

2 Peter 2, False Teachers

Jesus sent His disciples into the world to preach the Gospel, and make disciples of all the nations; but at the same time they were going into the world, the world was also trying to move into the churches. Immediately after Paul's first missionary journey in which he had planted numerous churches in the region of Galatia, false teachers came in after he left, and tried to add to the gospel a works oriented legalism. Paul was shocked, and as soon as he got that report, he fired off a letter to the new churches, which we still have a copy of in our Bible named THE LETTER OF PAUL TO THE GALATIANS. Paul warned them of the danger of false teachers preaching a different gospel than what had saved them, and Paul had some serious condemnation for those false teachers.

Jesus warned against false teachers in Matthew 7:15, saying they would be very deceptive by coming in "sheep's clothing", but inwardly they are "ravenous wolves". John also warned of "many deceivers" who teach an errant doctrine about Christ in 2 John 7-9. Jude, who was the half brother of Jesus, wrote his epistle primarily about the danger of false teachers. Now in 2 Peter 2, we have Peter's condemnation of these sneaky, greedy, lustful spreaders of error who have always invaded the church from the first church in Jerusalem to our churches today. Believers in every area and in every century have had to be on guard against this attack.

The History of Israel

Throughout the history of Israel in the Old Testament, false prophets were always a problem. The true prophets of God were always warning Israel about them, but their deceptive message tended to be more in line with what the people wanted to hear. God sent prophets like Jeremiah with a word of warning to repent and return to total devotion to the one true God of Israel. If they did not repent, God was sending discipline in the form of the Chaldean army from Babylon to destroy Judah and Jerusalem. As you can imagine this was an unpopular message, so the leadership brought in their own experts to deliver an opposing message with a very positive view of what was going on. Jeremiah had some stern words for these false prophets with a word from God, "An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land; the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule on their own authority, and My people love it so!" (Jer.5:31). Again in Jeremiah 23, God said, "Do not listen to the words of the prophets...who are leading you into futility. They speak a vision of their own imagination, not from the Lord...Behold I am against them...I did not send them...nor do they furnish this people the slightest benefit, declares the Lord".

In the New Testament, in Peter's second letter, Peter began his teaching about false teachers by reminding his readers of the history of Israel being plagued by false prophets in order to convey the message to his audience not to fall into the same trap. By ignoring the Word of God, and listening to the selfishly optimistic words of the deceivers, Israel fell into ruin, and was destroyed. Peter went on to say that there would be false teachers

among the churches that would sneakily introduce false destructive heresies, in particular concerning the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Conduct of False Teachers

In 2 Peter 2:1-3, Peter gave us the typical conduct of these false teachers. The false teachers actually rise up out of the midst of the church itself. Initially, no one identifies them as evil, but instead they may be popular and enjoy a large following. They don't blatantly introduce "destructive heresies", but very subtly bring in seemingly harmless stuff that is unnoticed. To many, they are appealing as their message is positive, and very much what people want to hear. Behind the scenes, their true colors are marked by greed, sexual immorality, and the exploitation of people (using the members for their own selfish purposes). Historically, their heresies have centered around the nature of Christ. They might say that Jesus was a great teacher, a great example for us to follow, and a great religious leader. Sounds good doesn't it, but Jesus is much more than that. They omit that Jesus is God in the flesh who lived a sinless life, and therefore He alone is able to atone for our sins. With a lesser view of Jesus they are then able to put less emphasis on such important doctrines as the resurrection of Christ. Eventually these false teachers will water down Christianity until they have just another man-centered religion with a works based salvation.

God's Judgment is not Asleep

In verse 3, Peter said that "their judgment is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep". There will be divine retribution, even though lightning will not strike them immediately. God is awake to what they are doing, and their eternal condemnation is assured. Peter seems to be using the image of an executioner who seems to be asleep because nothing is happening in the short run. These misleading people seem to get away with it for a long time, but in the end God will crush them. Historically, and in our own experience, these kinds of wolves in sheep's clothing do at some point in time show their true nature through some type of sex scandal or money scandal.

In the history of the Bible Peter gives three examples of God finally acting to bring judgment against evil (2 Peter 2:4-9). The first example is God's condemnation of fallen angels by committing the worst of them to "pits of darkness". If God did not fail to judge angels, He certainly will not fail to judge those who mislead the church. Secondly, God did not even spare the whole world from judgment during the time of Noah. Today, many of these televangelists or show business type preachers boast of huge congregations, but do they think that they can escape God's judgment if He was willing to wipe out the whole world with a flood? Jesus said that when this happened all the evil people "were eating and drinking and marrying", just living another day as if God would never execute judgment (Matt.24:38). Thirdly, God had patiently waited on the people of Sodom and Gomorrah to repent, but at a point in time He did not hesitate to destroy them completely. The author of Jude 7 wrote that these cities were "exhibited as an example, in undergoing the punishment of eternal fire." I'd say that seals their fate, and Peter is suggesting the same fate for false teachers in the church.

Interestingly, Peter points out God's treatment of the righteous among those examples of destruction in 2 Peter 2:7-9. God rescued Noah and his family from the flood, and God spared Lot from the destruction of Sodom. From the story of Lot in Genesis, Lot was no choirboy, but Peter confirms that Lot was a saved believer, and that he was distressed by the horrific sin going on around him in Sodom. Therefore God "rescued" Lot from Sodom. In v.9, Peter makes his point that God knows how to rescue His people, and He is sure to condemn and punish the unrighteous as well. At the end of verse 9 we see that God's punishment may be delayed until the day of judgment in the future, but the outcome is no less certain.

The True Characteristics of the False Teachers

As wolves in sheep's clothing, these people look good, sound good, and are appealing in every way. Just as Paul wrote in 2 Cor.11:14-15 that even "Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore it is not surprising that his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their deeds." Nevertheless, Peter wrote in 2 Peter 2:10-22 that behind closed doors they are very self indulgent, corrupt, selfish, adulterers, and worst of all they entice others into sin. This is the sin of Balaam that Peter mentioned in v.15. In Numbers 22-25, Balak the king of Moab, tried to hire a famous prophet named Balaam to curse Israel. Balak had heard of Israel's many victories and how God was with Israel, so Balak tried to go the superstitious way and get a mercenary false prophet to curse Israel. God not only forbid Balaam from cursing Israel, but God blocked his way by sending the "angel of the Lord" to keep him from going by standing before his donkey. When Balaam struck the donkey, the angel spoke through the donkey to tell him to turn back from cursing Israel. Still, even after God made it clear to Balaam that He was with Israel, Balaam's greed got the best of him. In the end, the sin of Balaam that Peter refers to was in teaching Moab how to sneakily corrupt Israel. Talk about deception and a wolf in sheep's clothing! Balaam advised Balak to exploit Israel at their weakest point. They sent the Moabite Bikini team into the Israelite camp to corrupt the men of Israel (my paraphrase of Numbers 25:1-5). We know that Balaam counseled this from Numbers 31:16. When you think about this it is insanity that Balaam thought he could get away with it, yet at the end of the day that is what sin is, insanity. Money, selfishness, sex, and power continued in Peter's day and far more so today to drive people to be spiritually insane.

Peter finished chapter 2 by using various images of false teachers self destruction, the emptiness of their teaching, and their fate, as well as those who follow them. Peter used two particularly disturbing metaphors to describe people who have every advantage and know the truth, but still turn away from it in verse 22, "It has happened to them according to the true proverb, 'A dog returns to its own vomit', and 'A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire.'" Let us "be on our guard" as Peter wrote at the end of his letter, and "grow in the grace and true knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

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