



The Letters of James and Peter

Week 8 - 2 Peter 2:1-3:18; 2 Timothy 3:16-17

Day 1 - 2 Peter 2:1-22

¹ But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive opinions. They will even deny the Master who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves. ² Even so, many will follow their licentious ways, and because of these teachers the way of truth will be maligned. ³ And in their greed they will exploit you with deceptive words. Their condemnation, pronounced against them long ago, has not been idle, and their destruction is not asleep.

⁴ For if God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of deepest darkness to be kept until the judgment; ⁵ and if he did not spare the ancient world, even though he saved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood on a world of the ungodly; ⁶ and if by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes he condemned them to extinction and made them an example of what is coming to the ungodly; ⁷ and if he rescued Lot, a righteous man greatly distressed by the licentiousness of the lawless ⁸ (for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by their lawless deeds that he saw and heard), ⁹ then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment ¹⁰—especially those who indulge their flesh in depraved lust, and who despise authority.

Bold and willful, they are not afraid to slander the glorious ones, ¹¹ whereas angels, though greater in might and power, do not bring against them a slanderous judgment from the Lord. ¹² These people, however, are like irrational animals, mere creatures of instinct, born to be caught and killed. They slander what they do not understand, and when those creatures are destroyed, they also will be destroyed, ¹³ suffering the penalty for doing wrong. They count it a pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are blots and blemishes, reveling in their dissipation while they feast with you. ¹⁴ They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed. Accursed children! ¹⁵ They have left the straight road and have gone astray, following the road of Balaam son of Bosor, who loved the wages of doing wrong, ¹⁶ but was rebuked for his own transgression; a speechless donkey spoke with a human voice and restrained the prophet's madness.

¹⁷ These are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm; for them the deepest darkness has been reserved. ¹⁸ For they speak bombastic nonsense, and with licentious desires of the flesh they entice

people who have just escaped from those who live in error. ¹⁹ They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption; for people are slaves to whatever masters them. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ 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 that was passed on to them. ²² It has happened to them according to the true proverb,

“The dog turns back to its own vomit,” and, “The sow is washed only to wallow in the mud.”

Understanding the Passage:

Similar to the false prophets of the Old Testament, Peter is warning his readers not to be misled by the false teachers of the day. Here Peter is reminding fellow believers of the upcoming fulfillment of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That it is the apostles and not these false teachers who are in line with the great prophets of Israel’s past. Fallen angels, the great flood, and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah are all, not so subtle, reminders of the dangers of being caught up in the judgment of those who lead others away from the Gospel. Towards the end of this passage, Peter warns the reader about the possibility of backsliding. Essentially saying that it would be better for you to have never known Jesus in the first place, than to know and love him only to turn your back on him. Theologians have debated whether or not you can truly “choose” Jesus and then later reject him, but those who come down on the side that it is possible to lose your salvation often point to this verse as one that supports their theological position. Regardless, Peter’s warning rings true for us today as believers. Whether it is the Old Testament, the early church, or the twenty-first century, we must be mindful of the meaning behind the message. Always looking for the unwavering truth of the gospel to reside there.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

- What jumps out to you in the scripture reading today? What did you find interesting?
- What does a false teacher look like today? Do you feel like you have ever been led astray either intentionally or unintentionally? How did you come to that conclusion?
- Do you believe in “once saved always saved,” or is it possible to reject Jesus once we have committed to following him? What are the implications to believing one or the other?
- What “vomit” are you currently in danger of returning back to?

Day 2 - 2 Peter 3:1-7

¹ This is now, beloved, the second letter I am writing to you; in them I am trying to arouse your sincere intention by reminding you ² that you should remember the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets, and the commandment of the Lord and Savior spoken through your apostles. ³ First of all you must understand this, that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and indulging their own lusts ⁴ and saying, “Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!” ⁵ They deliberately ignore this fact, that by the word of God heavens existed long ago and an earth was formed out of water and by means of water, ⁶ through which the world of that time was deluged with water and perished. ⁷ But by the same word the present heavens and earth have been reserved for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the godless.

Understanding the Passage:

By this time people were already starting to wonder why Jesus had not yet returned to judge and deliver the world. Early on the community felt as though Christ’s return was imminent and that it would happen within their lifetime. When this seemed to not be the case, false teachers arose in an attempt to

persuade the people that the prophesy of Jesus' return was never coming. But Peter calls the reader to remain firm in the promise that is to be fulfilled. Just as there were those who scoffed at the prophecies that Israel would fall to the Babylonians, Peter reminds us that God's timing is God's own. I am sure that people mocked Noah and his family right up until the first raindrops began to fall. For our purposes, we can also benefit from looking back on God's work throughout history, reminding ourselves that how things look for a time are rarely how they remain for very long. We await the full redemption of ourselves and this world, not as those who doubt, but as those who trust in its coming completion.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

- What jumps out to you in the scripture reading today? What did you find interesting?
- Does it bother you that the earliest Christians thought that Jesus would return within their lifetime? Why or why not?
- What does it mean to you that we live in an "already, not yet" reality when it comes to the coming Kingdom of God?
- What is one truth about Jesus that you can hold onto when doubts creep in because of the world around you?

Day 3 - 2 Peter 3:8-13

⁸ But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. ⁹ The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. 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 everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

¹¹ Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, ¹² waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? ¹³ But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

Understanding the Passage:

What motivates you to change? There are two basic approaches. The first approach is fear. "If you don't change, bad things will happen to you!" The second approach is hope. "If you do change, then you will experience good things." Much of the time, these are two sides of the same coin. The doctor says, "If you don't quit eating so much sugar and fat, and if you don't exercise more, you will die." The doctor also says, in the same visit, "If you lose some of this weight, you will have so much more energy and you will look marvelous!" Which of these will motivate you more?

In this passage, Peter is hoping that his readers, who are not living these lives of holiness or godliness, will "come to repentance." On one hand, he puts before them hope, "waiting for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home." But as time has passed, and the Lord's return has not yet come to pass, Peter can't only use the carrot of hope; he must use the stick of fear as well. He emphasizes the apocalyptic imagery of the second coming – the elements melting with fire and the heavens set ablaze. And he reminds the reader that some will perish.

Personally, it is the hope and confidence of being a part of a world restored that drives me forward over the long term. Hope in Christ provides the inside-out change that keeps me going. But when temptation comes knocking at the door, I often find myself prone to say, "how bad can one little sin be, anyway...?" At times like that, a little fear doesn't hurt either.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

- Peter describes God as being patient so more people can come to God. Have you benefited from God's patience with you? In what way?
- What is more motivating to you - hope or fear? Why do you think that is?
- What mental image do you get when you read verses 12-13? What do you think this new heaven and new earth will be like?

Day 4 - 2 Peter 3:14-18

¹⁴Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; ¹⁵and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, ¹⁶speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures. ¹⁷You therefore, beloved, since you are forewarned, beware that you are not carried away with the error of the lawless and lose your own stability. ¹⁸But 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.

Understanding the Passage:

These verses comprise the closing of the body of the letter and the end of Peter's two-part message to the churches. As was the theme throughout, Peter is exhorting the reader to rest in the peace of the coming judgment of Christ. Though we do not know the timing of Christ's return, we can rest assured that if we are living in authentic relationship with God, we need not worry about the suddenness of his return. Peter references Paul towards the end of his letter, referring to him as "our beloved brother." This signifies that Peter and Paul are united in their apostolic calling to share the gospel of Jesus to the world. Though Paul may be difficult to understand at times, Peter is assuring his readers that Paul is not counted among those who he refers to as the false teachers of the age. The letter ends with a doxology, representing a similar pastoral manner in which Peter opened the letter in the introduction.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

- What jumps out to you in the scripture reading today? What did you find interesting?
- Do you relate to Peter's assertion that Paul can be hard to understand? If so, what about Paul's writings do you find difficult?
- Have you experienced someone "twisting the scriptures" in order to change its perceived original message? How can we guard against such manipulation of the texts?
- What would being "found by God in peace" look like for you?

Day 5 - 2 Timothy 3:16-17

¹⁶All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

Understanding the Passage:

Throughout the centuries of the Church, people have looked to the letters of James and Peter for teaching, inspiration, and assurance of the Christian faith. Often it is important to understand the context and culture in which the New Testament letters are written. This will give us further insight into the reason and importance of what the author is choosing to emphasize in their letters. But there is still much theological truth to be found throughout, truth that is just as relevant to us today as when it was written. James reminds us that no matter what trials will come in life, and when they do, we can seek God's redemptive and formative work in the midst of it. Likewise, his warnings about being lukewarm in the faith, boasting about tomorrow, or the dangers of not taming our mouths, hold similar weight to us

today that they did when those words were first read. Peter warns his readers, and us today, that there will always be those who bring a false message with the purpose of diminishing or destroying the Gospel of Christ. Just as his original readers found hope in the assurance of Jesus' redemption, so too can we rest in that hope. God is redeeming both us and the world through Jesus Christ, and one day that redemptive work will see its completion. Amen.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

- What jumps out to you in the scripture reading today? What did you find interesting?
- Thinking back over these past eight weeks, what themes or images have stayed with you? What nuggets of truth will you carry away from this series?
- Which of the three letters spoke to where you currently are in life? Why do you think that is?
- How might God be calling you to go deeper in your relationship with Jesus today?