

Peter's Perspective on Persecution
"The Deception and Destruction of False Teaching"

Passages: 2 Peter 2:1-3, 17–22
 Matthew 23:13-24

Peter has a very simple view of humanity. For him, there are only two types of people in the world:

Either you are *moving towards the light of truth and grace* which is ultimately found in Jesus Christ... Or, you are *moving away from the light of truth and grace* which is ultimately found in Jesus Christ.

Peter, you see, is convinced that Jesus is *the light of the world*; Jesus is *the fullness of God's glory* revealed on earth. Jesus is the One who, ***"by His own glory and goodness"*** (2 Peter 1:3), now calls the human race to come out of darkness! Jesus is the One who invites us to ***"participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires"*** (2 Peter 1:4).

And the thing is, **no one can stand still!** Everyone is either moving in one direction or the other—towards the light of Christ or away from it! Of course, that movement may be imperceptible to the human eye. It may look like the person is standing still. But no one ever really stands still. Like fish in the ocean, all of us are moving through life. Every day, we are growing, learning, engaging with others. Every day, we are experiencing life in a myriad of ways—all of which gradually shape and change us. **No one is standing still!**

That is why Peter has such disdain for false teachers, and why (in today's passage) he launches into a stinging attack on their evil ways. **Because no one is standing still**, Peter's greatest fear is that the Christians to whom he is writing (scattered around Greece, Turkey and the Middle East) might start listening to these false teachers and start swimming in the wrong direction. They might start following the lead of these false prophets, just as ancient Israel repeatedly did throughout the Old Testament!

Listen again to Peter's words in verses 1:

“But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves.”

Do you remember how, in the previous passage (at the end of chapter 1), Peter talked about Jesus and His glory? Do you remember how he spoke about the Mount of Transfiguration and how Jesus (the *Living Word of God*) had come to illuminate this dark world? Do you also remember how Peter then told us that the Scriptures (the *written Word of God*) were now given to us to keep us in the light of Christ?

Peter said all that because he knew that his readers were increasingly drawn into the light of Christ. He knew that had been growing more and more in the glorious image of God’s Son! They were gradually being glorified! They were increasingly participating in the divine nature!

But, Peter also knew that was one thing that could short-circuit this glorification process; namely, false teachers! And so, Peter makes it clear:

² Many will follow their depraved conduct and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. ³ In their greed these teachers will exploit you with fabricated stories. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping.”

Essential to Peter’s argument against false teachers are two words:

“**condemnation**” and “**destruction**”. You see, anyone who leads another person to stray or turn away from the light of truth by fabricating another so-called truth is seriously devilish—that is, they are aligning themselves with the work of the devil, the father of lies...the very one whom God condemns and who He will eventually destroy! Indeed, throughout the Bible, anyone who leads another person into darkness is not only worthy of God’s condemnation—they must be destroyed! Why? ***“For God desires not the death of a sinner but that all might turn to Him and live”***. That is, God wants the whole world to turn to His light...to come back to His love...to return to His

fold. He wants, above all things, to embrace the human race in the glorious light of his Kingdom! That is why He sent Jesus to earth; that is why He has poured out His Holy Spirit on all flesh—to draw the world back into His light!

A false teacher undermines this process! By leading people (who would otherwise be growing in the light of life of Christ) into darkness, a false teacher participates in Satan’s work—they oppose God’s plans to save us and, as a result, they diminish our personhood! They destroy us!

That is why the two key words that Peter uses here are “condemnation” and “destruction”. Indeed, these are the exact same words that Jesus used when He spoke, directly, to the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law. They were false teachers! And this is what Jesus had to say to them in Matthew 24!

¹³ “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.” ^[14]

¹⁵ “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are.”

Indeed, the whole problem with false teachers is that they have been so incredibly duped by their own rhetoric that they can’t even see the darkness into which they are going and into which they are leading others! That’s why Jesus calls them “blind guides”!

¹⁶ “Woe to you, blind guides! ²⁴ You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.”

It is this fact which becomes the centre of Peter’s argument in 4 to 16. Peter gives his readers one story after another of the false teachers in Israel’s history who attempted to lead (or even succeeded in leading) God’s people astray. A people who were moving towards the light were distracted, and then diverted, from that light by false teachers. Peter’s point, in the end, is to say that these false teachers not only stand **condemned**, but they will eventually be **destroyed**.

Verse 13—**“They will be paid back with harm for the harm they have done.”**

Now, does that sound callous to you? Is God being heartless? I don't think so! After all, Jesus said much the same thing about false teachers! In Matthew 23:34, He concludes his tirade against them by saying: ***“You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?”***

Why is that? It's simply because teachers have been given a gift from God, the sole purpose of which is to lead people from darkness into light. God's gift enables you to reason with, and to convince, other people of the truth. It is a gift of incredible power! Divine power! It is a gift to be used for the good of humankind...given by God to lead people from darkness to light! Hence, to be a teacher is both a great privilege and a wonderful calling!

But this gift of teaching also has a huge responsibility that goes with it. As James, the brother of Jesus, would explain years later in his letter; ***“Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.”*** This is what Jesus was trying to say! And so was Peter! *Woe to the person who takes the good gift of teaching and uses it for evil purposes!* Woe to the one who uses their good gift to lead people **away** from the light and into the darkness! In verses 17 to 19, Peter calls them ***“springs without water”***; they are men who ***“mouth empty and boastful words and, appealing to the lustful desires of sinful human nature, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error.”*** Peter adds, ***“They promise them freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity...”***

When you look at it this way, I hope it is clear why, in the end, these false teachers must be *condemned* and *destroyed*...before they do any more damage.

But, what about their victims? What does Peter say about them? Are they to be held guilty of falling prey to false teachers? Will God *condemn* and *destroy* them as well? I don't think so! In fact, what Peter goes on to describe next is how those who follow false teaching aren't *condemned* and *destroyed by God*. Rather, they end up condemning and destroying themselves! **How is that?**

I'm sure you've heard the expression, "*You are what you eat!*" Well, how does that work? How does a person become what they eat? Does it happen in an hour? Or a day? A week? A month? Does it happen in a year? **No! It happens over a lifetime!** If you fill yourself with fatty foods and sugary drinks, it might not become evident straight away. But, over time, your body will change! These things will gradually begin to destroy you! At first, you may get a few pimples. Next, you will have new cavities in your teeth. Over a few more months, you may see that you are putting on some weight. In another year, your clothes no longer fit. After a few more years, you find yourself getting out of breath when walking up stairs. In ten more years, you discover that you have developed diabetes. Add another ten years and you are showing signs of cholesterol and heart disease. Your unhealthy diet will eventually kill you! And so, when we say, "*You are what you eat!*", it takes a lifetime to really see what this means!

Now, Peter understands this concept in a spiritual sense. He sees that, if you start eating the junk food that false teachers dish up, it may be very tasty at first...particularly in the midst of persecution! You turn to it because it offers a quick way out! It's a much easier road to travel! **In the long run, however, it will condemn and destroy you!** And even if, in the past, you were eating healthy foods, once you start eating the junk food of false teaching, you soon come in serious danger of self-destruction! Even if, in the past, you were moving toward the light of Christ, once you start moving in the opposite direction, you are in serious danger of becoming permanently lost in the darkness! Peter actually says that you are "**worse off**" than you were at the very beginning, before you knew Christ! Ignorance of Christ, it seems, is far better than outright rejection of Him!

Listen again to verses 20- 22,

²⁰ If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and are overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. ²¹ It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their

backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them. ²² ***Of them the proverbs are true: “A dog returns to its vomit,”^[a] and, “A sow that is washed returns to her wallowing in the mud.”***

These three verses throw up some difficult questions! Chief among them is whether or not **a person can lose their salvation**. I mean, is it really possible for someone who truly “knows *our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*” to be somehow turned away from His salvation through the influence of false teachers? Is it possible for someone who has “known the way of righteousness” to suddenly “turn their backs” on it?

Many Christians believe that this is impossible! And they argue that, since God would never let us be plucked from His hand, these words from Peter are only hypothetical. They argue that since ***“nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”***, that Peter is actually presenting us with an impossible scenario, just to serve as a warning.

Indeed, for many *churches*, this idea (often called “eternal security”) has become a chief doctrine of the faith! A few weeks ago, I received a phone call from a local Christian woman who told me that she would like to send her Chinese friend to our church. *“But before I do”*, she said, *“I want to make sure that you teach the truth.”* And with that, she bombarded me with a number of questions: What did I believe about Jesus Christ? What did I believe about the Holy Spirit? What did I believe about the Bible? Which version of the Bible did we use? (In her mind, the only Bible that was not corrupt was the King James Version! I cheekily responded by asking her which Chinese version should we use! She was silent!)

Anyway, one of the questions she asked me was whether I believed a person could lose their salvation! *“That’s a hard question,”* I responded, *“because, although I do believe that God holds us in the palm of His hand and fights for us to keep us in His ways, yet I also believe (as Peter seems to be saying here) that it is possible for a person to lose their salvation! It is possible for a believer to be so enticed by false teaching that they turn away from the very faith they*

once professed". That, of course, was the last straw for this woman. She hung up with an incredibly dismissive attitude, as if I was in league with the devil! But tell me, was I wrong? Doesn't Peter make it clear in these verses that it is possible for people who **"have escaped from the corruption of the world"** to become **"entangled in it"** once again **"and overcome"**?! Doesn't Peter believe that, just like a washed pig goes back into the mud, or like a dog that eats its own vomit, Christians can be enticed to go back to a former way of life...one that leads to death?

So, let's work it out. **How can a person 'lose' their salvation?** Is it God's fault? Has God failed to hold that person? Of course not! For if our faith is a matter of God holding tightly onto us, *even against our will*, then there is no relationship with Him. If faith is a matter of God *forcing us* to believe, even though we have been enticed to ditch it all, then faith becomes coercion! Dr. Jeff Niehaus, from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, put it this way: *"Can you 'lose' your salvation? No. But you can certainly throw it away."*

And with this idea, we come back full circle to where I started my sermon! As I said, **Peter has a very simple view of humanity**. For him, there are only two types of people in the world:

Either you are *moving towards the light of truth and grace* which is ultimately found in Jesus Christ...Or, you are *moving away from it*. Either you are growing in the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ, allowing Him to transform you, day by day, into His glorious image... Or, you are seeking other things as priority in your life, allowing false idea, false concepts, and false values to crowd out the truth you once knew, inevitably leading you down the slippery slope of unbelief.

And here's where the repeated warnings from Jesus, and Paul, and James and Peter come in—**"Don't throw your salvation away!"** Indeed, the very last words of Peter in this 2nd epistle reiterate this important issue (and with them we will conclude): ***¹⁷ Therefore, dear friends, since you have been forewarned, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of the lawless and fall from your secure position. ¹⁸ But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.***