

New Testament Handles

1 Peter

If 1 John was written to those unassured Christian, 1 Peter is written to the wearied Christian. Like 1 John it is referred to as a “catholic” epistle (having nothing to do with the Roman Catholic Church), but using the original meaning of catholic – “general.” In other words, it was not written to a specific first century Church in a certain town, but rather to the church at large – addressing common issues facing the believers in that day.

Though written in a time of rising persecution of Christians, Peter does not frame his words in response to any specific outbreak of hostility, but rather to the basic resistance that Christians have faced from the beginning. Suffering is a major theme (28x), as well as a basic call to hope, perseverance, faith, and obedience in the faithful. Peter actually tells us his own purpose for writing in 5:12 – *“exhorting and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it!”*

And this is the pattern of this letter – exhorting (70 imperatives) – this many commands may seem out of place for folks who are wearied. It seems more like gentle consolations and comforts would be in order. And that might be true if the wearied ones were like soldiers convalescing at a seaside hospital while their wounds healed. But if the Christians to whom he writes are right in the midst of the battle, then direct and plain commands are in order for how they resist discouragement and stand firm against the temptation to give up all hope, when they are so close to victory. This is not time for soft, comforting words – but rather compassionate, strong, truth-filled exhortations to carry on to the finish line.

And so interwoven with the exhorting is a significant dose of “testifying” (declaring the bedrock truths upon which our Christian life and hope is built). Truths about God’s purposes, God’s promises, God’s provisions, and God’s preeminence over our every foe. It is this testifying that made 1 Peter so useful to the early church as they were recognizing and solidifying and systematizing so many core doctrines of the Christian faith.

NT Handles

Stemming from Peter’s purpose, I would like to propose 3 Handles by which we can grasp the overall message of this letter. They come in the form of 3 summary statements that state the 3 basic divisions of his letter.

- 1) 1:1-2:10 – Your identity and inheritance is glorious – fix your hope and life on this.
- 2) 2:11-3:12 – This world is perverse – emulate Christ in every sphere.
- 3) 3:13-5:14 – This world is hostile to Christians – our suffering has a purpose, stand firm through it.

Handle #1 – 1:1-2:10 – Your identity and inheritance is glorious – fix your hope and life on this.

Peter is initially heavy on the testifying – beginning his letter with our great cause for rejoicing and hope – God’s choosing and sanctifying and purifying of us to belong to Jesus Christ (1:1-2).

Followed by a great benediction of God who gave us new life in Christ – and thus a new identity and a new inheritance, like no inheritance on this earth – imperishable, undefiled, and will not fade away reserved in heaven for you (1:3-4). And in addition God is at work through your own faith to protect that inheritance for you until the last day (1:5) – a fact which causes you to not only rejoice, but also to persevere in a proven faith in the midst of “various trials” that distress you (1:6-9).

Not only does this gracious work of God set the tone for the entire letter, but it leads directly to the first series of exhortations in the letter –

1:13 – to FIX your hope on the future grace coming to you at the final revelation of Jesus Christ.

1:14,17 – live HOLY lives in reverence and fear on this earth (considering the price Jesus paid – 1:18-19)

1:22 – LOVE the brethren (considering your common rebirth and inheritance – 1:23)

2:1 – PUT OFF the old ways (considering the endurance of the Word of God – 1:24-25)

2:2-3 – CRAVE God’s Word in order to grow by it (considering the goodness of the Lord – 2:3)

Peter then testifies again of our unique status in this world, compared with those who reject Jesus, the living cornerstone (cornerstone of life). We are living stones, a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, believing in Him we will not be disappointed. As opposed to those who disbelieve, He is a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense, over which they stumble and disobey God’s testimony about Him. And yet they are appointed to this place of disobedience to be used for God’s own unique purposes (see 3rd Handle).

Again he testifies of our glorious place (2:9-10) – chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation, God’s own special people, called out of darkness into His marvelous light, once not a people, now the people of God, had not received mercy, now recipients of divine mercy – all in order to proclaim His excellencies!

This is Peter’s testifying – of the believer’s glorious identity and inheritance.

SO... when we grow weary in the battle, whatever the cause (and we will see a few causes in the next two sections), we are to come back again and again and re-FIX our hope on these precious and inspiring truths.

Handle #2 – 2:11-3:12 – This world is perverse – emulate Christ in every sphere.

Peter begins immediately off of his “testifying” in previous verses with exhortations.

These exhortations are centered in the reality that the world we live in is broken, and thus we are not to take our cues for living from them, but rather from Christ – who Himself lived in this world, and felt the weight of its injustice and sorrows.

This section deals with suffering, not centering its cause in hostility against Christians per se, but in the broken nature of the world that causes even those who are doing what is right to suffer. We would think that if we are good employees, good citizens, good parents, good neighbors, then everything should go well for us. We understand when the wicked have it hard – but it shouldn’t be that way for the righteous. True! But it is. This world is broken and perverse.

And this is why we cannot depend upon our natural reactions to such things, nor respond to such

injustice as we naturally would. We must look to Christ's example. We, now like Him, are "aliens and strangers" in this world (2:11), thus our behavior and responses ought to reflect our true identity and heritage, not our natural identity and heritage. In this way we "live out our faith."

Thus this series of exhortations...

2:11-12 – ABSTAIN from fleshly lusts and BEHAVE excellently (a blessing to others – v. 17)

2:13-16 – SUBMIT to government leaders

2:18-20 – SUBMIT to earthly masters (yes, even to the unreasonable/perverse ones)

This is the example of Jesus Himself (2:21-25). Note the purpose statement in v. 21... The purpose is stated in v. 20 – to patiently endure suffering despite the fact that you do right (NKJV has correct rendering of this verse).

Peter continues with the exhortations...

3:1-6 – SUBMIT to husbands (even who are not obedient to the Word) – note the "hope in God" (v. 5)

3:7 – CONSIDER your wife

3:8-12 – a counter-cultural manifesto of Jesus' characteristics

It is these kind of grief's that can weary us the most – when you are doing everything right, and seemingly for no reason you suffer the brunt of a broken world and broken people. Keep going back to the purpose statement in v. 21... Part of our glorious calling, identity, and inheritance is to emulate Jesus in this broken world, patiently enduring it, while we fix our hope on eternity. This is a life of faith, and God allows this broken and cursed world to continue on so that we might be afflicted in a similar way as His Son – and by the power of His Spirit "prove" (v. 6) the genuineness of our faith – which in reality will result in overwhelming joy for us in the last day – when all our faith struggles have been vindicated.

So do not crater under the pressures you face in doing what is right. Do not revile people or God while sorely distressed. Emulate Christ with the eye of faith and a heart of hope.

Handle #3 - This world is hostile to Christians – our suffering has a purpose, stand firm through it

Immediately Peter dives into a whole new kind of suffering – when you suffer specifically FOR doing what is right (3:13-17).

The response is not to be fear or bitterness, but rather a re-sanctifying of Christ as the Lord in our hearts, and using such responses as an opportunity to explain why will just continue right on doing right even if we suffer for it. Even the hardest heart will still be curious what is going on with you that you would continue right on doing the thing you are suffering for – this gives us a unique opportunity to testify to the hope that is within us.

The exhortations continue...

4:1 – ARM yourself with the same purpose as Christ – living for the will of God (4:2)

4:7 – PRAY

4:8 – LOVE (forgive)

4:9 – Be HOSPITABLE

4:10-11 – SERVE the Church

Then in 4:12 – Peter explains the purpose of such trials – “our testing” – not in order to burden us, but to bless us (4:14). The context of our suffering here goes beyond “for doing right,” but are a particular sharing in the “sufferings of Christ” (4:13), specifically suffering “as a Christian” (4:16).

Our response (4:19) – the same response of Jesus in 2:23 and the wife of 3:7 – *“entrusting our souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.”*

Under such suffering we...

5:6 – HUMBLE ourselves under mighty hand of God (think “protection”)

5:7 – CAST our anxieties on Him (think “care”)

5:8-9 – RESIST / STAND FIRM against the devil’s assault (no matter who his agent is)

And then Peter returns to his Testifying, with his final word of encouragement – 5:10...