

SECOND PETER

Lesson 1

God's Gift to Prevent Apostasy

2 Peter 1

The Book of Second Peter is an amazing and power-packed book. It is a tract for our modern times. It is as relevant today as it was two thousand years ago—a living proof that the true Word of God is never out of date. The twentieth century church is certainly facing many of the same problems that these first century Christians to whom Peter was writing were facing.

Apparently this epistle was written to the same group in the five provinces of Asia Minor that Peter was addressing in First Peter (1 Pet. 1:1), but it was several years later, about 66 or 67 AD. In his first book, Peter wrote to them about enduring unjust suffering from the persecution of the world. Now, two years later, new problems had arisen which demanded immediate attention. The danger to the local churches in Asia Minor was now less from without than it was from within. The churches were being infiltrated with false teachers who were teaching heresy.

Peter's reason for writing this epistle was to expose false teachers and false teaching.

“But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves” (2 Pet. 2:1).

These were not just false teachers, but they were apostates; that is, they had known the truth of Christianity, claimed to have laid hold of it by faith, and then turned from it, completely denying the truth they once knew.

“For if after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment delivered to them. It has happened to them according to the true proverb, ‘A DOG RETURNS TO ITS OWN VOMIT,’ and, ‘A sow, after washing, returns to wallow in the mire’” (2 Pet. 2:20-22).

Peter, therefore, warns these Asian Christians about following these wolves in sheep's clothing. *“You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, be on your guard lest, being carried away by the error of unprincipled men, you fall from your own steadfastness” (2 Pet. 3:17).*

The contrasts between 1 and 2 Peter are interesting. First Peter is filled with rejoicing hope in the time of suffering, but Second Peter deals with how to be true in the

face of falsehood. First Peter deals with how to detect unjust suffering and 2 Peter with how to detect untruthful error. First Peter is a letter of consolation; 2 Peter a letter of warning. First Peter is an epistle that was designed to comfort the hearer; 2 Peter was designed to disturb the hearer.

The key word in 1 Peter is “suffering”; the key word in 2 Peter is “knowledge,” which is used sixteen times in its various forms.

There was a particular heresy that Peter was attempting to combat in 2 Peter. It was Gnosticism from the Greek word *gnosis*, which means “knowledge.” This was incipient Gnosticism with its intellectual and antinomian characteristics.

A Gnostic believed that the universe was made up of two dualistic, eternal principles—spirit and matter. Spirit is good and matter is evil. God, for the Gnostic, was true spirit and could have nothing to do with that which was evil, and therefore, could have no contact with matter. In order to bridge the gap between a good God and evil matter, they devised a system whereby God emanated out from Himself a series of *aeons*, angelic beings or semi-gods. These emanations proceeded out from God in a long series, each one being a little less holy than the one before it.

The first aeon that proceeded out from God was a very holy one, but less holy than God was. Finally somewhere down the scale of emanations, there came an aeon evil enough to be responsible for the creation of the universe. It was this distant or secondary aeon (angelic being or semi-god) that was responsible for the creation of the universe. Therefore, for a Gnostic, a wicked aeon had to create an evil world. Each emanation away from God became more ignorant of God and hostile towards God. Some Gnostics identified the evil, cruel god of the Old Testament as distinct from the pure, loving God of the New Testament.

Gnostics believed that for a person to be saved, he had to traverse the course of aeons back to God. He must begin with the lowest aeon and move on back until he comes to know the true God. In doing this, the person is partaking more and more of the divine nature of God, becoming more spiritual (spirit-like) and less natural.

In their pilgrimage back through the aeons to the true God, the Gnostics believed that this was done through knowing only certain esoteric, private and secret truths known only to Gnostics and no one else. Gnostics, therefore, claimed to have the true knowledge. This knowledge, they said, led to salvation and happiness. As men gained more secret knowledge, they became more spiritual and less natural. It was only the elite or the elect (those capable of Gnostic understanding) who were saved.

Gnosticism was very intellectual and salvation was in knowing truth and not in a changed life. They believed that the body, which was evil matter, could not change but the mind could become more spiritual. Therefore, the Gnostics often lived immoral lives while they claimed to have all intellectual understanding. It is this heresy that Peter is seeking to refute in 2 Peter.

It seems so stupid to you and me that professing Christians could believe such things, but is it any more ridiculous than the modern day Jehovah’s Witnesses who say that Christ was the first created being, not God but the highest of all creatures. Or the Christian Scientists and Unity advocates who say that men become gods. You see, friends, the modern day cults are merely repeats of ancient heresies. There is no new heresy under the sun.

GIFT OF FAITH (1:1)

“Simon Peter”

Peter addresses his readers with his recognized full Christian name. Simon was his Aramaic name and Peter his Greek name. Both words mean “Rock” and if Peter were living today, we would probably call him “Rocky.” Outwardly, he was rough and callused at times, not too sensitive to the needs of the people. Yet, he had a very soft heart for the things of the Lord and genuinely wanted to minister to God’s people.

By the time he wrote 2 Peter, he was probably a man in his seventies, and he probably took little pleasure in writing this epistle because it is such a stinging rebuke against apostasy. No minister of the gospel likes to rebuke, but it is part of the job description.

“I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths” (2 Tim. 4:1-4).

Second Timothy is Paul’s swan song and 2 Peter is Peter’s, and both of these parting epistles deal with false teaching and heresy which was creeping into the local churches. They wanted to keep the churches pure doctrinally and the people alive spiritually, but people are hard to corral for Christ.

“a bond-servant and apostle of Jesus Christ”

Peter acknowledges his place in the body of Christ. He states that he is an apostle, which was a high and exalted position, and he needed to do that in order to have some authority behind his rebukes and exhortations. Yet, he identifies with his readers and calls himself a bond-slave of Christ. No matter what Peter’s position was, he was ultimately a servant.

No matter what our spiritual gifts or what positions we hold in the church, we are to serve as slaves for Christ. When Peter rebuked the people, he did it with the authority of an apostle but also with the humility and meekness of a slave.

“to those who have received a faith of the same kind as ours”

Peter is saying that these Christians had received the same faith from God that the Apostles received when they were saved. When it comes to saving faith, there is no distinction between ordinary Christians and the Apostles.

Peter is not referring to a system of belief or a doctrinal creed when he speaks of receiving faith, but to actual saving faith. Think about that for a moment! We have men of such sterling character and of such great faith, so far above us in knowledge and

practice, but Peter never thought of himself in that way, nor did any of the Apostles. They had received saving faith like any other ordinary, common Christian.

We today have been saved no differently than the Twelve Apostles of the first century, and they had no more salvation or privilege than we have today. The NIV translates this: *“Have received a faith as precious as ours.”*

The word “received” is very significant for it means “to obtain by lot” or “to receive by divine allotment.” Faith is received; it is a gift from God; it is a gracious gift totally undeserved. Saving faith which initially places one into Christ for deliverance from sin, self and judgment, is not something we work up ourselves. God grants faith to us. This faith is given in sovereign grace by God to the sinner elected (chosen out) to salvation.

Men in their natural states are so sinful, so depraved, so callused they cannot believe in Christ and they do not want to believe in Christ. There does not exist within the deadness, rebellion and corruption of the human heart the power to believe in Christ. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to convict, draw and regenerate the human heart to bring that person—to the place where he, by an act of the will, desires to place his faith and trust in Jesus Christ for salvation. Even the faith we exercise in Christ for salvation is a gift from God, and this is taught in other places in the Bible.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is a gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast” (Eph. 2:8-9).

“For to you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake” (Phil. 1:29).

“They said therefore to Him, ‘What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?’ Jesus answered and said to them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent’” (John 6:28-29).

If you believe that Jesus died for your sins and acknowledge Him as Lord of your life, then you are saved and you should shout from the housetops your thanksgiving to God, for your whole salvation, even your faith, is of God. Realizing that we were lost and headed for hell and God turned that all around by granting us salvation, even our faith, should cause us to have a genuine spirit of humility and thanksgiving.

Faith is a gift from God, but it is the act of man. God gives faith but man exercises faith, and no person will ever be saved until he or she personally believes in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Faith, however, does not ultimately come from ourselves but from God. This means that salvation is all of grace and we cannot take any credit for any part of our salvation. Salvation is not of grace plus my faith, but “by grace through faith,” faith being a gift from God and the means of appropriating salvation in Christ.

One of the best ways to prevent a person from going after false teaching and perhaps becoming a prime candidate for apostasy is to understand that salvation is by grace plus nothing. The Gnostics thought that salvation was primarily through knowledge and they could come to this knowledge all by themselves. How wrong they were! The Bible teaches that God brought us to salvation. Works do not save us; baptism does not

save us; church membership does not save us. Yes, not even our faith saves us. God saves us by grace through faith which He sovereignly gives to us.

This is a very important teaching and without it we may fall into perverted teaching or false teaching which could greatly hinder our understanding of true biblical Christianity. This is why from Augustine in the fifth century through the Reformers in the sixteenth century, such as Luther, Calvin and Knox, right down to the present time, there has been a remnant in Christianity who have sought to proclaim free grace theology over against free will theology which states that man contributes something to his salvation, even if it is just his faith.

Historically, free will theology has been known as Pelagianism, semi-Pelagianism and Arminianism. Historically, free grace theology has been known as Augustinianism or Calvinism. This is no minor issue. If man contributes anything to his salvation, even his faith, we have a works salvation. If salvation is not wholly of grace, then it is not a “by grace” salvation and it is no salvation at all.

Fortunately, many free will Christians have a practice far better than their theology. In their hearts and on their knees, they know God is sovereign in giving salvation because they thank God for it, and they pray for God to save men. Yet, on paper they say man contributes his own faith in the salvation process.

The danger with free will theology is that if man really believes he contributed his own faith to salvation, then he opens himself up to all kinds of false teaching. So you see, whether God saves or man saves is a big issue and never the two shall meet.

If you are a non-Christian and you wonder whether you have been chosen to salvation, you can lay that fear to rest if you will but exercise genuine heart-faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior from sin. If you do the act of faith, then you will know you were chosen and the gift of faith was given to you.

“by the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ”

This may mean that saving faith was given by the righteous act of God in that He does not make distinctions in giving free grace as would men. God gives saving faith to whom He pleases, not just to the rich, the wealthy, the educated, the privileged or the intelligentsia as the Gnostics believed. He does not give faith to one class of individuals and not another as Gnostics dogmatically held. Whenever God dispenses saving faith to men, it is done in total justice and fairness.

However, it seems to me that Peter is referring to the atoning work of Christ when he speaks of righteousness. In His death, Jesus Christ not only forgives every sin of the believing sinner, but He also purchased for that sinner absolute righteousness which includes saving faith. The truth was taught by Peter in his first epistle.

“For He (Christ) was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you who through Him are believers in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God” (2 Pet. 1:20-21).

Christ actively provided for a saving faith. to be given by God to believing sinners. Christ did for the sinner what he could not do—He purchased a man’s faith and

that faith is given by the Father and applied by the Holy Spirit. This is pure grace! Grace is receiving what no man deserves because of the meritorious work of Jesus Christ upon the cross.

Notice also how Jesus is referred to in this verse: “*Our God and Savior, Jesus Christ.*” Peter said Jesus is God, not an aeon, not an emanation, not an angel, not a semi-god but God, the second person of the Trinity.

Paul, in refuting the Gnostics in the Book of Colossians says, “*For in Him (Christ) all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form*” (Col. 2:9). To deny the deity of Christ is to be guilty of heresy of the worst kind. Almost every so-called cult denies the truth that Jesus Christ is truly God come in the flesh, full deity, truly God and truly man.

The relationship of Jesus’ deity to His humanity was explained at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD. At this council it was concluded that Jesus was very God and very man. That is, Jesus is undiminished deity and true humanity united in one person forever. Any other position on the deity of Christ is unbiblical and heresy.

CONCLUSION

What does God want us to learn as Christians from this lesson? First, all that we have in the way of salvation is by the grace of God. We deserve nothing but judgment but God has turned us around in grace and has given us Christ, salvation and heaven. This should cause a deep spirit of humility as well as a joyful spirit of thankfulness.

Second, faith is a gift from God and it is just as effective in bringing salvation to the little guy as the big guy such as the Apostle Peter. Saving faith has been given to the weak believer as well as the strong believer. It does not take strong faith to save us, but true faith. God does not say whoever has a giant-faith, that can remove mountains, that can stop the mouths of lions, shall be saved; but whoever believes, be his faith ever so small.

For you who are not Christians, do you desire to be saved? Do you want your sins forgiven? Do you want a new life? Then place your faith in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. You say, “How can I unless God grants me the faith?” All right then, do you have a desire to be saved? If so, then the Holy Spirit is drawing you. With this confidence, I urge you to place your faith in Christ. The moment you do, you will be saved and you will then begin to understand that God supernaturally gave you the faith to trust in Christ. Remember what Jesus said, “*This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent*” (John 6:29).