

2 PETER: In The Face Of Falsehood

by Ray C. Stedman

It almost seems that Second Peter was written for us today, in the present hour in which we live. Every word of it is so pertinent, so contemporary, so filled with practical advice for the day in which we find ourselves, that it is at once confirmation of the freshness and the vitality of the Word of God, which never gets out of date. It also suggests that perhaps the cycle has come full turn -- that we are now living in days very similar indeed to those in the first century, and that the conditions we are facing in our world are almost the same in kind, if not in expanse, as the conditions that were faced then.

There is a considerable difference between Peter's two letters. The first one was full of rejoicing hope in the face of suffering. But the theme of this second letter is that of faithful truth in the face of falsehood; how to detect error, how to live in the midst of deceit, how to distinguish between right and wrong, when wrong is subtly alluring and deceptive.

First, let me give you just a brief outline of the letter. It falls into three chapters, each of which strikes a different note. In the first chapter, the apostle is giving his readers a word of exhortation on what the Christian life is all about. In the second chapter, he gives a word of warning on how to recognize and handle false teachers; and in the third chapter, he gives us a word of certainty about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the facts that underlie our faith. And then he draws a conclusion. It is a very simple outline, isn't it -- a very practical letter, as you might expect coming from such a practical, hard-headed Christian as Peter.

This letter was very likely written from the same place as the first letter, when Peter was a prisoner, perhaps of Nero of Rome. At least, it is evident that he is in great danger, because in this letter he says that he feels the time is drawing near when he is to put off his body -- his tent, his habitation -- to go and be with the Lord. And he says the Lord himself showed him this, as recorded for us at the close of the Gospel of John. The Lord Jesus had said to Peter that there would come a time when men would bind his hands and lead him where he did not desire to go.

Peter understood this to mean that he was to suffer and die as our Lord died, on a cross. And tradition tells us that Peter was indeed crucified, that he was so humbled by the fact that he was counted worthy to die the same kind of a death that the Lord Jesus did, that he begged his captors to crucify him upside down.

In writing to these Christians in the midst of trouble, he is not in this letter trying to encourage them with how to rejoice in the face of suffering, but rather he is trying to help them to be true in the face of falsehood. In this opening chapter, there is a wonderful word in the first verse; the letter is addressed,

to those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours ... {2 Pet 1:1b RSV}

Think of that! We have been so tempted to think of these mighty apostles as men of such sterling character and of such abundant faith that they are far above us in their grasp of knowledge and truth, but the apostles themselves never thought of themselves that way. They regarded themselves as nothing but ordinary believers with the same equality of opportunity in faith as any other believer enjoyed.

Years ago, I ran across this expression, and it has been an encouragement to my own heart ever since: "Even the weakest believer holds in his hands all that the mightiest saint ever possessed." That is the theme of Peter's opening chapter. Listen to these words:

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, {2 Pet 1:3a RSV}

All the necessities both for handling life and for manifesting righteousness, or godliness -- godlikeness -- in

this world are ours. That means that everyone who has genuinely come to Jesus Christ, without exception, has all that it takes to handle all that life can throw at him.

Do you believe that? A lot of people do not; they are always looking for something more -- some new experience, some different reaction, some further revelation, some outstanding feeling of some kind -- and they think that without these things they can never be the kind of Christian they ought to be. But do you see how flatly Peter denies this? He says, if you come to Christ, you have him; and if you have him, you have all that God is ever going to give you. You have all power and all things that pertain to life and godliness though the knowledge of him.

Now if this is true, then there is no excuse for failure, is there? That means if we have everything in Christ, we only need to know more of him, and we will have all that it takes to solve the problem we may be confronting.

I wish I could drive that home in some practical way. To me, the great thing about being a Christian is that, in Jesus Christ, I really am finding practical answers to every problem that I am confronted with. Now, of course, when you become a Christian you do not automatically know everything in all the books in the world. But you do gain an insight and an understanding, as you grow in the knowledge of Christ, to handle all of the difficulties, heartaches, and problems, and to understand life and yourself.

His divine power has already granted to us everything we need. But when you first come to know Christ, although you have all that it takes, you have not yet discovered it -- you have not yet found all this in terms of experience.

There are two channels by which it comes. First, the promises:

... by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, {2 Pet 1:4a RSV}

These are not just mere glowing words; this is not just so much theological twaddle designed to stir your heart a bit. These are sure and certain guarantees that God has given us, that he will honor with all that he has. His very nature, his very character, his magnificence is at stake in these words; they refer to promises that are sure and certain.

Therefore, the first thing we need to do is to learn what he has promised, which means acquainting ourselves with the Scriptures. That is why it is impossible for you to find fulfillment in your life, and really discover the kind of person God wants you to be, unless you understand the word of God.

You can take as many courses as you like, and all you will get is the accumulation of man's knowledge with its mixture of both truth and error, with no ability to distinguish one from the other. That is why even the most educated person who does not know the Bible can make the most grievous and atrocious blunders, and it happens all the time. But if we begin to understand these great and mighty promises, then we will understand what life is all about. That is what they are for, to reveal things as they really are.

Now, notice the effect of relying on these promises:

that you may escape from the corruption that is in the world ... {2 Pet 1:4b RSV}

That sounds inviting, doesn't it? There is so much corruption around. Corruption means anything that defiles and pollutes and destroys. How will you escape from it unless you have the truth from God? No escape is possible. We would all be caught inextricably in a mesh of lies and deceit without the truth from God.

Corruption is in the world because of passion. Three passions are at the root of all human evil: lust, which means sexual passion, in a wrong sense -- which destroys the body; greed, which is materialism; and then ambition, the pride of spirit that seeks popularity and fame and the praise of man. Those three things are wrecking the lives of men and women all over the earth, and those are the three things which the truth of God particularly delivers us from as we understand and obey it.

Now the second avenue of discovering all of these things that are available to us is found beginning in verse 5:

For this very reason make every effort [be diligent] to supplement your faith [literally, "to round out" your faith] with virtue [that means, basically, "the courage to face life"], and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness [patience], and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. {2 Pet 1:5-7 RSV}

Now you have all this in Christ, but you need to work at discovering it and applying it in your life. That is what we are all engaged in doing now, trying to apply these in practical terms with the people we live with and work with, and the irritating folks that are always rubbing our fur the wrong way -- our in-laws, and our out-laws -- no matter who they may be, we are to apply this there. And what is the result?

For if these things are yours and abound, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful ... {2 Pet 1:8a RSV}

as a Christian. Do you want a recipe for success as a Christian? Well, there you have it -- faith and obedience. The knowledge of the promises of God and the application of them in specific situations -- these will keep you from being unfruitful and ineffective.

Furthermore, "whoever lacks these things is blind and shortsighted;" even though he's a Christian, he is living just like anybody else, and he has apparently forgotten that "he was cleansed from his old sins," {2 Pet 1:9 RSV}. Even his regeneration has seemingly had little effect upon him.

... be the more zealous [says the apostle] to confirm your call [make it sure] for if you do this you will never fall; so there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. {2 Pet 1:10b-11 RSV}

That means, when it comes time for you to go home, the trumpets will be blowing in glory at your entrance into that kingdom because you have found the secret of successful living.

Peter goes on now to show us the two guarantees that undergird this statement; first, the eyewitness account of the apostle himself. He says,

We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, ... {2 Pet 1:16a RSV}

And then he recites an instance; he says, "I was with him on the holy mountain when he was changed before me, and I saw him -- I was an eyewitness of that event -- and I'm making known to you what I saw, the coming and the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. We were eyewitnesses of his majesty."

And that is where Christian faith rests -- on the eyewitness accounts of men and women who were there and who simply reported what they saw and heard, and what Jesus did.

Peter goes further to say that this is confirmed by another voice -- the voice of the prophets of the Old Testament. These men wrote not by their own inspiration -- they did not write their private opinions -- but they wrote what they were given by the Spirit of God, and they accurately predicted events that were to follow centuries afterward. If that is not confirmation of the truth of this thing, what could be? Two things -- eyewitnesses, and prophetic words -- underlie our faith.

In the second chapter, Peter gives us a warning against certain false teachers. Again, this sounds as though it were written for our own hour:

But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, ... {2 Pet 2:1a RSV}

What a strange thing that we have reached the stage today when a great denomination is now trembling on the very verge of declaring that there is no such thing as heresy, because actually everything is true, or at least nobody is certain of anything, and therefore, how can you charge anyone with heresy.

But Peter says some will arise in church who "will bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them," which tells us that these men are not mere atheistic antagonists of Christianity -- we have always had those -- but these will be men who claim to be Christians, who profess to love the Lord Jesus, who profess to be followers of Christ; yet the things that they teach will deny everything that he stood for. What echoes of some of the voices that are raised in our day!

And many will follow their licentiousness, and because of them the way of truth will be reviled. 2 Pet 2:2 RSV}

People will look down on those who believe the Bible as being simple-minded, ignorant folk who have no understanding of the great issues of the day, who are back in the dark ages.

And in their greed they will exploit you with false words; from of old their condemnation has not been idle, and their destruction has not been asleep. {2 Pet 2:3 RSV}

Then he passes to the certainty of the judgment on these men, and he recounts three instances from the past which prove that God knows how to handle a situation like this. Do not be alarmed when false teachers arise and scoff at your belief. God knows what he is doing, and he will handle them. He did not spare the angels when they sinned, but he judged them. He did not spare Sodom and Gomorrah when they sinned, but he judged them; and he did not spare the ancient world, but he judged it in the flood, and yet through all of them he preserved a remnant of integrity. Therefore, his conclusion is,

... the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment. {2 Pet 2:9 RSV}

Then follows a very vivid description of the characteristics of these false teachers. First, they will be presumptuous; that is, they will be eloquent with impressive words about things having to do with life and death and salvation and other great themes, but they will really be ignorant -- they will not know what they are talking about. They are like animals, says Peter, who are "creatures of instinct, born to be caught and killed, reviling in matters of which they are ignorant." (vs. 12) The second characteristic, then, is ignorance, and the third is shamelessness; they will encourage licentiousness and sexual misconduct. They will openly urge people to indulge their lusts freely and shamelessly.

The fourth mark is that they will be greedy;

They have hearts trained in greed. {2 Pet 2:14 RSV}

For the sake of money, they will teach almost anything think people want to hear. And finally, they are pretentious:

... uttering loud boasts of folly, they entice with licentious passions ... men who have barely escaped from those who live in error. {2 Pet 2:18 RSV}

And then we have this word, most illuminating in our day: they promise freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. Doesn't that sound like some of today's proponents of drug use, such as the so-called "mind-stretching" hallucinatory drugs? You will experience an opening of the mind, they say, and enter into an experience of liberty such as you have never had before. And when people try it, there is indeed a sense of freedom, but with it comes an increasing bondage that destroys. So the apostle concludes with some of the most sobering words in Scripture:

For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overpowered, the last

state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them. {2 Pet 2:20-21 RSV}

Think of this. Men who work with the Scriptures, who have in their hands the Word of God; who study it, and attempt to explain it, who hold the position of teachers of the truth -- they themselves deny all they have taught and learned, and become victims of their own delusions.

The final word then, is a note of certainty. Do not be discouraged, he says, by this prevailing atmosphere of error. Remember that One is coming who will settle the whole thing. He speaks of the assurance of the coming of the Lord. He says there will be scoffers who will base their arguments against the second coming of Christ on the fact that all things have continued as they were since the beginning of creation.

This is a stable universe, they will say, nothing ever happens out of the ordinary; there can be no intrusion into this universe of a divine power that operates in any way differently than what you can observe around you. But, says Peter, they are wrong. They have been wrong in the past, they will be wrong in the future.

This is not a stable universe. This universe has been upset terribly in the past, and it will be upset again. The flood is the record of the past and it points to a day in the future when the world will be destroyed again -- not by water, but by fire. And in a most unusually descriptive passage here, many of our nuclear scientists who are Christians have seen a description of a nuclear explosion:

But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist have been stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. {2 Pet 3:7 RSV}

And then skip to verse 10:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up. {2 Pet 3:10 RSV}

Very instructive, isn't it? Now, he says, you need to remember two things about this. Remember that the past has proved what the future will be and the record of the flood is the guarantee that God is going to move as he said he would in the future. And the world that now exists is kept together by the same word as the world that existed before the flood.

The one thing that keeps life operating at all is the word of God, the authority of God. Therefore, all God needs to do is to alter things in our physical universe, and the whole thing begins to fall apart. And Peter says, if you get impatient and wonder about the time, remember this: God does not look on time as you do. A day with the Lord is as a thousand years, and a thousand years is as a day; therefore, what seems to drag on endlessly for us is but a few moments for him.

Second, remember that God has a purpose in delaying, for which we ought to be very grateful; once God begins judgment, everyone will be included. He delays his judging hand in order to give us all a chance to think over what life is all about. That is what the word "repentance" means; it means to think again; to take a good square look at the facts, and act upon that basis. God withholds his hand in order that men might have a chance to think things over and change their ways. Isn't that wonderful? Aren't you glad he waited for you?

A man told me some time ago that he was walking with a friend past a church, and on the bulletin board out in front he noticed the subject of the message for next Sunday, It was, "If I Were God," and it started these men thinking. One of them turned to the other and said, "Do you know what I'd do if I were God? I'd just lean over the battlements of heaven and take a great big breath and blow it out of existence!" Well, we know how he feels, don't we?

Why does God put up with the insults of men? With the violence, and the cruelty, and the injustice and the darkness, and the deviousness, and the impurity, and the shameless things that go on in our world? Why?

Because he is a loving God, and he is not willing that any should perish. He waits and delays, in order that men might have a chance to think things through, and see where it is all going.

The apostle's conclusion raises a searching question:

**Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of persons ought you to be ...?
{2 Pet 3:11a RSV}**

Since this is how the world is going to end, what kind of a person ought we to be right now in terms of holiness and godliness, waiting for and (this is almost incredible, isn't it?) hastening the coming of the day of God.

How do we hasten the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ? How do we bring at last into being what men have hoped and dreamed for for centuries -- a world at peace, a world of plenty, a world of blessing and quietness and joy, and unlimited opportunity for all? How do you bring about a world like that?

During an election year, every politician promises this, doesn't he? And we do not know which one to believe, because frankly, down deep, we suspect that they are all phonies -- none of them can produce what they promise, because they are not getting at the heart of the problem. But this word says that we, the people of God, have the ability to hasten the coming of this day.

How is it done, then? Three primary things are suggested in the Scriptures; first, prayer. Remember what the Lord Jesus taught us to pray? "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," {Matt 6:10, Luke 11:2 KJV}. That is a prayer for hastening the day of God. Second, by witnessing. This gospel of the kingdom must be preached to all the nations, and then shall the end come, says the Lord Jesus {cf, Matt 24:14}.

So as we share our faith, not in a mechanical way, trying to hammer the truth into people, but in genuine love and compassion, administering to the needs of others, and speaking of a hope that enflames us and engages all our heart, we are hastening the coming of the day of God.

And third, by obedience. There is a saying among the Jews that if all of Israel would obey the law fully for one day, the Messiah would come. What God is looking for is men and women who will be obedient, who will be His. The only freedom that men have at all is the freedom either to serve God or to serve the Devil, one or the other. That is the only choice afforded to us. And the freedom that comes from serving the Devil is only a temporary, apparent freedom which soon vanishes in a darkening despair leading to nothingness.

But the freedom that the Lord Jesus provides is a growing, enriching freedom that widens out to the fullness of life. It never ends until all things are yours; all things present and things to come; the world and everything else is yours who know Jesus Christ.

Therefore, beloved, since you wait for these, be zealous to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. {2 Pet 3:14 RSV}

Then in a final P.S., he says that Paul agrees too. Those things which our beloved brother Paul has written, he says, some people twist and distort as they do the other Scriptures, but do not pay any attention to them.

And then he closes with two verses which I feel should be written large across the present lawlessness of our day:

You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, beware lest you be carried away with the error of lawless men and lose your own stability. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen. {2 Pet 3:17-18 RSV}

Stability is based on knowledge, Peter says -- knowledge of all the unchangeable truth as it is in Jesus Christ.

Since we have the facts then, we must not allow ourselves to be carried away, deceived, by those who seek to undermine us. In a time of very real attacks on the truth, now as in Peter's time, we must exercise our freedom in Christ and choose to remain faithful and obedient to him.

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