

KNOWING GOD
IN THE LAST DAYS

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COMMENTARY ON 2 PETER

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*To the past and present staff of
the Reformed Free Publishing Association
which has provided many insights
and much encouragement*

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FOREWORD

This commentary on 2 Peter is a valuable resource for the church of Christ.

Its value lies in its brevity. There is certainly a place in the lives of God's people for longer and deeper commentaries on each book of the Bible, and many have been written. Such is not this volume. Instead, it is concise and to the point, briefly explaining 2 Peter verse by verse. The commentary will be excellent for a quick read to grasp the book as a whole in its general themes, for a needed reference to understand a particular section, for the family to read aloud around the dinner table for family worship, or for believers in a Bible study to generate thoughts and discussions on this portion of God's word.

The commentary's value lies in its clarity. The author's style is refreshing. As a capable editor of many other works, the author understands well how to wield the English language effectively, which comes through clearly in this work.

The commentary's value also lies in its perspective. It is written from the viewpoint of the Reformed faith, and shows conviction of the doctrines of grace as they are set forth in the three forms of unity. Writing from this perspective, the author honors God as the sovereign creator and redeemer of his people through the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

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More could be said to explain the good resource that this commentary is for the church today. I let the work speak for itself, and I pray that the Spirit of Jesus Christ will use this work to guide his saints to a better understanding of the truth.

—Rev. Nathan Decker

INTRODUCTION

Until recently commentators have largely ignored the second general epistle of Peter. The reason is difficult to determine. Perhaps this has to do with its brevity or with its content, or with both. Perhaps this is because the second epistle of Peter has stood in the shadow of the first epistle of Peter. But the fact is indisputable.

Of late, however, there has been a resurgence of interest in 2 Peter. A number of commentators have recently taken up the pen in explanation of the epistle.

Authorship and Canonicity

This renewal of interest has been fraught with controversy. To ignore this fact is to do injustice to the scriptures. Beginning already with the early church and continuing until the present, there has been disagreement regarding two major issues. The first concerns the identity of the human writer of the epistle; some in the history of the church have denied that Peter is the writer. The second concerns its canonicity.

The two are intertwined. Either Peter is the human writer of the epistle, or he is not. If he is, his epistle belongs to the canon of scripture because the Holy Spirit inspired him. If he is not, his epistle does not belong to the canon but is a forgery and a fake. Conversely, if the book, according to the judgment of the church,

is canonical, Peter must be the human writer. If the epistle is not canonical, Peter cannot be the writer.

Although the arguments pro and con are sketchy, they date to the first three centuries, continue through the time of the Reformation, and intensify in the twentieth century. Most of the argumentation, while scholarly, is technical and arcane and therefore not helpful to God's people.

While many commentators with various degrees of complexity and clarity address these issues, Simon Kistemaker is perhaps the clearest. In the introduction to his commentary, he devotes nineteen pages to the issues and disagreements. In so doing he draws correct conclusions based on the evidence.¹

Much of modern scholarship, which often denies that Peter is the human writer, thus denying the canonicity of 2 Peter, smacks of higher criticism and must be rejected. The correct view is that the apostle Peter is the human writer of this epistle and that it therefore is canonical.

This view is confirmed by Peter himself in 1:13–15, where he asserts that he wrote the epistle:

13. Yea, I think it meet, as long as I am in this tabernacle, to stir you up by putting you in remembrance;
14. Knowing that shortly I must put off this my tabernacle, even as our Lord Jesus Christ hath shewed me.
15. Moreover I will endeavour that ye may be able after my decease to have these things always in remembrance.

Reformed—and all Bible-believing—Christians assert that because scripture interprets itself, Peter's words are to be accepted as truth. Peter speaks in verse 15 of "these things," a clear reference

¹ Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1987), 5–24.

to what he intends to teach the church and what the church must remember after his death. Besides, and most significantly, in 1:1 Peter identifies himself as an apostle, which means that he is the divinely inspired writer of the epistle who writes as the authoritative representative of Christ.

Date

The date of this epistle cannot be ascertained precisely. Estimates vary widely, depending on one's view of the authorship and canonicity of the letter. Those who deny that Peter wrote the book and reject the book's canonicity assign to it a second-century date, but they are wrong.

Peter himself in 1:13–14 indicates that he writes this letter shortly before his imminent demise. The early church historian Eusebius places the date of Peter's death during Nero's persecution of the church during AD 64–68.

Further, Peter was acquainted with Paul's writings (3:15–16). Therefore this epistle could not have been one of the earliest New Testament writings.

Taking into account these facts, it is likely that Peter wrote this epistle shortly before AD 68.

Recipients

In 2 Peter the apostle does not state directly to whom he writes. In 1:1 he identifies them only as those who "have obtained like precious faith with us through the righteousness of God." In contrast, the apostle in 1 Peter identifies his readers as those who live in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.

Yet there is a definite connection between the two epistles. This link is evident from 2 Peter 3:1, where the apostle describes this

letter as his second epistle, a clear reference to 1 Peter. The recipients of 2 Peter, then, are the same saints of Asia Minor to whom he wrote 1 Peter.

As in 1 Peter, he writes to the churches in general, including both Jewish and Gentile Christians. Nothing suggests that he addresses a particular group or that he deals with a problem specific to any situation, such as a doctrinal error or a practical issue.

Theme and Purpose

The theme of 2 Peter is the knowledge of God. Peter uses the word *knowledge* and its related forms no fewer than eleven times in this brief epistle. In 1:2–3, 5–6, 8; 2:20; 3:18 he uses the term *knowledge*. In 1:20; 2:9; 3:3, 17 he uses various verb forms of the word.

The epistle, although short, contains a wealth of instruction for the church, which explains why its theme is the true knowledge of God. This theme the apostle develops and applies to his readers. In chapter 1 he exhorts the Christians to grow in the knowledge of God and of Christ as revealed in the word of prophecy given through the apostles. Having received the promises, they are to add to their faith various spiritual virtues, including knowledge. In chapter 2 the apostle warns against false teachers, whom believers can recognize and reject only if they have the true knowledge of God. In chapter 3 Peter applies true knowledge to the end times and describes appropriate Christian behavior in light of the final judgment and the renewal of all things.

The purpose of the epistle is to teach the knowledge of God and of Christ. It is impossible to know God without knowing Jesus as his Son. The purpose is to strengthen Christians in true knowledge and faith in opposition to false teachers, about whom Peter has much to say, especially in chapter 2. It is further the purpose to

give instruction concerning the end times in contrast to those who deny Christ's second coming and the final judgment. Christians must live as those who are in the end times.

Character

Peter's letter is not easy to interpret because he often uses words found nowhere else in scripture. In chapter 3 alone he does this six times. One of the principles of understanding the Bible is that scripture interprets scripture, which sometimes makes his meaning difficult to discern because he does not use identical or even comparative terms that are used elsewhere in scripture. In addition, in keeping with his character, Peter is often blunt, very graphic, and sometimes almost abusive in his language. He is definitely not politically correct.

Division

I have divided the content of this epistle into verses and sections for purposes of organization and clarity. Although these divisions are helpful, they are somewhat artificial. Peter did not write an outline but a personal letter to the church of his day, and this must always be kept in mind. His letter is a unity, and its continuity must be recognized.

Perspective

This hardly needs to be said, but my perspective as a Reformed Christian is that 2 Peter is the inspired and infallible word of God and must be explained as such. In the interpretation of this epistle I also subscribe to the doctrines taught in the three forms of unity—the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dordrecht.

CHAPTER ONE

Greeting: 1:1–2

1. Simon Peter, a servant and an apostle of Jesus Christ, to them that have obtained like precious faith with us through the righteousness of God and our Saviour Jesus Christ:
2. Grace and peace be multiplied unto you through the knowledge of God, and of Jesus our Lord.

Peter begins his letter to the churches by identifying himself as Simon Peter. More correctly, he gives his name as Simeon, the Jewish form of Simon. This name is usually used in the New Testament and in Hebrew is a form of Samuel, which means God has heard. Peter's reason for using his given name, Simeon, is to express his unity with his Jewish readers, who undoubtedly knew its meaning.

The apostle also identifies himself as Peter, the name that Jesus gave him (Matt. 16:18). Christ gave him the name *Petros* (Rock in Greek), which in the Aramaic is Cephias, a form infrequently used in scripture. That Peter is the rock on which Christ will build his church may not be misinterpreted, as does the Roman Catholic Church, as referring to Peter personally, from which Rome deduces that Peter was the first pope. Rather, Peter is the rock on which the church is built from the viewpoint of his confession that Jesus is the

Christ, the Son of the living God (Matt. 16:16–18). By frequently using these twin appellations, as he does here, the apostle acknowledges that he is both Simon and Peter.

The apostle is the Jewish fisherman whom the Lord called to follow him as his disciple. He is Simon according to his weak and often sinful nature. He belongs to the old covenant, and he frequently does not understand the meaning and nature of Jesus' kingdom. Being of a somewhat brash and hasty nature, he sometimes stumbles and falls in his pilgrim journey of faith, notably when he denied the Lord.

Yet Peter is also *Petros*, his distinctively Christian name. As the spokesman for the other disciples, he confessed that Jesus is the Messiah. Being enlightened by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, he preached his famous Pentecost sermon. As the rock he understands that the gospel of Christ must go to Jew and Gentile alike, and to that church he writes his epistles.

Peter, now an old man, knows himself. He knows that he is both Simeon and *Petros*, and as such he addresses his letter to the churches. Undoubtedly the church of his day knew exactly what he meant when he used this double identification.

Peter goes on to describe himself in two more related ways. He calls himself a servant and an apostle. The word rendered as “servant” in the King James Version is correctly translated as “slave.” There is a difference. A servant is someone who voluntarily serves another. He is hired to perform a service, usually by means of a contract or other agreement, and he is paid for services rendered. A simple example makes this clear. If I hire someone to mow my lawn, we sign a contract that spells out the duties to be performed and the amount of money to be paid for the service. However, the relationship between the customer and the service company is voluntary. The lawn maintenance company is not the slave of the

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customer. Either party can terminate the relationship at will. Such is the idea of servanthood.

Slavery, however, is different. It carries with it not the idea of a relationship between equals, but the idea of ownership: one person owns another. Their relationship has an involuntary aspect. Unlike a servant, a slave mows his owner's grass whether or not he wants to do so, and he is not paid to do it. He cannot terminate a contract and walk away, but he is bound in servitude to his master. Never mind that in Peter's day slaves were frequently viewed as being almost members of the families of those whom they served. They belonged to their owners.

Peter uses the idea of slavery, so common in the Roman world, to describe himself. He is a slave of Jesus Christ. From a spiritual viewpoint he belongs to Jesus. Christ owns him, body and soul. Jesus has bought him by means of his atoning death. Christ has regenerated him, called him, justified him, and sanctified him. Thus the apostle belongs to him. The relationship between Christ and Peter is not voluntary or contractual, but that of ownership. Because Christ has redeemed him, Peter in his whole being and life belongs to Christ, along with his readers, who are also slaves of Christ. By thus describing himself, Peter puts himself on the same plane as his readers: together they willingly and lovingly belong to Christ, their lord and master.

Peter also describes himself as "an apostle." The word is the noun form of a verb that means to send or to commission, which implies that there is one who commissions or sends, in this instance, Christ, who chooses to send his gospel by means of his emissaries. Peter does not write his own ideas and words, but he speaks only those given to him by Christ through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. His teachings therefore are authoritative because he belongs to Jesus Christ, who sent him as an apostle to preach and teach the gospel.

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In his capacity both as a slave and as an apostle, Peter addresses those who “have obtained like precious faith with us.”

Faith in scripture can have two meanings. Sometimes it is used objectively, so that it refers to the content of faith. It is what we believe, the doctrines of the Christian faith. Sometimes faith is used subjectively, so that it refers to the act of believing, the trust that believers place in God. There is no dichotomy between objective and subjective faith, although there is a distinction. The two senses are like the two sides of a coin: related but not separated.

Commentators disagree regarding the use of the term here, but the evidence points to the subjective meaning of faith.

This faith is described as “like precious...with us.” “Like precious” literally means “of like value or significance,” and thus precious. The idea of a precious and similar faith, Peter says, is shared “with us.” Peter refers to himself and the other apostles, all of whom shared a personal trust in Christ. Peter uses the pronoun “us” to show that the faith of his readers is the same as that of the apostles. By so doing he unites himself with his readers.

Peter goes on to say that he and his readers have obtained this like precious faith “through the righteousness of God and our Saviour Jesus Christ.” More correctly the text reads “in” the righteousness of God and our Saviour Jesus Christ, that is, in the sphere of or in connection with this righteousness. The meaning is that faith is always connected with righteousness. It is only in the sphere of righteousness that faith is possible and is our possession.

Righteousness in scripture has more than one meaning. It can refer to the divine attribute (Ps. 145:17; Rom. 3:26; 1 John 2:29), in which case it means that all of God’s willing and acting are in perfect harmony with his holiness. It can also mean justification, the imputed righteousness accomplished through the atoning death of Christ, so that God’s elect people are judged to be in harmony with

the holiness of God (Rom. 4:22–25). It can also refer to sanctification, by which God delivers his people from the dominion of sin and enables them to walk in holiness (Matt. 5:6; Rom. 6:18). These three ideas may be distinguished but not separated.

There is a difference among commentators as to which aspect of righteousness is meant here. It seems that the emphasis falls on the righteousness of God as his divine virtue. Therefore, the term “God” in this instance refers to the triune God as he is revealed in Jesus Christ. Peter connects faith with righteousness, so that the meaning is that God imparts this righteousness to those who have been given faith, that is, to those who believe.

God is our savior. Peter calls God “our Saviour Jesus Christ.” He is Jesus, Jehovah salvation. He is Christ, the promised Messiah. Revealed as Jesus Christ, savior from sin, God is in harmony with his perfect righteousness. That righteousness is imputed to his elect through the death of Christ, so that they are justified, and is then realized in the sanctification of God’s people. Thus those who have faith believe in God our savior as he is revealed in Jesus Christ.

The words *grace and peace* are often used by the apostles as their salutation to the churches (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2), and this is no exception. *Grace* in scripture has many nuances and applications, but its basic meaning is God’s favor. Grace is that which affords joy, pleasure, and delight. It is charm and loveliness, the opposite of disfavor, displeasure, and wrath. Peace is negatively the absence of war and conflict; positively, it is harmony, tranquility, and concord.

Peter says, “Grace and peace be multiplied unto you.” He uses a verb form that expresses a wish: he wishes that grace and peace will be increased to his readers. Peter, however, does not express this wish from a purely personal and human viewpoint. If this

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were the case, his wish would carry with it no weight or power, but would be no more significant than anyone else's wish.

Instead, Peter writes as an apostle, as he asserts in verse 1. He writes authoritatively, as an official representative of God and of Christ. Therefore, his wish actually conveys grace and peace to the church. This idea is reinforced by the passive voice of the verb: be multiplied. This expression implies an agent—someone who does the increasing or multiplying. That someone is God.

When we put these ideas together, the meaning is that God through the apostle conveys his grace and peace to his people.

This increase of grace and peace is “in [not through] the knowledge of God, and of Jesus our Lord.” The knowledge of which Peter writes is not a general or secular knowledge. Rather, the word is used in the New Testament and here to indicate ethical and divine knowledge. More specifically, it refers to precise and correct knowledge. This implies that God is the originator and author of this knowledge. Grace and peace are conditioned by true knowledge.

Surely the knowledge of which Peter speaks is an intellectual knowledge. From scripture we know the truths of Jesus' incarnation, his life and ministry, his suffering and death, his resurrection and ascension, and his promised return. But this knowledge is also spiritual and experiential. It is not sufficient to know the hard, cold facts of the life and death of the Lord. Rather, the knowledge of which Peter speaks applies to God's elect people, who are the beneficiaries of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

This is why Peter characterizes this knowledge as “of God, and of Jesus our Lord.” This knowledge is God's; he is its author. This knowledge is that of Jesus, Jehovah salvation, and of our lord, our ruler and king. What a great and glorious grace and peace are ours in the knowledge of God through Jesus Christ!

Great and Precious Promises: 1:3–4

3. According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue:
4. Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.

Commentators are divided as to whether or not verses 3 and 4 are connected with verses 1 and 2. The textual evidence and the grammar, as well as the thought and meaning, indicate that there is a connection between these verses. Peter expresses this relation by “according as,” which has the sense of “because.” The connection is that grace and peace (v. 2) are multiplied in accordance with or because of God’s divine power. This means that God’s power through Christ is effectual. Grace and peace are the believers’ possession because of God’s power.

There is also a difference of opinion as to whether or not the words “his” and “him” in verse 3 refer to God or to Jesus. Does “his divine power” refer to God or to Christ? Does “the knowledge of him” refer to God or to Christ? The weight of the evidence seems to be on Christ, since these pronouns have “Jesus our Lord” as their antecedent. But which option is correct does not matter greatly, since both God and Jesus Christ are mentioned in verse 2.

The divine power of verse 3 is God’s, as is God’s knowledge. God’s is all divine power and all knowledge, but his power and knowledge are always through Jesus Christ. Christ is the revelation of God, and he reveals his power and knowledge only through