

BIBLE SERIES: "EXPLORING OUR AWESOME BIBLE"

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2 PETER 1 – WARNING OF FALSE TEACHERS AMONG THE FLOCK

In this Second Epistle of Peter, he is quite alarmed due to false teachers infiltrating the Church (2 Pet. 2:1-3). Due to the persecutions, he also believes he will die soon (2 Pet. 1:13-15). This epistle was probably written in A.D. 66, during Emperor Nero's great persecution of Christians (A.D. 64-67). It is possible that Peter died in Rome.

We thus have a classic letter from an apostle dealing with false teachers that serves for all ages. A false Christianity was deceiving the brethren primarily with the teaching of *antinomianism*, or using a *false grace* or *liberty* to do away with God's laws (2 P. 2:19). As Barclay points out, "Peter had to meet *the antinomians*, the people who used *the grace of God as an excuse for sin*. They declared that grace was wide enough to cover every sin; therefore, sin does not matter anymore, the grace of Christ will win forgiveness for it.

Jude also writes about this same problem, warning, "Beloved...I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to *contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints*. For certain men have *crept in unnoticed*, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, *who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ*" (Jude 3-4).

Paul called them "false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself *disguises* himself as *an angel of light*. Therefore, it is no wonder if his ministers also *disguise* themselves as *ministers of righteousness*; whose end shall be according to their works" (2 Cor. 11:13-15). He named this false church "the ministry of lawlessness" (2 Thes. 2:7). It was a counterfeit religious system based on the teaching that God's laws have been abolished.

John also strongly denounced these false teachers in his epistles, and Jesus is revealed to him, at the end of the first century in the book of Revelation, that this false church would become enormously successful in the world by mixing Christianity with Babylonian and Greek paganism. The erroneous system would become an impure and rich religious "harlot" of the world that would dominate the kings and many nations of the earth

(see Rev. 17-18). The origin of the entity is named: "Mystery, Babylon the great, the mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth" (Rev. 17:5). God reveals it would be full of "mysteries", or mystical doctrines that do not come from the Bible itself, but mostly a Babylonian origin.

So, what actually happened in that first era of the Church? Historians of traditional Christianity say these false teachers were mostly Gnostics, an extreme group of renegade Christians who mixed astrology, Greek philosophy and Judaism. Yet, they became a bigger problem later in history (although they are described in Colossians). But what mainly threatened of the Church overall was the antinomian system much closer to the true Christianity, disguising itself and using a false "grace" to deceive the brethren. Christ predicted this infiltration in the parable of the wheat and tares, where Satan would plant "tares" inside and outside of the Church" (Mt. 13:37-43).

Leading church historians acknowledge there is a "mysterious void" of information about the Church after the death of Peter and Paul. Edward Gibbon, a British historian, writes: "The *scanty and suspicious materials* on ecclesiastical history seldom enable us to dispel *the dark cloud that hangs over the first age of the Church*" (*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Abridged*, p. 260).

Another historian, Jesse Hurlbut, admits, "For fifty years after St. Paul's life, *a curtain hangs over the church*, through which we strive *vainly* to look; and *when at last it rises*, about 120 A.D. with the writings of the earliest church fathers, *we find a church in many aspects very different from that in the days of St. Peter and St. Paul*" (*The Story of the Christian Church*, (Revised 1970, p. 26). He later adds, "After the death of St. Peter and St. Paul, and *for the space of fifty or sixty years, the history of the church is a blank*," p. 39). So, many of their successors' writings were destroyed or changed at that time by the false church.

During their day, the apostles Peter, Jude, John and Paul were combating together this infiltration of heresies and strongly denounced them. That is why, before dying, Peter wanted to leave this epistle as his legacy and last instructions to the

Church. He writes it with great urgency, not focusing on style, as he did in his first epistle. He needs to be very forceful, for these “lambs” that Christ charged Peter and others to take care of were being devoured by the false teachers. Truly, nothing alarms and angers a true shepherd more than when there are, as Jesus said in Mt. 7:15, “wolves in sheep’s clothing” inside of God’s flock!

Now, Peter begins at this epistle: “Simon Peter, a *bondservant* and apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who have obtained like precious faith with us by the righteousness of *our God and Savior Jesus Christ*: Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord” (2 Peter 1:1-2). Note, he first identifies himself as a “servant” of Jesus Christ. The Gk. term is *doulos*, which means a slave. Thus, instead of using a lofty title, Peter humbly calls himself “a slave of Jesus.” As one grows spiritually, we should see more pride and vanity being put aside and the focus is on humility and thanks for being “redeemed with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Pet. 1:19). We recognize we are nothing without God’s help.

Peter then explains to the brethren their faith is “equally precious” as that of the apostles. In other words, there is no difference between the faith of Jews and Gentiles who are converted, for all have the same spirit from God and have the same privilege to fight the good fight of faith and one day of entering the kingdom of God.

Notice, Peter here calls Christ, “*our God and Savior*,” just as the Father is also God. So there are now two divine Persons within this family called “God” (see Jn. 1:1-2). Christ is called “His Son” and God is called “the Father” (1 Jn. 1:3). Thus, this spiritual relationship is that of a divine Family.

Next, Peter points out that our faith has to be *strengthened* or it may wither away. He says: “As all things that pertain to life and godliness have been given to us by His divine power, through the knowledge of Him who called us by His glory and excellence, whereby He has given us exceeding *great and precious promises*, that by these you might become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust; you also, giving all diligence for this very thing, added to your faith...” (2 Pet. 1:3-5).

Regarding those “great and precious promises” *Believers Commentary* says, “It is estimated that there are at least **30,000 promises** in the Bible. So, it is the goal of every Christian to receive them, some now, some in the future, including being “partakers of the divine nature.” Just as there are now two divine Beings in the family called “God,” one day, if we are faithful, we may also be part of that same family as “perfected” children of God (Rom. 8:16-17, Heb. 2:11, 1 Jn. 3:1-2).

Notice, to receive that “divine nature” we must escape the “lusts” of the world and not succumb to them. So this incorporation into God’s family--the goal of our “salvation,” does not happen automatically. Peter says we need to put “all diligence” into this way of life, or we can fail. As Paul said, “...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12). So we must *fortify* our faith (our beliefs and practices) with seven “reinforcements” to reach the goal of entering God’s kingdom. It is like a beautiful symphony of God’s spiritual gifts with faith as the melody and the seven other virtues as its blended harmonies.

Peter writes we must buttress our faith with “virtue, to virtue, knowledge, to knowledge, self-control, to self-control, perseverance, to perseverance, godliness, to godliness, brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness, love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:5-8).

Hence, to that faith we must first add “virtue,” from the Greek *aretē*, or *spiritual courage to carry out God’s will* in our lives. *Believers Commentary* says, “Here it means *spiritual courage before a hostile world*, the *strength to stand* for what is right.” One might believe something, but another thing is to have the courage to apply it. As John says, “My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in *deed and in truth*” (1 John 3:18).

Secondly, we are to add knowledge, from the Gk. *epignosis*, or of *growing in understanding of God’s Word and His will for us*. As Paul said, “Therefore do not be unwise, but *understand what the will of the Lord is*” (Eph. 5:17).

Thirdly, we must add, “self-control,” from the Gk. *egkrateia*, which means the discipline to control ourselves, our tempers and our desires.”

As Pr. 16:32 says, "He that is *slow to anger* is *better* than the mighty; and he that *rules his spirit* than he that takes a city." Pr. 25:28 adds, "He that has *no rule* over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down and without walls." In his letters, Paul often compared the Christian to an athlete who must exercise and discipline himself if he ever hopes to win the prize (1 Cor. 9:24-27; Phil. 3:12-16).

Fourthly, faith needs "patience" from the Gk. *huponome*, which really means perseverance in the face of trials or the ability to endure when circumstances are difficult. Wiersbe adds, "It is not something that develops automatically; we must work at it. James 1:2-8 gives us the right approach. We must expect trials to come, because without trials we could never learn patience. We must, by faith, let our trials work for us and not against us, because we know that God is at work in our trials. If we need wisdom in making decisions, God will grant that wisdom if we ask Him. Nobody enjoys trials, but we do enjoy the confidence we can have in trials that God is at work, causing everything to work together for our good and His glory."

Fifthly comes "godliness," from the Gk. *eusebia*, (to worship well) and means to be godly -- having the fear and deep respect for God that makes us obey Him above all things. As Ps. 111:10 says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; a *good understanding* have all those who *do* His commandments."

Sixthly, we have "brotherly affection," from the Gk. term *philadelphia*, which is a *genuine* affection for the brethren. As Paul said, "Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another" (Rom. 12:10). The fact we love our brethren in Christ is evidence that we are converted (1 John 3:10-11).

Seventhly, we have "love," from the Gk. *agape*, which is the action of self-sacrifice done for the greater good of others. This is the kind of love God the Father and Jesus Christ have for all of us (John 3:16; 1 John 4:8-10).

In sum, Peter says this ladder of faith should include these seven rungs to be complete. And he adds: "For if these things are yours and abound, you will be *neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ*" (2 Peter 1:8).

What happens, though, if our faith doesn't grow? He says, "For he who *lacks these things* is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins" (2 P. 1:9).

A true Christian can become unproductive and God can remove him from being part of His vine, as the pruner removes the dry branches (John 15:1-2). One can forget his covenant at baptism to persevere in faith and be fruitful to the end. Peter compares it to being "myopic" or shortsighted (Gk. term, *myopazon*), where we can no longer see our true spiritual condition. So we *can* forget being "cleansed from our old sins" at baptism and of the costly price God paid for us, by sacrificing His Son.

To avoid being neglectful, Peter adds, "Therefore, brethren, be even *more diligent to make your call and election sure for if you do these things you will never stumble*" (2 Pet. 1:10). Notice the importance of the great effort required. He says God it will not do everything for us. The term "diligent" comes from the Gk. *spouden*, and means to exert maximum effort -- while God will do the rest for us. As Paul said, "I can do *all things through Christ* who *strengthens* me" (Phil. 4:13).

If we stop striving, Peter warns us that we will "stumble or fall," from the Gk. *ptaiein*. Barclay explains, "The picture in his mind is of a march and he means that we will never fall out upon the march and be left behind. If we set out upon this upward and onward way, the effort will be great but God's help will also be great; and in spite of all the toil, He will enable us to keep going until we reach our journey's end."

Peter ends this section with encouragement, saying, "For an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the *everlasting kingdom* of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 1:11). Barclay says, "Here is an image of a victorious athlete who, in ancient times, on arriving at his village, finds they had a special entrance made for him, and on entering, he is cheered." In our case, it is Christ who will greet us and say: "Well done, good and faithful servant...enter into the *joy of your Lord*" (Matthew 25:21).