An Incredible Faith
2 Peter 1:1-2

Today we're starting our new series in Peter's second letter. And we're going to look at the first two verses of the passage read to us earlier.

Now yesterday was Wilson and Anne-Lize's wedding, which was wonderful. But several years ago, when I was a brand new pastor here, Su and I were guests at another wedding. And at the dinner afterwards we were picked to take part in one of the games: *How well do you know your wife?* And Su was sent out of the room, while I was asked questions about her. And I still remember one of the questions: how many pairs of shoes does Su own?

And I'm sat there thinking, 'I don't know! Is it 4 or 5? There's her black pair and the blue pair, and I think she has a brown pair, and then there are her sports trainers. So that's 4, oh yes, and her hiking books. Five! Five pairs.' And the guy sat next to me looks at me like I'm an idiot, leans over and says, 'you clearly do not know your wife.'

And then they call Su back in and ask her, 'how many pairs of shoes do you own?' And she goes, 'well, counting my hiking boots… 5.' And the guy next to me turns and says, 'your wife only has 5 pairs of shoes?! Mine has 25… and counting'. And I'm thinking, 25??… why would you have 25 pairs of shoes?

And as I sat there, something dawned on me. I realised that I did know my wife - but I clearly did not know his.

Now why tell you that? Because one of the major themes in this letter is *knowledge*. Look at v2, 'the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.' That's how it starts. But it ends, the very last verse of the letter: 'Grow in the grace *and knowledge* of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ' (3:18). So knowing God is like the book ends to this letter, and in between, Peter keeps on bringing it up.

Which presents a challenge to our current culture, doesn't it? Because someone might say, 'well, I don't really believe you can *know* God like that, not *personally*, I prefer to think of God as the Universal Consciousness, or the Great Cloud of Unknowing.' And maybe that's you: you're a mystic, or a pantheist. God's everywhere… and nowhere. So how could you *know* him?

Or maybe you're a rationalist, and you're agnostic or atheist - 'Well, I don't think there is a god so how *could* you know him? And anyway, I wouldn't believe God existed unless I could empirically *prove* it. I'd want the facts and the figures.' Or you could be a rationalist but a *religious* one. Maybe you were brought up in a religious family, or have studied philosophy or theology, and you know *about* God, you could debate at length about his existence and nature, but like the agnostic, your knowledge, your interest, is with facts and figures, you don't know *Him*.

Well, as we're going to see as we go through this letter, Peter says there is a God, and you can know him, and know him personally, like a husband knows his wife, and you can know that you know.

And when you do, Peter says, it has a profound effect on your life. We're going to look at three things: An Incredible Faith, A Doubted Faith and the Ground for Faith.

An Incredible Faith
Look at v1, 'Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ.' So this is Peter, one of the original twelve disciples, who's writing. And in chapter 3 he says that 'this is now *the second letter* that I am

writing to you' (v1). Which means that the people he's writing to are probably the same as those addressed in 1st Peter - early Christians living in what is now modern day Turkey.

And Peter's writing because, v14, 'I know that the putting off of my body will be soon.' So, he's probably imprisoned in Rome and his execution is drawing near. How would that focus your mind? If you knew you had one last letter to write, what would you write? Well, this is what Peter wrote.

And look how he introduces himself: *Simeon Peter*.

And just like a crater tells you an asteroid hit, so Peter's name carries the marks of the impact that knowing Christ has had on his life. Simeon, Simon, was the name his parents gave him, it was who he *was*. Peter, the Rock, was the name Christ gave him: 'and on this rock I will build my church.' 'This is what you *will* be Simon… Peter.' A man transformed by Christ.

I want to ask you: does your life bear the marks of such an encounter? Does your character? Your world-view? The way you use your gifts and resources? Because Peter, with the whole of the New Testament says, it can!

You see, think what Peter knew about Jesus. One day while Peter was working on a beach in Galilee, he'd heard Jesus call him to follow, and he'd followed. On another day, he'd watched Jesus standing beside the bed of his sick mother-in-law and command a fever to leave her and he'd seen her instantly cured. He'd been in the boat when Jesus told him to put the nets down, and despite knowing there was no point, Peter had done it. And as the net was overwhelmed with fish, Peter was overwhelmed by Jesus, and his own unworthiness, to the point of begging Jesus to leave him. And he'd been in the boat when the storm came up, knowing their lives were going down with the boat, only to watch as Jesus commanded the storm to stop. And if Peter had been afraid in the storm he was terrified in the calm. Because who was this man?

And he'd heard Jesus' teaching and seen lepers healed and paralysed people walk, and demons flee, and he'd seen a dead girl raised up, as Jesus said to her, 'little girl, honey, it's morning, time to wake up!' - as if death was just a passing night and dawn was coming.

And on the night Jesus was betrayed, Peter had watched him plead with God to take the cup from him. And he'd stood in the courtyard as Jesus was on trial, and three times denied he knew anything about him, and then felt Jesus' gaze upon him as Jesus looked through a window at him, and as the cock crowed he fled, broken.

And he'd seen Jesus crucified, and heard him forgive those who did it, and he watched him die. But then, on Sunday morning, he'd seen him alive, speaking words of peace, and watched him eat a fish of all things, to prove he really was alive.

And so if Simon Peter's life had already been turned on its head by knowing Christ, now it would never be the same again.

And yet, of all the events he could have recounted, the one Peter mentions in this letter is Jesus' transfiguration: v16-18, 'we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honour and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," we ourselves heard this very voice.'

Why pick that one? Because it told him, this is who Jesus really is. This man you've sailed with and walked with; this man you've listened to and watched and know, is no mere man.

Wouldn't you like to have experienced what Peter experienced? Maybe you're examining Christianity and wondering, is there anything in this or not? Or maybe you're already a Christian but struggling with doubts, and you hear about Peter and think, 'If I could have experienced what he experienced it sure would make it easier to believe.'

Except, look how Peter addresses his readers: v1, 'To those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours.'

Now, Peter's not writing to a group of fellow apostles, or even a bunch of mega-church pastors. He's writing to men and women who had never even owned a Bible, let alone seen Jesus, normal everyday Christians struggling to stay in the faith. And here is Peter saying, your faith is of equal standing with ours.

Is that just Peter being nice, but we all know it's not true? Like someone saying, 'you know, Martin, you and the other Rock, Dwayne Johnson, you are so similar: I mean, you're both bald and your physique… there's nothing to tell you apart.'

No! When Peter says their faith, your faith, is of equal standing to his, he's using a phrase for equal civic status. He's not saying, 'hey, you and me, our experiences of God, what we know about God are identical, we're like twins separated at birth.' He's saying 'there are no second class citizens in God's kingdom. There are no elite saints up here, and you plebs down there. Your faith, your trust in Christ, gives you exactly the same privileges and honours as me.'

Think what that means. It means that when God sees you, his heart is as filled with love for you as much as for Peter, or Paul, or any of the other apostles. That he accepts you and welcomes you, just as he accepted them. That all your sins have been washed away just as theirs were. That when he hears you praying, however awkwardly, his ears are as attentive as if Peter was praying. That when you fall on your face in sin, he is as full of compassion to pick you up and brush you down as he was with them. That the Spirit he has put in you is the very same Spirit he put in them, that he is as close to you as ever he was to them, and you are just as much a child of God as they were.

As Peter says, you 'have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours.'

But do you believe that? Or do you find yourself thinking, 'if only'? And instead of feeling loved by God, you feel guilt. Instead of feeling heard, you feel ignored. Instead of feeling close to God, you feel distant - if you feel anything at all.

Why is that?

A Doubted Faith

And I want to give you a couple of reasons why you might doubt it. Ask yourself, what's the master, and what's the message?

Look again at how Peter introduces himself. Verse 1, 'Simeon Peter, *a servant* and apostle of Jesus Christ.'

And the word for *servant* is the word for a bondservant, a slave. Ask Peter who he is and he replied, 'I'm a slave.' It's hardly an aspirational title, is it? And yet, something or other is going to be your master.

Later on, in chapter 2, Peter says, 'Whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved' (v19). And that's not theoretical. Peter's talking from experience, because there was a time when Peter was enslaved by what others thought of him. It's why a great rock of a fisherman crumbled before a servant girl asking if he knew Jesus.

And if something other than Christ is your ultimate master you're going to have a hard time believing that your faith is of equal standing.

Think how it works. Let's say like Peter you're enslaved to what people think of you. That'll mean how you feel about yourself will go up and down with your performance or your appearance. And you'll feel great, and think God thinks you're great, when others tell you you're great. But when they don't, because your performance slips or your image cracks, you're going to have a hard time believing God loves you, because what is there to love?

Or what if your career, or what you do outside your career, is your master? And that's what gets all your time and energy. You give yourself to it: your work, your sport, your interest. But your relationship with God is starved of oxygen. No wonder he feels distant.

Or maybe you'd say, as our culture trains you to say, 'I'm not enslaved to anything or anyone, I'm my own master.' But what that means is you're enslaved to self-centredness or self-absorption or self-interest. And those things are not exactly fertile soil for growing in love and knowledge of another, are they?

Or maybe some pain from your past, or some substance or addiction you're using to numb that pain has you in its hold. Or maybe anger or bitterness has taken root in your heart and you can't shake it. Or you look at someone else's life and *she's* got a partner, or *he's* got a better job, and envy is wrapping its tentacles around your heart. And these things are controlling you. But as they do, what do they do to the sense that your faith is of equal standing, that you are as loved and as blessed by God as Peter?

You see, it's not that the privileges and honours you enjoy as a Christian are taken back as punishment for serving some other master. It's that when you serve or are controlled by this other thing, a fog settles across your heart, a grime builds up, and you can't see them. Like the sun disappearing behind a grey cloud, the sun is still there, but so is the cloud. Remove the cloud, have Christ as your master, and you'll soon feel the warmth of the sun.

But there's a second reason you can doubt the equal standing of your faith. Verse 1 again, 'Simeon Peter, a servant *and apostle* of Jesus Christ.' And to be an apostle was to be an ambassador - chosen and sent by Jesus. But it was also to be a messenger. And even just in these two verses you get a glimpse of Peter's message. He calls Jesus, 'Christ' - the messiah, the anointed one, the long

promised king come in the line of David. He calls him, ‘Our God and Saviour’. And he calls him, ‘Jesus *our Lord*.’

And probably none of that surprises you. But think how that would have read in first century Roman culture. Who was Lord, who was King, but Caesar? And from the time of Augustus, the emperor was Soter, Saviour - the one who had saved the empire from political chaos. And who but Caesar could claim to be a god and the son of God?

And so the message of the gospel Peter proclaimed collided with the message the empire proclaimed. The message about who was king, who was saviour and who or what should be worshipped.

So let me ask you, what message are you listening to? What message is shaping you, about who’s king, about who’s saviour, about who or what should have your devotion? And could that explain why your faith is struggling?

You see, if you’re filling your head and heart with one YouTube video or podcast after another, about this or that politician who’s the only one who can rescue us from chaos, no wonder a cloud has settled over your heart and there’s no vitality to your faith.

Or maybe having the next great experience, or the latest stuff, is what has your heart. You’d never say you worshipped it, but it sure has your devotion. And yet, as Jesus warned, like weeds crowding out a plant, this desire for other things, or the cares of this world, can strangle the spiritual life out of you. We think pursuing this stuff is life, but in reality it’s suffocating what's *really* life.

Or maybe in the books your read, or podcasts you listen to, you have surrounded yourself with the message that you’re the king, and your personal thriving and flourishing is in your hands - you’re your own saviour - and the good life is for you to define and for you to obtain. And you may be a Christian, and have a faith of equal standing with Peter’s, and the honours and privileges of that faith are like an immense inheritance, kept in a vault for you that you can access at any time, but that message never gets through to you, because all this other stuff fills your airwaves. And there’s a cloud over your heart.

But there’s a third reason you may sense your faith is nothing like Peter’s. Look again at v1, ‘To those *who have obtained* a faith of equal standing with ours.’ And you could read that and think, ok, so this faith is something I need to work for, to obtain. And if I live a good enough life, pray enough, worship with passion enough, God will grant me these honours and privileges of faith. And faith is like a university degree to be obtained by hard work, or a position to be obtained by years of experience.

Except that’s not what that word *obtained* means. It’s something you receive as a gift from another. Something that you’ve obtained because you’ve been given it.

And maybe this faith of equal standing is not yet your experience because you think Christianity is about what you have to ‘do’ - when it’s all about what Christ has done for you.

The Ground of Faith

Look again at v1, ‘To those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours *by the righteousness of our God and saviour Jesus Christ.*’

So does your faith depend on you being a good enough Christian, on your righteousness? Is that why the sunshine of God’s grace can shine on you. No, Peter says, it depends on the righteousness of Christ. You have been made rich, because Christ became poor. You are welcomed and accepted because at the cross Christ was forsaken. Your sins are forgiven, because Christ bore them, and absorbed the wrath of God for them. And you can know and experience the warmth of the sunshine of God’s grace because at the cross Christ experienced the darkness as the sun was blotted out. And all of our failure to live as God wants us to live was counted to him, and all his perfection is counted to us. And as you trust in what Christ has done for you, God looks on you and sees you as beautiful. As Paul writes, ‘For our sake he made him [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.’ (2 Cor 5:21).

Now maybe you hear that and think, but is it right for God to punish his Son for our sin? Isn’t that, as some New Atheists have argued, deeply immoral? But look again at how Peter describes Jesus, v1, ‘Our God and saviour Jesus Christ.’ And the Greek construction is clear: he’s talking about one person - that Christ is both God and Saviour.

And that’s why your faith is of equal standing with Peter’s. God stepped into your place and absorbed all his wrath against your sin upon himself, so that you might stand forgiven, cleansed, accepted and righteous. With all the privileges of heaven at your disposal.

And when you know that - not just theoretically like the rationalist, or fluffily like the mystic, but deep in your heart; when that’s the message you’re listening to and filling your heart and mind with, it will profoundly affect you.

Firstly, it’ll deliver you from slavery to all these other things. When you know God loves you, your craving for the approval of others dries up. When you know that he’s the thing of supreme value, you’ll still value your work or your leisure, even your possessions, but you’ll give them their right value rather than ultimate value. When your heart is filled with love and gratitude for him, rather than your heart being filled with anger or bitterness or envy towards others, you’ll begin to show them the love and grace Christ has shown you.

You see, we’re all going to serve one master or another, but only Christ is kind. As Augustine prayed, ‘O God, to know you is life; *to serve you is freedom;* and to praise you is the soul’s joy and delight.’

But secondly, knowing the truth of what Christ has done for you will fill your heart. Verse 2, ‘May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.’

Don’t you want that? I mean, in a world that’s increasingly confused and noisy, doesn’t your heart long for peace? In a world filled with anger, don’t you want grace and kindness to increasingly mark you?

Well, Peter says, have Christ as your master, allow the message of all that he has done for you shape you, live in the good of all the honours and privileges trusting him gives you, and growing,

multiplying, exponentially increasing grace and peace will be yours. And then go into the world this week and live it and share it.