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BIBLE BOOK OF THE MONTH – I PETER

Gordon H. Clark

Some people make it a custom to read the Bible through once a year. It is an excellent custom. What would they think if they were asked to spend a whole year on one short epistle, such as 1 Peter? One might imagine that they would think 1 Peter is a little short even for a book of the month – in a year its contents could be exhausted many times over.

At first sight this would seem to be so, for there is much in 1 Peter that is easily understood. One of its chief themes is obedience, and what it commands is clear and plain. For example, it tells us to be sober (1:13 and 4:7); it tells us to put away all malice, envy, and slander (2:1); it tells wives to be good wives and husbands to be good husbands (3:1, 7); and it exhorts the elders to tend the flock of God (5:2). All this is easily understood. It may be hard to put all this into practice, but it is perfectly easy to understand what it means.

Then, too, within the first month one would come to recognize its outline and paragraph divisions.

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| 1:1-2 | Address and salutation |
| 1:3-12 | God's great mercy in salvation – the basis of the following exhortations. |
| 1:13-2:10 | General exhortation to hope and holiness. |
| 2:11-4:6 | Particular exhortations relative to special situations |
| 4:7-5:11 | (a) Relations among Christians
(b) Relations between Christians and unbelievers
(Here Peter warns and advises the people about the persecutions that they must shortly face; and it may be that this section is the immediate purpose of writing the epistle.)
(c) Further relations among Christians. |
| 5:12-14 | Concluding paragraph. |

But this first month of study is only a survey; it does not exhaust the book. In a second month other interesting bits of information would come to light. For example, one would note that the epistle was sent to areas in which the Apostle Paul had never preached, and that it is addressed mainly to Jewish, rather than to Gentile, Christians – the elect sojourners of the Dispersion (1:1). For this reason Peter makes a large use of the Old Testament. And what does he teach about the Old Testament? Does he teach that its lessons no longer apply in this new age? What relation is there between the Old and the New Testament?

Then, too, it will be seen that Peter wrote the epistle from Babylon (5:13). Is this the literal Babylon on the Euphrates? Then Peter must have traveled widely in the east. Or is Babylon a symbolic word for Rome, as it is in Revelation? And if it is, would that show that Peter was the first bishop of Rome, the first Pope? Can the reader, out of the epistle itself, produce evidence, even if not conclusive evidence, as to which city is really meant? And does the rest of the New Testament in its incidental references to Peter's whereabouts prove or disprove the idea that he lived in Rome for twenty-five years? All these and other interesting questions would come to light in a second month of study.

Before the third month had begun, the reader, if he pondered some of these questions, especially those relating to the Old Testament, would find some parts of 1 Peter are not so easy as he had first thought. There is that section about Christ's preaching to the spirits in prison (3:19-20). Does that mean that Christ descended into Hell and preached the Gospel to the lost? Will the lost have another chance of salvation? Or does it mean that there is a purgatory from which Christ took the Old Testament saints into Heaven? And why does Peter mention Noah and the flood in this connection? And how can the flood be an illustration of baptism? With these puzzling questions in mind the faithful reader may well conclude that Peter has written enough material to keep him busy even for an entire year.

This conclusion will be reinforced by the realization that the second main theme of the epistle is election. Peter puts the idea of election into his first verse, though the King James version delays it until the second; but in any case the first two verses contain the double theme: elect unto obedience. The idea of election, though not always the word itself, occurs about a dozen times in the five short chapters. It is a very important idea for Peter; it is an important idea throughout the Bible; and though many Christians are ignorant of it, and though many ministers neglect to preach it, the doctrine of God's sovereign election is a very important one for Christians today.

As the year of study progresses, the love of God's word sees more and more implications in Peter's command: Desire the sincere milk of the word that ye may grow thereby (2:2). He will be more ready to give an answer to every man that asketh a reason for the hope that is in him (3:15). But it is

altogether likely that he will be convinced of his small progress in obeying the command: Be ye holy, for I am holy (1:16). And probably he will not be impressed with his success as a husband, a wife, a servant, or an elder. But, if he faces trouble, he can confidently rely on Peter's inspired promise: Cast all your care upon Him, for He careth for you (5:7).

The year comes to an end. The Christian has read the epistle many times. He has pondered and puzzled and prayed. And now he knows for a surety that a short epistle cannot be exhausted even in a life time. But still it is a good custom to read the whole Bible, all the way through, in a year.