

## New Testament Survey for Beginners: Part 22 – 2 Peter

Peter's reference to his first letter (3:1) makes it clear that this second letter was written to the same people, to a number of converted Jews and Gentiles scattered throughout Asia Minor. It is difficult to pinpoint the precise time of writing, yet it is clear that circumstances had changed for both the writer and his readers since that first epistle.

For Peter, on the one hand, his earthly pilgrimage is quickly coming to an end. The Lord Jesus had told him that he would in time suffer confinement and the death of a martyr (John 21:18,19), and now at last Peter is seeing, increasingly, the evidence of that prophecy being fulfilled (1:12-15). What is so wonderful in all this, however, is that the apostle is not intimidated by any of it; his tone is neither anxious nor fearful. Had he not told Jesus, "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You"? We know of course that Peter did deny Jesus three times before that very night was over, but now as a result of God's sanctifying grace, the Lord working in him to will and to do His good pleasure, Peter is ready and willing to lay down his own life for the Saviour whom he loves so dearly.

Peter's example, beloved, is it not a great example to us all? Unlike Peter, we may not know the kind of death which has been appointed to us, but we have been called of God in His Word to offer our bodies a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1), and there is no greater way of demonstrating our love to the Lord, no greater witness we might bear of Christ before the eyes of a watching world, than to lay down our life when called to do so for Him! It is the Lord Himself who gives us the strength to do that, and it comes of our being stayed on Him (Isaiah 26:3).

For his readers, on the other hand, these pilgrims of the Dispersion, it may well be that they are still suffering the persecution of their neighbours, but what they are experiencing now is an even more threatening and immediate need, that of false teachers who are in their number and exercising their malicious influence upon them. The apostle addresses that need in a way that is reminiscent of Jesus Himself in Matthew 23, the chief difference being that, while our Lord confronted false teachers directly (Matthew 23:13f.), Peter wrote those who could be too easily taken in by such people and their erroneous claims.

2 Peter falls naturally into three parts, each chapter taking up a new part. The first chapter is about the blessing of saving knowledge, the second chapter is about the curse of false teachers who seek to undermine that knowledge, and the third chapter is about the Second Coming of Christ, the very doctrine that false teachers are so quick to mock and determined to overthrow.

The subject of chapter 1 is the blessing of saving knowledge – a very personal, intimate and experiential knowledge of Christ Jesus – which comes of being born again to a living faith in Him. This is the peculiar possession of the true Christian, something that moves him to embrace the exceedingly great and precious promises of God and makes him at the same time a partaker of the divine nature (vv.2-4). What does it mean that the believer is a partaker of the divine nature? It means that he has been made a new creation in Christ, that he bears spiritual fruit by feeding on Christ, and that he can live a life pleasing to the Lord through Christ who strengthens him.

As a result of this blessing of knowing Christ, Peter calls his readers (those who have obtained like precious faith) to pursue holiness, and would have them to understand that by such means they can make their calling and election sure (vv.5-11). Every believer has eternal life in Christ, and is kept by the power of God through faith, but only those believers who actively pursue holiness demonstrate what they have in Christ to others and can be overwhelmingly comforted by the assurance of that relationship themselves.

The sure, unshakable foundation of this saving knowledge is not cunningly devised fables but the Word of God (vv.16-21). The apostles were eyewitnesses of Christ's majesty and glory. Peter writes specifically of the time when he and the sons of Zebedee were privileged to see sights and to hear sounds from heaven. Jesus was transfigured before them, was found talking with Moses and Elijah. God the Father Himself declared the glory of His Son Jesus when He proclaimed, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." This and other such events serve to confirm the prophecies of Holy Scripture, how they came to us from men who were set apart by God to speak, and this they did, not on their own authority but by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. And, since these prophecies are of God, let every Christian heed them as a light that shines in a dark place until the Lord Jesus comes again and drives the darkness away.

Chapter 2 is one of the darkest passages in all the New Testament for false teachers, and especially for those once enlightened who are resolved to continue spreading their destructive heresies. We read here of their coming punishment (vv.1-9), of their true character and conduct (vv.10-17), and of their wicked influence (vv.18-22).

Now in observing this, it is important that we understand the following points:

(1) It seems clear that these false teachers were not from the outside, but from within the covenant community – some of them may have even once been professing members of the church who had come under sound preaching and had heard enough to know better – yet, in spite of these advantages, they denied the Lord, demonstrating that they had always been, and still remained, unconverted.

(2) The gospel message was offered as freely to these false teachers as to anyone else. It is the fact that they were resolved to reject the gospel, to carouse in their own deceptions instead, which filled their cup of iniquity and fueled the wrath of God to be poured out upon them. Let all such purveyors of evil know that, unless they repent of their sins while it is still called today, the opportunity to turn from sin and receive the Lord Jesus as their Saviour may soon be taken from them.

(3) Teachers are to be judged by a higher standard (James 3:1). Someone does not need to be a false teacher but simply someone ordained to holy office who waters down the gospel message – who leaves out the offence of the cross and fails to call sinners to Christ – let him know that things will not go well for him if he continues on that same path. It is not merely heresy which is a problem, you see, but any failure of a pastor to proclaim the unsearchable riches of Christ. Is such a fellow not like the unprofitable servant who hid his talent only to be cast into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth?

(4) If anyone reading this is a believer and looking for a church where he might grow in grace and in the knowledge of Jesus Christ, make certain that you do not settle for anything less than a church where Christ is lifted up in the preaching and where the pastor does not shun to declare the whole counsel of God. It is so important that the rest of us should hear this kind of preaching, that we are fed a regular diet of it and learn by such means to resist all error.

Chapter 3, finally, is about the second Coming of Christ and the certainty of that great event. Scoffers may say, "Where is the evidence of His Coming? The prophets and apostles may come and go, and they may say whatever they like, but everything continues as it has been from the beginning." What is this? Oh, how the wicked so readily forget and blindly deny the worldwide flood in Noah's day, which came with the promise of God preserving the earth until its appointed end, but was at the same time a graphic portrayal of the earth being reserved for a consuming judgment to fall on ungodly men (vv.1-7)!

Did not God tell us that, as the heavens are higher than the earth, so His ways and thoughts are altogether higher than ours (Isaiah 55:8,9)? Well, then, let us not reduce His promise to our own conception of how we think it should and must be fulfilled. Our God is not confined by any of the restraints of time in the ways that we are, but is able to see every detail of what has happened, and has yet to happen, and to see it all at the same moment. If it appears to men that His promise of Christ's return is a long time in coming, it is because He is longsuffering toward us and not willing that any of the wheat should be lost along with the tares in that final harvest (vv.8,9; see also Matthew 13:24-30).

The Lord will come suddenly and when least expected. His coming will be accompanied by a thorough demise of the present order, the curse on all creation as a result of sin will be lifted, and it will make way for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells (vv.10-13). Let every believer look forward to that day, and let him strive to be found blameless when at last our Lord appears. If it seems even to the people of God that this day of the Lord is a long time in coming, it is for the salvation of each and every one for whom Christ died. Paul has written of these same things, things which are sometimes difficult to understand, things which careless souls distort to their own destruction. To avoid falling from steadfast faith into careless error, let the Christian grow in the grace of God and in this blessed saving knowledge of Christ (vv.14-18)!

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