

Stand firm

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[0:00] It does seem a little old-fashioned, doesn't it, this hymn to 21st century Christians.! When Peter wrote his letter, it wasn't nearly such an old story.

! And yet already it seemed they were beginning to forget it. What do we know about the letter to Peter?

It was probably written around AD 67 or 68, shortly before Peter's death, and of course not long before the destruction of Jerusalem.

We know that Peter realised he was facing death, he tells us that in verses 14 and 15 of the first chapter. Some take the reference to a dark place in verse 19 to suggest that he was in prison somewhere.

Tradition says that he died in Rome, whatever the truth of that, certainly he knew that his death was close. These are his last words, his last will and testament, if you like, to the scattered disciples.

[1:12] And what is the theme of it? Well, Peter didn't start with the name Peter, did he? He started with the name Simon. And he started impulsive.

Act first, think later. Simon. But Jesus had said to him, you are Peter the rock. And Peter wants those who read his letter to become Peters like him.

He wants them to become the rock. He wants them not to lose their stability, as the English Standard Version translates, chapter 3, verse 17.

So this is his second and final letter. So what does he have to say to us?

How does Peter describe himself? He could have quite legitimately described himself as a personal friend of the Lord Jesus. He was that.

[2:20] He certainly claims to have known Jesus very well. You see that in verse 16. He was in some ways a privileged friend.

He was one of the ones that Jesus took to the mountain of transfiguration. But how does he refer to himself in verse 1? First of all, he says he's a bondservant.

That's what the Greek word means there. A slave, really. One who obeys his master's will rather than his own. And he describes himself as an apostle.

Now we, of course, think of an apostle as being a kind of important person. And in a sense that's true. But, of course, what the word apostle really means is a person who is sent on a task.

And not a task of his own bat, as we say. Not of his own authority. But one who is sent on a task for his master.

[3:20] That's how Peter describes himself as a bondservant and an apostle. One whose purpose is to do the will of his master, the Lord Jesus. Now his task, he knows, is nearly completed.

But, verse 12 suggests, he wants to ensure that he's not laboured in vain. And he wants to reassure those who are going to follow him that their faith is not somehow second-hand, second-rate.

And so that's what he says in verse 1, isn't it? From the apostles to the humblest, newest believer, each has the same status and standing.

That of a sinner declared righteous by grace. In the kingdom of heaven there are no second-class citizens. The pundits are telling us now this week, aren't we, that we have a ruling elite and disenfranchised masses.

That's their take on the events of the week. Where there is no ruling elite and disenfranchised masses in the kingdom of heaven.

[4:30] In the kingdom of Jesus. All are one in Christ Jesus. And so Peter first wants to assure them of that. Your faith, you may not have known Jesus personally as I did, says Peter, but your faith is in no way second-rate or second-hand.

It is exactly the same value as mine. Verse 3, Peter gives them his apostolic blessing. But what's the content of that blessing?

What is the legacy he wants to hand down to them? I say it's in a sense his last will and testament. And he's leaving a legacy. To his hearers and his readers. What is that legacy?

Well in short of course it's the grace and peace that comes from the knowledge of God through Jesus. But Peter goes to expand on this knowledge. And he does so, if you look, by four contrast. And we'll look at these, each of these. First of all, he tells them they have everything. But they need to add to their faith. Secondly, he tells them their election is sure.

[5:41] But they need to confirm it. Thirdly, he tells them that they know these things. But they need to be reminded. And fourthly, he says our testimony is true.

But you have the testimony of the prophets also. So in case you get worried about the clock, I should say I'm going to spend most of the time on the first one of those. But we will look at all four of these.

So what is it he tells us first of all?

There's always someone waiting to sell you an upgrade, isn't there? You love your old car, but the new one is bigger and faster and at the same time safer and more economical.

Up to now, you were happy with your smartphone, weren't you? But now there's a newer, faster, better model around. Your phone is so last year.

[6:48] Be cool and upgrade it. But Peter wants us to be clear that as far as the gospel is concerned, there is no upgrade.

Whatever the competition tries to tell you, and he's going to go on in the next chapter to see what the competition is selling. But no, says Peter, there is no upgrade.

There's nothing available. The current model has all the features you could possibly want. Verse 3. And just to make the point, he lists them for us, doesn't he? He says you have the knowledge of Jesus.

You have the great and precious promises of God. You are partakers of the divine nature. And you escape from the world's corruption.

What better gospel could there possibly be? I don't know whether you noticed the first three of these are Trinitarian. Son, Father, and Spirit.

[7:48] The knowledge of Jesus. The promise of God. And partakers of the divine nature. Seems he means here by the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. They're given a part in the divine nature through the Spirit.

And notice this is not the false claim to be gods that Satan offered Adam. And the world continually offers each of us. Instead, it's the pouring out of the Spirit.

And through him, fellowship with the true God. So says Peter, no upgrade is possible. We already have everything.

We have it all. This is the faith. This is the gospel. This is the truth.

To look anywhere else would just be a step backwards. So you have the gospel.

[8:49] The best gospel there could possibly be. You don't need an upgrade. But that doesn't mean to say you can't make better use of the model you've got. As you might say, haven't you downloaded the apps that are really useful?

They're there, as it were, on the app store waiting for you. But you need to put them to use. What do we really need to increase our spiritual productivity?

That's what he's talking about, isn't it, in verse 8. How are you going to be fruitful and productive in your knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ? What apps do you need to increase your productivity?

That's one of the search terms, if you ever look on these app stores. Productivity apps, they talk about. Well, it's productivity apps that we're talking about here, in a sense. What do we need to make our faith effective?

And what, by contrast, is just hype and froth? So Peter gives us his list of the really useful stuff. And in the next chapter, and we'll look at this next week, he comes on to the malware, as it were, the viruses, the fishes, the Trojans.

[9:56] But this week, he's giving us the editor's pick. What's the really useful stuff? And that's what Peter is about to tell us.

Not surprisingly, perhaps there are seven. We might have expected that, the divine number. The number of wholeness, of completeness, of roundedness. There are seven, but there is a logical structure to it.

The first two lay the foundation. The middle three relate to individual behavior. And the last two relate to the community.

And the idea is one of wholeness. It's not that you get familiar with one and then you move on to the next one. Of course, it's not a Jacob's ladder. You need all of these.

As it's clear from verse 8. If you want to be productive, you need all of these. And you need to be practicing, continually practicing their use.

[10:59] So let's look through this list and see what he says it is that we really need. The first one is variously translated virtue or goodness.

And the word means a state of moral integrity. What's the opposite of goodness? Well, it's badness or rottenness, isn't it?

Think of a piece of fruit. It looks fine on the outside until you bite into it. And then you find that inside it's full of maggots and corruption. Or think of a wooden floorboard.

Looks perfectly good. Looks perfectly sound. And then you step on it and it just crumbles and you fall through. Peter starts by saying the virtues that are to follow.

And I'll use the term virtue. Again, that sounds like an old-fashioned word, doesn't it? But I'm going to use it. The virtues that follow are not to be put on the outside like a mask.

[12:05] But to pervade the whole character of the believer. That's what Peter is asking for here. Goodness, virtue, integrity, wholeness, wholesomeness.

That these other things should be all the way through. Not just something painted on the outside. But something that runs all the way through. And then he talks about knowledge.

What does he mean by knowledge here? Well, certainly not just the ability to recite facts. When the New Testament talks about knowledge, it means an intimate understanding and wisdom.

But still, it is a mind thing. Without a rounded knowledge of the truth, you are very much prey, aren't you, to the latest fashion or the latest scam.

Knowledge is what keeps your internal model of the world in tune with reality. We all have a view of the world inside us.

[13:09] And that relates somehow to the real world around us. And it is knowledge that keeps that model inside us healthy.

That helps us to understand the world properly. And not to misunderstand it. So those are the foundation. Integrity, goodness, virtue and knowledge.

And Peter then goes on to describe three aspects of behavior. And again, they all sound rather old-fashioned and rather unpopular, don't they?

Self-control is particularly unpopular today, I think it's fair to say. But it is an important one. If we don't achieve mastery over our desires and passions, they're likely to enslave or destroy us.

That's what Peter's getting at. And it's not just ourselves they'll destroy either. But they'll destroy our families, our physical families, and our Christian families, our Christian brothers and sisters.

[14:16] If we don't have self-control, then we're a danger to both ourselves and those around us. Like a madman driving a car.

It's like driving a car when you're drunk. The only question is whether you'll kill yourself or somebody else. It includes sexual self-control, but I don't think it's limited to it.

Greed and gluttony can be just as deadly sins as sexual immorality. It's not wrong, I think, to desire things.

But it is disastrous if we let desire enslave us. Christians can have no sympathy with a slogan, if it feels good, do it. We need to master ourselves.

We need self-control. The next one in the list isn't that glamorous either. It's the very opposite of our society's insistence on instant gratification.

[15:22] Isn't that true? If we're not instantly getting what we want, it's somebody else's fault, and it's their duty to provide it for us. There's no reason for us to make an effort.

Again, you can translate the word in different ways. Sometimes some versions translate it perseverance. Others translate it patience. But patience is not passive patience here. It's not resignation. It's that patience that doesn't rush a task to get it finished. That patience that sticks at the job until it's completed properly. It's that patience that refuses to be discouraged in the face of setbacks or slow progress. Stickability, we sometimes call it.

Perseverance. We need that in the Christian life. As I say, when Peter wrote, it wasn't that old a story.

[16:28] And yet already they were getting impatient. And we come on to that in chapter 3. And the next one is kind of a lifestyle thing.

You need godliness. That sounds old-fashioned as well, doesn't it? Godliness isn't some flashy, holier-than-thou attitude that puts others down.

Godliness is a lifestyle. It's not the voice of that Pharisee who says, Lord, I thank you that I'm not like other men.

Godliness is a lifestyle, a daily conduct that takes God seriously. It's reverence. It's reverence. It's piety.

In fact, it's that integrity that Peter started with made visible. It's that integrity, that wholeness put into practice. In God there is no darkness.

[17:46] And godliness should be clear and transparent. We need to be godly. We need to be serious. We need to tell that story, sometimes in earnest tones and grave.

Remember, I'm the sinner whom Jesus came to save. And finally, then, we have the virtues of family and community.

I didn't change the slide. I meant to change it, actually, to say, I said family, but I think a better word, actually, is relational. We have the virtues that affect our relations with one another.

And you'll notice that there are two of them. First of all, the first one is, well, the Greek word is Philadelphia. It means brotherly kindness, brotherly love, concern for one another, family feeling. And notice that Peter does include it in his list. He is going to go on and talk about love, agape, but he says we need brotherly love too. Brotherly kindness is that family love that derives from a common interest, a common welfare, the understanding that we're in this together.

[19:08] And therefore, we ought to be supporting one another, not competing for attention, as some were doing in the churches. Beware of sibling rivalry in our churches.

That can cause terrible damage. The church family shares a common welfare. If one suffers, all suffer. If one is successful, all rejoice.

We are called to rejoice with those who rejoice and to mourn with those who mourn. Family feeling. Philadelphia.

And then finally, we have agape. Love in its purest form. Its most powerful form. Love which is unconditional. Which is giving.

Which is sacrificial. Brotherly love in its nature is essentially a shared thing. But you can display this love, this unconditional love, on your own.

[20:18] And yet, that very fact, paradoxically, is what makes it the most communal. The most relational. Because while you can show love yourself, you've got to have someone to show it to.

Love has to have an object. You can't just love nothing. That's just emotional, well, emotional claptrap, honestly. Just saying, you know, if you're happy and you know it, clap your hands, perhaps.

But you've got to love somebody. You've got to love something. And it's that unconditional love that is, brothers and sisters, we need to have for one another.

That is the most powerful form. If we need to stand firm. If we need to be productive. These are the things we need.

As Paul points out in 1 Corinthians 13. It is this kind of love that binds the church together. So, says Peter, do you feel you're not making progress?

[21:25] Do you feel you need a spiritual boost? Do you feel you need encouragement? Well, who doesn't? But, says Peter, don't look for a new gospel.

Don't even look for an enhanced version of the one you have. Just make use of what you have already. Just keep your eyes, spiritual eyes open.

Be clear-sighted. He tells us that. Uses that metaphor, doesn't he, in verse 7. Don't be short-sighted. And blind. Have a clear view of things.

These are the things that will make us effective, productive in the spiritual life. And I don't want to labour the point. But let me just point out what isn't on this list.

So many of the spiritual must-haves are always being told of the keys to success. But Peter says, no, the key things, the really useful stuff, are these.

[22:31] Just old-fashioned holiness. Everything else is short-sighted and forgetful. So then Peter moves on in this chapter to answer some objections.

And to clear up some possible confusion. Well, hang on a minute, Peter. We were told that we were called by God.

We were elect. You told us that. But now you're telling us that you need to be holy. Peter, isn't this anti-grace?

Are you now coming along with a gospel of salvation by works? No, not at all, says Peter. It is demonstrating that our calling is genuine.

Verse 10. These virtues aren't the cause of our salvation, but they are the evidence for it. If they're not present, we rightly could be suspicious.

[23:42] Whether our calling and election is sure. Do I need assurance? And of course, Calvinist, Reformed Christians often struggle with this.

William Cooper did, of course. What if I'm not elect? Perhaps I'm not elect. I feel my own sinfulness so strongly. Can I really believe that God can love me?

And that's another way that our feet can slip. And we can be put off. Peter's answer is here. Start with faith.

Believe God's promises, but believe them and put them into practice. And you'll find it works. You will find that the gospel really does change lives.

Churches do work. Surprisingly well in most cases. There is genuine love in genuine churches.

[24:54] Put it into practice. That's the way. If you're asking this question, Am I elect? Am I chosen? Are you relying on the promises of God?

And putting them into practice? That's the way of assurance. That's the way to trust. It's not because of these things that we gain the eternal kingdom.

But it is the pathway that we travel to get there. I've been thinking with Phil, haven't we, about walking. This morning in our morning meetings. And you don't walk randomly, do you?

You walk in order to get somewhere. And it is walking along this pathway that takes us to the heavenly city, the eternal city.

Let's not be antinomians. Let's remind ourselves of what Hebrews says, that without holiness, no one will see the Lord. This is not anti-grace.

[25:59] It's not anti-election at all. The evidence of our election is that we are putting these things into practice. And if we're not, then indeed, we might have some cause for worry.

But don't, on the other hand, think that God is unable to save. Trust his promises. Don't trust in the holiness that we have. Trust in the promises of God.

And see how they're working out in our hearts and in our communities. And that will confirm your calling and election. Now another objection and another paradox.

You know these things already, says Peter. But you need to be reminded of them. We have another objection and another therefore in verse 12.

Notice in verse 10 and 11 he used therefore. And in verse 12 he used therefore. These follow from what he said before. The argument, it's one argument. We have another therefore in verse 12.

[27:11] What's the objection in this case? Well, it's really going back to in some ways to what he's already said. Yep, yep, Peter. We know this. We've heard this before, Peter.

Tell us something new, please. We want something new. We don't see the eternal kingdom made visible yet. What is the next step? And I come back to that hymn that we sung.

Tell me the story often, for I forget so soon. The early dew of morning is passed away at noon. How easily we get distracted. The next step, says Peter, is to refocus on the essentials.

It's not so much that these truths get forgotten as they get overlaid. Something else attracts our attention, doesn't it? We're so easily distracted.

Either by something glittering and shiny that we want to reach for, or by something that scares us and turns us aside.

[28:17] Whether it's Vanity Fair and By Path Meda, or whether it's the Chained Lions. They both cause us to forget the pilgrimage we started on.

It's not so much that we forget these things, but they get overlaid for us. Something else attracts our attention, and we begin to look elsewhere, then, for spiritual success. Or perhaps we just lose interest in the pilgrimage altogether.

So Peter here is using his final message to remind them of what is really important. And he's making provision to ensure that after his death, they will still be reminded.

He knows he's going to be taken from them soon. And he wants to make extra sure that they won't forget. He tells us he's making provision that after his death they will still be reminded.

He doesn't actually specify what that is. But I would suggest, perhaps, it's two things. One is the committing of this very message to paper, so that it can be read after his death.

[29:29] And perhaps also he has in mind the teachers who would follow after him, the ones who would teach this word. Because certainly in the next chapter, he's going to go on to talk about what happens when you don't have sound teachers.

Peter is not going to let this go. He's going. But he wants his next generation that followed him. And he wants us 2,000 years later, also, not to forget these things.

He'll not allow his hearers and his readers such as ourselves to forget. Yet another objection, perhaps.

Well, we might say, thank you for sharing that, Peter. We really value your insights. But of course, that is just your opinion.

We do need to consider what others have to say as well. We do need to listen to other people's insights. I mean, everybody has the right insight. Everybody has something to contribute to this gospel.

[30:46] And you've told us that our faith is of equal value to yours. So surely we need to make a contribution as well, don't we, to the gospel? No, not at all, says Peter.

That's completely to misunderstand it. Why is that? Because, says Peter, it isn't just my personal opinion. In fact, the only voices that are worth listening to are the ones that agree with me.

And he does switch to the plural here. You may have noticed that. Why is that? It's because I and the other apostles saw it with our own eyes.

It's not my testimony you're disputing, but that of God himself. And we have here, clearly, that reference to what we call the transfiguration, that time in Matthew 17, where Jesus took Peter, James, and John up a mountain, and where Moses and Elijah appeared to them.

But we don't, actually, we didn't hear, or they didn't hear what Moses and Elijah said. The words God spoke, then, are the words that are repeated here in verse 17.

[31:58] This is my son, listen to him. These reports are most certainly not made-up stuff. I mean, if you were going to make up a fairy story, then surely you'd do a better job of it than this, wouldn't you?

But this is not made-up stuff to draw in the gullible. Faith isn't believing six impossible things before breakfast.

It's simply following the evidence, cross-examining the witnesses. And because, says Peter, I'm not going to be around much longer, I'm leaving you my testimony.

So in 30 years, or in 100 years, or 1,000 years, or even 2,000 years, you can still read my testimony, and the testimony of the other apostles, those who were witnesses.

But perhaps even the apostolic testimony isn't enough for you. Then you could look at what the Old Testament prophets had to say. And you need to be clear, that wasn't made-up stuff either.

[33:12] Peter reminds us that these words of prophecy in the Old Testament came from God as well, came through the Holy Spirit. And I think he's maybe hinting that sometimes the prophets themselves may have not fully understood the implications of their message.

Perhaps that's what he's getting at in verse 20. But if you need extra illumination, if even the testimony of the apostles isn't enough, then look to the prophets.

Their message is exactly the same. They all point to Jesus and his righteousness. A word established by many witnesses, by many testimonies.

And this is just one of them. But we have many more recorded for us. So Peter will have none of this, it's just your opinion business. And neither should we.

This is the authentic gospel. It's precious to Peter and it's equally precious to us. A girl got involved this morning, isn't he, in talking about TV programs and people started to look blank.

[34:30] I'm going to talk about a TV program as well. Have you ever seen the TV program Fake Britain? Yes. Yes. Well worth watching actually. It's quite a good program.

It's a warning program. It warns us to beware of all limitations. And how does it do that? Well it does it by pointing out, you know, you get what you pay for in one sense.

At best the fake product is of inferior quality. At best other forms of the gospel are perversions, are not as good as the gospel that Peter is talking about.

More often than not the fake is absolutely useless. And sometimes, and you do see some cases of this on that TV program, sometimes the fake can be downright lethal.

And so Peter warns us here to beware of all limitations. Listen to the testimony. Make sure that the gospel you have is not the fake.

[35:54] Make sure it's authentic. And as I say in the next chapter, he's going to go on to describe some of the fakes, some of the imitations. But here he reminds us the light shines clear in a dark place.

The testimony illuminates us. We say like that blind man, once I was blind but now I can see. Once I was feeding around in the dark.

But the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ means we can see. That's another quote you get nowadays, isn't it? It's good to be in the presence of people seeking the truth but avoid people who think they've found it.

Well, let's not be intimidated by that kind of thinking. Let us say that the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is the truth. Accept no fakes, accept no imitations because they're very liable to kill you. But the light of the gospel shines clear. So what should we make of this message? It does all sound a bit old hat, doesn't it? Shouldn't we be catching up on the latest theological or philosophical debate?

[37:18] Well, perhaps that's not your thing. Perhaps we need to make our services more entertaining or professional. Perhaps we need to get some first-rate musicians in. We need to perhaps commission some new songs from the best musicians.

Or we could get into social action and politics. Or we could advertise healings and train people up in TSM is the latest acronym. If you haven't come across it yet, training in supernatural ministry.

That's what it stands for. That's the latest buzzword. What should we say to that? Now don't get me wrong. I spent my working life in education.

I believe that education is always good. The word philosopher means a lover of wisdom and you can hardly argue with that, can you? one can hardly object to that.

And certainly as we looked when we looked into the Psalms, we see that music is a gift given us to enable us to praise God. And those Old Testament musicians, the Sons of Korah and the Asaph division, we're expert musicians.

[38:32] It's not that we need to be amateur and sort of boring in our music as William Booth put it. Why should the devil have all the best

tunes? But that's not what's central to our message.

Psalms remember our prophecy set to music. It's the prophecy bit that is the key. And without a doubt we need to show the love of Christ in practical ways.

we need to remember the special love that God has for the stranger, the orphan and the widow.

And I hope you do give some of your worldly wealth to those who are in need.

I hope you thought about that and are seriously ready to do that through Tear Fund or City Mission or whatever organisation you may wish to do that. I hope you do that.

But that's not the crucial thing. that's not the central thing. Yes God has love for the stranger, the orphan and the widow. But that crucial love is the love that is shown through Christ Jesus.

[39:46] And what about these latest buzzwords as I say there's things like training in supernatural ministry and these other things. I'm going to be in trouble now when this gets on the recording. I'm going to get emails from people as I expect but we shall see.

What should we say to that? Well let's be careful again. It would be very foolish indeed wouldn't it to seek power anywhere else than from the Holy Spirit.

Without me says Jesus you can do nothing. but it is also true that power needs to be tempered with wisdom because the Lord Jesus is wisdom.

The Spirit is the spirit of wisdom. Once these things become the focus they may be good things in themselves but once they become the focus once they become ends in themselves then in fact they become hollow and false.

They become fake. Where should our effort be directed first? Where should our focus be if we want to be productive in the Christian life?

[41:08] And that is what Peter is talking about here. He says if you want to be productive in the Christian life where do you want to put your effort in? Well that verse I quoted earlier from Hebrews reminds us make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy.

Without holiness no one will see the Lord. And of course that holiness will flow over into love for our neighbours. It will flow over into singing God's praises.

And as we partake in the divine nature through the Holy Spirit we do indeed want to see the power of that spirit made manifest amongst us in the church where also people are going to see the power of the Holy Spirit.

It is the power of the Holy Spirit which makes men and women holy that is the key that gives us these things gives us love brotherly affection makes us the same all through not just bearing a mask.

Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy without holiness no one will see God and Peter's message is the same if we want to see the Lord we want others to see the Lord then we need to open we might say another app in fact we need to open the maps app we need clear directions and a good plan of the way and if it's a good app it will tell us where the delays and dangers are as well won't it Jesus is the way and the way of Jesus is the way of practical down to earth holiness the way of brotherly affection and unconditional love the way that does care for the orphans and the widow and the stranger that shows love to those who are in need but it is not our love but the love spread aboard through Christ Jesus and that's the way our calling is authenticated we live in a dangerous world and Peter is going to go on to describe some of it for us

[43:24] I think I will quote what Maria said before the service actually says we don't need more panic at the moment do we but I think that's true is it sensible to go on and describe some of those things that Peter is going to the dangers he's going to describe next week well I think it is I think we need to do it but let's not panic let's put our faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ let's follow the pathway that Jesus has pioneered for us we will never get tripped up let's make our motto that again I'll quote from that hymn of Arabella Hankey tell me the old old story Christ Jesus makes you whole wholeness is what this passage is about and it is the wholeness that we have through Christ Jesus so let's remind ourselves of that

I won't make you sing tell me the old old story again I'm tempted to but tell me that I tell me that I
can't that I tell me that I that I