

A LOOK AT A BOOK: 2 Peter

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Introduction to 2 Peter

Most of us don't like to focus on the negative. And maybe that's why 2 Peter would probably come toward the last of most people's list of favorite books in the New Testament. Second Peter does not tell us much about the wonderful blessings that God has given his people, but it says a great deal about the dangerous and deceitful practices and teachings of certain false teachers.

Peter and His Letter. When we turn to the book of the Bible we call 2 Peter, we find an immediate claim about that book: that it was written by "Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ" (1:1). Few readers of the New Testament would fail to recognize this name. Simon was one of the first apostles called by Jesus to follow him (Mark 1:16-18). Along with James and John, he seems to have been part of the "inner circle" of apostles. It was Simon who was led by God to recognize that Jesus was the promised Messiah, the Son of God; and, as a result, Jesus himself designated Simon "Peter" (meaning rock) (Matthew 16:13-18; cf. John 1:42). Simon Peter comes both to typify the apostles and to stand out as their leader.

2 Peter 1:1-2

It is not Peter, in himself, who possesses any particular authority; his authority stems entirely from the master whom he serves. But the title "servant" also carries with it a sense of honor. Great figures in Israel's past had similarly been called "servants" of God – especially Moses (e.g., Joshua 14:17; 2 Kings 18:12) and David (e.g., Psalm 18:1; Ezekiel 34:23). Peter's right to speak authoritatively to these Christians is emphasized even more clearly in the second title, "apostle." This word can mean simply "messenger" and is so used occasionally in the New Testament (e.g., 2 Corinthians 8:23; Philippians 2:25). But the word more often has a technical sense, denoting those men chosen specifically by the Lord to be his authoritative representatives.

If Peter's description of himself sets up the letter by establishing his right to address them, his description of his readers also anticipates some of the points he is going to make in the letter. First, these Christians, who are Gentiles, have "received a faith as precious as ours." Speaking of faith in this sense as something that is "received" is unusual; and many commentators therefore think that Peter is referring to faith in its passive sense: that which Christians believe, i.e., Christian truth or doctrine. Peter further describes these Christians to whom he writes as those who have obtained this

faith “through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ.” This is the only place in the New Testament where we read of “the righteousness of...Jesus Christ.” Everywhere else the righteousness is attributed to God. But this reference to Christ is in keeping with the whole tenor of the letter, which consistently puts Christ at the same level as God. Here we have one of the few verses in the New Testament where Jesus is explicitly called “God.”

Verse 2 which follows generally the typical New Testament “greeting” form, continues to sound notes that will be heard throughout 2 Peter. “Grace” and “peace” appear frequently in these New Testament salutations. But only here in a New Testament letter opening do we find a prayer that “knowledge” might be “yours in abundance.” “Knowledge” is a key idea in the letter.

2 Peter 1:3-11

Like many good sermons, it has three points:

- (1) God has given Christians all that they need to become spiritually mature (vv. 3-4).
- (2) Christians must actively pursue spiritual maturity (vv. 5-9).
- (3) Christians must pursue spiritual maturity if they expect to be welcomed into God’s eternal kingdom (vv. 10-11).

The Believer’s Responsibility (vv. 5-9). Peter’s point is clear: Spiritual growth is not a matter that Christians can treat lightly; it is a goal to which we need to give ourselves body and soul, every day of our lives. Rather than summarizing this goal in a single word, Peter chooses to describe it as a series of ascending steps. Verses 5b-7 describe, like the steps in a staircase, eight Christian virtues that must be added, one to the other, as we move upward in our pursuit of spiritual maturity. Having said this, however, it is significant that Peter begins where he does (with “faith”) and ends where he does (with “love”). Faith, of course, is the foundational Christian virtue (or, better, gift; see v. 1); with it we respond to God’s call and come to know him and his Son, the Lord Jesus (v. 3). Peter calls on us to add “goodness” to our basic response to God’s work. “Goodness” is the same word Peter used at the end of verse 3 to describe God’s quality of moral excellence.

2 Peter 1:12-15

Peter has introduced the letter (1:1-2) and its central purpose (vv. 3-11). In verses 16-21, he will begin to explore the specific issues that have led him to write this letter – the erroneous ideas and practices of certain so-called Christians. But before Peter launches into these specifics, he does two things: (1) He commends his readers for their spiritual maturity (v. 12), and (2) he lets them know that he writes to them as one who is himself near death (vv. 13-15). Both points reinforce the strength of his appeal. The first removes the possibility that his readers might be offended by his

warnings, while the second gives to his words a “death-bed” earnestness that reinforces the seriousness of what he is saying (John 21:18-19a).

2 Peter 1:16-21

In 1:12-15, Peter has underscored the importance of what he had to say by characterizing this letter as a sort of last will and testament. In verses 16-21 he turns to the doctrinal issue that he thinks his readers are most in need of remembering in their present circumstances: the return of Christ in glory and judgment at the end of history. Peter highlights this matter by returning to it again at the end of the body of the letter (3:1-13), thereby creating a frame around the central part of the letter.

Peter attacks this eschatological skepticism by reaffirming “the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” and citing two reasons why Christians can be sure that this coming will take place: (1) the eyewitness testimony of himself and other apostles who had seen the transfiguration of Jesus (vv. 16-18), and (2) the reliability of the prophecies of Scripture (vv. 19-21).

Peter’s Eyewitness Testimony to the Parousia (vv. 16-18).

This “we” must refer to Peter and other apostles since it was only they who were eyewitnesses of the Transfiguration. In Acts 3, addressing a crowd of Jews at the temple, Peter calls on his hearers to repent, “that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you – even Jesus. He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets” (Acts 3:19-21). Again, speaking before Cornelius and his household, Peter testified that Jesus was “the one whom God had appointed as judge of the living and the dead” (10:42).

The word “coming” is used throughout the New Testament as almost a technical term for Christ’s return in glory – so much so that the underlying Greek word, *parousia*, has passed into our theological vocabulary. The Greeks used the word to refer to the special “presence” or even “coming” of a god. Josephus uses it to depict the terrifying appearance of God to Moses on Sinai. Especially significant perhaps for the New Testament use of the word is the application of *parousia* among the Greeks to the official visit of a ruler. Hence, as in verse 16 here, the word occurs seventeen times in the New Testament to refer to Christ’s return in glory.

The Transfiguration involves a transformation in Jesus’ appearance, but it is a transformation that reveals his true nature. It is this glorious and majestic nature, hidden, as it were, during his earthly life, that will be revealed to all the world at the time of his return. Put simply, the Transfiguration reveals Jesus as the glorious King,

and Peter was there to see it. He therefore has utter confidence that Jesus will return as the glorious King and establish his kingdom in its final and ultimate form.

The Testimony of the Prophets to the Parousia (vv. 19-21)

The reliability of revelation is the idea that links verses 16-18 and verses 19-21. Peter, James, and John can testify to the revelation of Christ's glory in the Transfiguration. But also testifying to Christ's glorious appearance at the end of history are the prophets.

Paul picks up from the Old Testament prophets the idea of "the day of the Lord" – that time when God will intervene decisively in history to save his people and judge his enemies. As the Romans text demonstrates, New Testament writers proclaimed that, with the death and resurrection of Christ, God had fulfilled his promises about that day. But they were equally insistent that these past redemptive events did not include all that God has intended to do in saving his people and judging his enemies. The "day of the Lord" still awaits its culmination.

It is this as yet unfilled aspect of the day that Peter here picks up. He wants his readers to pay attention to the prophetic word "until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts." The "day," as we have seen, is an Old Testament metaphor for the eschatological climax. The dawning of the day refers generally to the eschatological climax, whereas the rising of the morning star in the heart refers to the effects of that climax in the life of the believer. "Morning star" may refer to Christ himself, since Scripture elsewhere uses "star" as a messianic reference (Numbers 24:17; Revelation 22:16).

2 Peter 2:1-3

With these verses, Peter introduces the subject that will occupy the rest of the letter body: a denunciation of false teachers. Peter hinted at the existence of these false teachers in 1:16, implying that they were accusing him and the other apostles of basing their prediction of the Parousia on "cleverly invented stories." Now he turns full attention to them. The key word in these verses is "destruction/destructive": the false teaching itself is destructive (v. 1) and will bring destruction on the false teachers themselves (vv. 1, 3).

Introduction of the False Teachers (v. 1a)

Because God himself speaks reliably through his prophets, we must pay close attention to their words (1:19-21). "But," Peter reminds us, "there were also false prophets among the people." Old Testament false prophets regularly shared three characteristics: (1) they did not speak with divine authority; (2) their message was one of "good news," promising peace and security in contrast to the warnings about

judgment given by true prophets; and (3) they were shown to be worthy of condemnation. Peter applies all three characteristics to the “false teachers” he denounces. And we should especially take note that these false teachers, like the false prophets of old, scorn the idea of a judgment to come (see 3:2-10).

A Profile of the False Teachers (vv. 1b-3)

(1) They are *devious* in their manner. Realizing that an open resistance to apostolic teaching would be useless, they introduce their false ideas “secretly.”

(2) They are perpetrating a *serious error*: “even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them.” “Sovereign Lord” translates to a term applied to God or Christ only four other times in the New Testament (Luke 2:29; Acts 4:24; Jude 4; Revelation 6:10).

(3) The outcome of their teaching is *destruction*. The word here refers to eschatological condemnation. Those who follow the theology of the false teachers will be led not to final salvation but to condemnation.

(4) The *destiny* of these false teachers is, like those who follow them, “destruction.” The false teachers may think that they will not have to reckon with God’s judgment, since they hold the view that this world will continue indefinitely as it is now (see 3:2-5).

(5) The *popularity* of these false teachers is great. “Many will follow their shameful ways.”

(6) Their *impact* on the Christian movement is disastrous. For by following this erroneous teaching and lapsing into the kind of licentious behavior that Peter ascribes to the false teachers in 2:10-22, professing Christians bring “the way of truth into disrepute.”

(7) The false teachers are *motivated by greed* (v. 3). Peter alludes to this motivation later in the chapter as well, comparing the false teachers to Balaam, “who loved the wages of wickedness” (2:15; cf. v. 14: “experts in greed”). Peter claims the false teachers are “exploiting” the believers, trading in “stories that they have made up.”

(8) This phrase brings us to the final characteristic of the false teachers: The *basis* of their teaching is “stories they have made up.”

2 Peter 2:4-10a

The idea that God reserves evil people for judgment is the key idea in this paragraph. The structure of 2:4-10a is simple: Peter writes one long conditional sentence. The “if” part of the sentence is long, extending from verses 4-8.

If God did not spare angels... [v. 4]

if he did not spare the ancient world... [v. 5]

if he condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah... [v. 6]

if he rescued Lot... [vv. 7-8]

then [v. 9a]:

the Lord knows how to rescue godly men...
and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment... [vv. 9-10a]

2 Peter 2:10b-16

The False Teachers' Sensuality (vv. 13b-16)

(1) "Their idea of pleasure is to carouse in broad daylight."

(2) "Blots and blemishes." These are obviously general descriptions. The best way to define them is to recognize their opposites. Thus, in 3:14, Peter encourages his readers, as they look forward to the return of Christ, to "make every effort to be found *spotless, blameless.*"

(3) "With eyes full of adultery, they never stop sinning."

(4) "They seduce the unstable." "Seduce" translates a Greek word that has its roots in the world of hunting and fishing; it suggests the bait used to lure a fish to the hook or an animal to the trap.

(5) "They are experts in greed."

(6) "An accursed brood!" (lit., "children of curse").

(7) "They have left the straight way and wandered off to follow the way of Balaam son of Beor." Characterizing a philosophy or religion as a "way" was common in the ancient world. The imagery suggests a path of belief that one followed. Biblical writers picked up this language; the Christian movement is sometimes simply called "the Way" in the book of Acts (9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22).

2 Peter 3:1-7

Within the present unit (vv. 1-7), Peter's argument proceeds in three stages:

verses 1-2: Peter urges his readers to *remember* the truth

verses 3-4: Peter warns of scoffers

verses 5-7: Peter rebukes the scoffers for *forgetting* the truth

2 Peter 3:8-10

Peter continues to deal with the disturbance created by the appearance of "scoffers" within the church. Peter uses the word "forget" to mark the two stages in his argument. In its first stage, he reminded the false teachers of an elementary point: The Old Testament reveals many occasions on which God intervened in his world in a direct and dramatic way. How foolish to think that God cannot judge and even destroy the world (v. 7) when he himself has created it (v. 5) and "destroyed" it once already (v. 6)! But Peter realizes that even faithful Christians have questions about the return of Christ. So in this paragraph he turns to them and makes two arguments: (1) We cannot interpret God's timetable by our human reckoning of time (v. 8); and (2) we must understand God's positive purpose in delaying the Parousia (v. 9). Peter

concludes the paragraph (as he did vv. 5-7) by reiterating the truth of the return of Christ to judge (v. 10).

2 Peter 3:11-13

In 3:3-10 Peter has focused on teaching Christians what to believe about the return of Christ in glory. Now, in verses 11-13, he turns to what Christians should do about it. Reminders about the coming of the Lord and the response that Christians should have toward it are common in the last section of New Testament letters (e.g., 1 Corinthians 15:58; Ephesians 5:10-16; Philippians 4:5; Colossians 4:5; 1 Timothy 6:14; 2 Timothy 4:1-5; 1 Peter 5:1-10).

Concluding Eschatological Exhortation (vv. 14-15a)

Motivated by the Day of the Lord that is coming, believers should work hard to be found perfectly pure and blameless when God in Christ assesses our lives. They should strive to be the opposite of the false teachers, who are “blots and blemishes” (2:13).

Appeal to Paul for Confirmation (vv. 15b-16)

The implicit point Peter is making emerges from his claim that the false teachers distort Paul’s letters “as they do the other Scriptures.” The word “other” shows that Peter considers the letters of Paul to belong to the category of Scripture. The word “Scriptures” always refers in the New Testament to those writings considered not only authoritative but canonical – in a word, it refers to the Old Testament. Peter therefore implies that the letters of Paul have a status equivalent to that of the canon of the Old Testament itself.

Doxology to Christ (v. 18b)

Doxologies (ascriptions of glory [Greek *doxa*]) at the end of these letters are unusual – we find them only here, in Romans 16:25-27 (assuming that these verses are original), Philippians 4:20, and Jude 24-25.