospel, Acts 17:5), or economic (as in the case of the persecution of Paul and Silas at Philippi, Acts 16:19; and also in the case of the riot at Ephesus for fear that the new faith would undermine the trade in statuettes of the goddess Artemis, Acts 19:23-41).

Believers of the first century not only had to cope with all the pressures and temptations of a society every bit as depraved as the one in which we live today (and we shall have occasion to examine some of the common aspects in our future studies), but they also had to be ever on their guard against the constant danger of persecution. In such an environment, personal tragedies and setbacks would have been all the more onerous: ***only strong, positive faith would be likely to endure such distractions to spiritual growth.***

Persecution: A few words should also be said here about Satan's indirect assault upon the believer's faith during this period. *Persecution and personal suffering* are direct challenges to a growing, vibrant faith. The believer is tempted to "faint", and doubt God's ability to deliver him from his trials. *False teaching*, however, is an even more insidious and deceitful threat to faith, undermining its foundations, rotting the beams on which it rests. We will examine the deceptive doctrines of the first century and their modern counter-parts later in our study (they

are properly the subject of 2nd Peter), but we should note from the start that the early believers lacked a number of advantages that you and I take for granted (most importantly, there was as yet no complete Bible available). The leaders of any given church would have been Christians for only a short time, and would possess no formal training, no seminaries, no books on Christian subjects, and the apostles would only have been able to visit even the most important centers of the Church periodically. Yet despite all odds, our fellow believers did keep the faith. In these two letters, Peter sought to warn the Christians of his day of these twin threats to their faith (i.e., the distractions of suffering and false teaching), to remind them of the proper way to safeguard and establish their faith, and to challenge them to reach their full spiritual potential that their lives might be blessed, and that they might reap a full reward in eternity.

Summary Conclusion:

TIME OF WRITING: 62-67 A.D.

INTENDED AUDIENCE: Circular letters to all believers in Asia Minor

LOCATION and AUTHORSHIP: Written from Rome by the Apostle Peter

THEME OF 1ST PETER: Don't let life's problems (suffering) stunt your spiritual growth!

THEME OF 2ND PETER: Don't let false teaching stunt your spiritual growth!

Spiritual Growth: God supplies all we need to learn His truth (the Bible, free will, the necessities of life, opportunity to hear His Word taught and explained). As we hear, and accept His Word (understand it, believe it, act upon it), we are "built up" and grow spiritually, gradually gaining the breadth and depth of faith sufficient not only to cope with the severe distractions of life while maintaining a fervent and steadfast love for our Lord Jesus Christ, but also sufficient to accomplish whatever work God has called us to do.

Now grow up through the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. 2nd Peter 3:18

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