

An Initial Glimpse

Acts and the Letters — Understanding I and II Peter Series, Part 2

By Escape the Mustard Tree

Introduction

Last time we got to know the man himself: the fisherman Jesus called and renamed, the disciple who swore he'd never deny his Lord and then did it three times beside a fire of coals, and the restored apostle who stood up on the Day of Pentecost and preached to the crowd in Jerusalem (Acts 2:14). After the council in Jerusalem (Acts 15), Luke's record turns almost entirely to Paul, and Peter all but drops from view. Then, near the end of his life, Peter writes two letters, and he sends them to people Paul had a great deal to do with.

Before we read a word of those letters, two questions need answering: who received them, and what had they already been taught? A letter to people who'd heard the gospel once reads very differently than a letter to people who had sat under years of instruction. Scripture answers both questions, and the answers shape everything Peter says.

I. Five Regions, Five Histories

Peter opens his first letter this way:

“Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To the pilgrims of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia” (1 Pet. 1:1).

A pilgrim is someone living away from home, and the Dispersion means a scattering. Peter is writing to people spread out across five Roman provinces. Together they cover most of what's now Turkey: Pontus and Bithynia along the Black Sea coast to the north, Galatia and Cappadocia across the interior, and Asia in the west on the Aegean Sea. Asia here doesn't mean the continent. It's the Roman province whose chief city was Ephesus.

Those five regions did not hear the word the same way or at the same time, and Scripture tells us more about some than others.

Three of them were represented in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. Luke lists the crowd that heard the apostles speaking in their own languages: “Parthians and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia” (Acts 2:9). That was the day Peter preached, and “those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them” (Acts 2:41). Scripture does not say whether any of them went home to Pontus or Cappadocia afterward, but it isn't hard to imagine that some of the people Peter wrote to near the end of his life first heard him preach that morning in Jerusalem.

Pontus turns up again in a couple Paul met at Corinth: “a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus” (Acts 18:2). He and his wife Priscilla would later take the gifted teacher Apollos aside at Ephesus and explain to him “the way of God more accurately” (Acts 18:26).

Galatia had Paul himself. He went through “the region of Galatia” on his second journey (Acts 16:6), came back on his third, “strengthening all the disciples” (Acts 18:23), and wrote them a whole letter.

Bithynia is the opposite case. Paul tried to go there, “but the Spirit did not permit them” (Acts 16:7), and Scripture never tells us who brought the word to Bithynia.

That leaves Asia, and Asia is where the record runs deepest.

II. Three Years in Asia

On that same second journey, before Paul ever turned toward Bithynia, he and Silas “were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia” (Acts 16:6). Luke does not say why. A few years later, on his third journey, the Lord sent Paul to Ephesus and kept him there the better part of three years (Acts 19:1; 20:31). Here’s what he taught them:

“And he went into the synagogue and spoke boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading concerning the things of the kingdom of God. But when some were hardened and did not believe, but spoke evil of the Way before the multitude, he departed from them and withdrew the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus. And this continued for two years, so that all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:8-10).

Notice the subject. Luke could have summed up those three months a dozen ways, and he chose this one: “reasoning and persuading concerning the things of the kingdom of God” (Acts 19:8). It’s the same subject Jesus Himself taught for the forty days after His resurrection, “speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3), and it’s the subject Luke leaves Paul still teaching in the last verse of Acts, “preaching the kingdom of God” (Acts 28:31). The kingdom is what these Christians in Asia had been taught. So when Peter later writes to them of an “entrance... into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 1:11), he never stops to explain what the kingdom is. He doesn’t have to; Paul had spent three years on it.

And the teaching didn’t stay in Ephesus. “All who dwelt in Asia heard” (Acts 19:10), and even Paul’s enemies said so. The silversmith Demetrius complained to his trade that “not only at Ephesus, but throughout almost all Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away many people” (Acts 19:26). Luke sums it up in one line: “So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed” (Acts 19:20).

III. The Farewell at Miletus

Some time later, hurrying to reach Jerusalem by Pentecost, Paul “decided to sail past Ephesus, so that he would not have to spend time in Asia” (Acts 20:16). He stopped instead at Miletus, a port a short way down the coast, and sent for the elders of the church at Ephesus (Acts 20:17). What he

told them sums up everything he'd given them. He had "kept back nothing that was helpful" (Acts 20:20). He had gone among them "preaching the kingdom of God" (Acts 20:25). And he could say, "I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27).

Then he warned them:

"For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears" (Acts 20:29-31).

Don't miss where the danger comes from. Some will "come in among you," and some will rise up "from among yourselves," but either way they end up inside the flock, and what they bring is teaching: "speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves" (Acts 20:30).

Paul's answer to that danger was the word itself: "So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32). When he finished, "they all wept freely, and fell on Paul's neck and kissed him, sorrowing most of all for the words which he spoke, that they would see his face no more" (Acts 20:37-38).

IV. The Leaven at Work

What Paul warned about at Miletus wasn't new, and it didn't stay a warning. We can watch it at work in the very regions Peter wrote to.

Jesus Himself gave us the word for it. When He told His disciples to "beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees," they thought He was talking about bread (Matt. 16:6-7). He wasn't: "Then they understood that He did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Matt. 16:12). Leaven is teaching that corrupts, and it only takes a little.

Paul had already met it in Galatia, one of Peter's five, years before Miletus. Men had come in pressing the Galatians to be circumcised and keep the law (Gal. 5:2-3; 6:12-13), and Paul wrote to them, "You ran well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? ... A little leaven leavens the whole lump" (Gal. 5:7, 9).

In Asia it came exactly the way Paul had said it would. Years after Miletus, Paul left Timothy at Ephesus "that you may charge some that they teach no other doctrine" (1 Tim. 1:3). By his last letter he could name two of them: "their message will spread like cancer. Hymenaeus and Philetus are of this sort, who have strayed concerning the truth, saying that the resurrection is already past; and they overthrow the faith of some" (2 Tim. 2:17-18).

That same letter carries the saddest line Paul ever wrote about the region: "This you know, that all those in Asia have turned away from me" (2 Tim. 1:15). He does not say why. The verses around it, though, show Paul writing as a prisoner, urging Timothy not to be "ashamed of the testimony of our

Lord, nor of me His prisoner” (2 Tim. 1:8), and thanking God for the one man who “was not ashamed of my chain” (2 Tim. 1:16). False teaching rising from within, and shame and pressure pressing from without: both were at work in Asia at the same time.

When the Lord Jesus Himself addresses the churches of Asia in Revelation, the leaven is still there. Ephesus is commended because “you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars” (Rev. 2:2). Pergamos is rebuked: “you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam” (Rev. 2:14). Thyatira is rebuked for something worse: “you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants” (Rev. 2:20). All three cities lie in the province of Asia. And look at the wording: “you have there,” “you allow.” Every time, the false teacher is inside the assembly, just as Paul said at Miletus.

This is the leaven Jesus warned about, and He told us how far it would go: “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened” (Matt. 13:33). Peter tells these same readers to expect it right to the end: “scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts” (2 Pet. 3:3). We’ll trace it across the whole New Testament when we reach the second chapter of 2 Peter, where Peter spends real time on these men and says something about them that’s easy to read past. They were “denying the Lord who bought them” (2 Pet. 2:1).

V. What Kind of Letter?

So put yourself in Peter’s place. These Christians had heard the coming kingdom preached for years. They had been given “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). They’d been warned with tears about men who would rise up among them, and those men were already rising. Trouble was coming from outside as well. Peter warns them of “the fiery trial which is to try you” (1 Pet. 4:12) and of being “reproached for the name of Christ” (1 Pet. 4:14). He does not name its source; history points to the growing hostility of Rome under Nero.

What kind of letter would you write to people like that? You wouldn’t write them a tract on how to be saved. You’d write the kind of letter Peter wrote. In the first one he reminds them that God “has begotten us again to a living hope ... to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you” (1 Pet. 1:3-4), and he names where their faith is headed: “receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls” (1 Pet. 1:9). He also mentions that the gospel had already come to them “through those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven” (1 Pet. 1:12). Others had done that work before Peter ever wrote.

In the second letter he says outright what we’ve spent this whole message finding out: “I will not be negligent to remind you always of these things, though you know and are established in the present truth” (2 Pet. 1:12). And near the close: “Beloved, I now write to you this second epistle (in both of which I stir up your pure minds by way of reminder)” (2 Pet. 3:1). In both of which: the two letters went to the same people, and both were written as reminders. Peter even points them back to the man who had taught so many of them, “our beloved brother Paul,” who “has written to you” (2 Pet. 3:15), and he sets Paul’s letters alongside “the rest of the Scriptures” (2 Pet. 3:16).

Applying “An Initial Glimpse”

Peter’s readers were not beginners. They had been taught the coming kingdom, warned about the leaven, and now reminded again by an apostle near the end of his life. The danger was still real for them. Being well taught gave them no immunity; it gave them a responsibility. Peter says so himself in the verses right after he names Paul:

“You therefore, beloved, since you know this beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen” (2 Pet. 3:17-18).

“Since you know this beforehand” fits us too. We have now seen where the leaven comes from and where it’s headed. Knowing it ahead of time doesn’t guard anyone by itself. Peter’s answer is to keep growing, in the grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus, so that we aren’t led away by teaching that comes from inside the room.

Looking Ahead

Next time we open the first letter itself: the living hope, the inheritance incorruptible and undefiled, and the “salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” that Peter sets before these pilgrims from his very first lines (1 Pet. 1:3-5).

Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.