

## 2PETER 2:1-22    CBC 7.3.2021am

Covid has taught us to be careful: to keep our distance, to wear our mask, to sanitize our hands. This morning, God is warning us about something far more destructive than Covid. So if we can be diligent about washing our hands, let's be even more diligent in heeding God's word.

What's the danger? False teachers. We don't take them seriously enough, but the apostles did. Jesus told Peter to tend his flock. Feed them! Guard them! Peter took that seriously, and 2Peter 2 is a powerful warning against false teachers. It's not PC, because there's no nice way to warn of people who are a menace. Think of parents warning children of dangers – an unpleasant but necessary duty, motivated by love. And children don't always want to listen! But I'm praying we'll be eager listeners, because God wouldn't say these things if we didn't need to hear them.

And if anyone says, "*Aren't Christians meant to be tolerant?*" – the answer is, Not tolerant of evil and destruction. Would it be good to have a God who tolerates people leading others to hell? Thank God for a God who says "*The only way to hell is over my dead body.*" Literally.

The clearest way to get hold of this lengthy chapter is to focus on its two main themes:

- The menace of false teachers
- The power of God to judge and to save

So first the bad news, then the good news.

### **1. THE MENACE OF FALSE TEACHERS, vv.1-3, 10-22**

**2:1** *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. 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.*

Peter says that the menace of false teachers is always with us. He has been telling us about true prophets (1:21), but now he reminds us that God's people in the past were also plagued by *false* prophets who preached things that were wrong. True prophets in the Old Testament were usually a despised minority.

Nothing has changed, says Peter: v.1 "among you" – false teachers mingle with the true church. There are apostate teachers in mainline denominations – wolves in sheep's clothing. The internet is infested with them! Cable and satellite TV will pump them into your living room. And it's foolish to pretend it isn't happening. We can't hide from it – but we can be awake to the danger.

They "*deny the sovereign Lord*" – what a heartfelt thing for Peter to say. HE denied the Lord, but his denial was a blip under pressure and he repented of it. Theirs is a determined rejection of God's sovereignty over them. They don't want God's rule, and they show it:

- "destructive heresies" (v.1) – they don't want God telling them what to believe! They'll believe and teach what suits them.
- "depraved conduct" (v.2) – they don't want God telling them how to live! They'll live how they please and teach others to do likewise.

It shouldn't surprise us. False teaching is one of Satan's main weapons – "*Who are we to believe?*" It's an effective weapon: v.2 "*many will follow them.*" And a lucrative one (v.3) – they make money out of their "*fabricated stories*" – just what Peter said "*We didn't follow*" (1:16). This might be claims to new revelations, or boasts about the success of their ministry, or offering things that God hasn't promised – millions believe the false gospel that "*You'll be wealthy*" – and they're not wealthy, but the people selling them the message ARE wealthy, and exploiting the flock.

So how do we know these false teachers? What do they look like? They won't have a big sign around their neck saying *"I am a false teacher, please don't listen to me."* But through Peter's pen God gives us a portrait of them in vv.10-22. It's like the police issuing a picture of a dangerous criminal and saying, *"If you see this person, do NOT approach him!"* Not all these characteristics are true of every false teacher but they make a recognisable picture and they should sound warning bells:

a) Arrogant and spiritually reckless vv.10-12

**10** *This is especially true of those who follow the corrupt desire of the flesh and despise authority. Bold and arrogant, they are not afraid to heap abuse on celestial beings; 11 yet even angels, although they are stronger and more powerful, do not heap abuse on such beings when bringing judgment on them from the Lord. 12 But these people blaspheme in matters they do not understand. They are like unreasoning animals, creatures of instinct, born only to be caught and destroyed, and like animals they too will perish.*

The false teachers have no respect for the supernatural. They mock anything they can't understand – like church leaders who scoff at the existence of the devil. Yet even the angels – much stronger than we are – don't play fast and loose with evil powers. They know that it takes the power of God to defeat these evil forces. But the false teachers are blinded by their own arrogance. Don't they realize they're playing with fire? *"Fools rush in where angels fear to tread"* (Alexander Pope).

b) Addicted to evil vv.13-16

**13** *They will be paid back with harm for the harm they have done. Their idea of pleasure is to carouse in broad daylight. They are blots and blemishes, revelling in their pleasures while they feast with you. 14 With eyes full of adultery, they never stop sinning; they seduce the unstable; they are experts in greed – an accursed brood! 15 They have left the straight way and wandered off to follow the way of Balaam son of Bezer, who loved the wages of wickedness. 16 But he was rebuked for his wrongdoing by a donkey – an animal without speech – who spoke with a human voice and restrained the prophet's madness.*

They're addicted to evil and they're confidently immoral. They think they can get away with it, because their greed has blinded them to the disaster that awaits them. They're like Balaam, a corrupt prophet whose donkey had more spiritual insight than he did! (You can read the detail in Numbers chs.22-24).

c) Empty promises vv.17-19

**17** *These people are springs without water and mists driven by a storm. Blackest darkness is reserved for them. 18 For they mouth empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of the flesh, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error. 19 They promise them freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity – for 'people are slaves to whatever has mastered them.'*

False teachers lose touch with reality. They promise spiritual refreshment for the thirsty, but the reality is they are *"springs without water"* (v.17) – dry wells (a horrible discovery for an Eastern traveller). They say life will work if we follow their simple programme. But of course we're disappointed.

They promise freedom (v.19) – freedom from narrow morality. But what's the truth about these false teachers? *"They themselves are slaves of depravity."* Inviting us to come and join them. That's the irony.

**d) The same old nature vv.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,' and, 'A sow that is washed returns to her wallowing in the mud.'*

After an initial show of repentance, they soon prove that nothing in their nature has changed. They came into the church and picked up some knowledge but they didn't stick with it. And the reason, v.22, is their nature has never been changed. The dog throws up and get some muck out of its stomach –

but it's still a dog! Before long, it shows it's back at the vomit, sniffing and licking it. It shows its true nature. You can scrape some of the mud off a pig, but you won't change its nature – it's still a pig, and it will go back to the mud.

Everybody in the world is true to their nature – either to their fallen nature because that's all they've got, or to their new nature because God has granted them the miracle of new birth. I think Peter is saying these people were never converted. Their true nature has reappeared. Peter isn't talking about people in church who want to follow Christ but still sometimes fall into sin – Christ died for our forgiveness and we must keep turning back to Him. That's what Peter himself did – but it's not what he's talking about here.

No: the false teachers have not had a momentary lapse. They've chosen their course, and like everybody else they're travelling in the direction of their nature. If they had a new nature, there'd be a new direction. That's why Jesus said we must be born again.

It's not a pretty picture. Is Peter going over the top? Perhaps we're the ones who've become insensitive to the danger. Think of a parent screaming at a child who has just wandered into the road. Would you say to that parent, *"I don't think you should get so worked up about these things"*? The parent might reply, *"Are you crazy??"* You'd be out of touch with reality.

Thank God that Peter is a good shepherd, like the Lord Jesus. He warns us against the wolves. He's a faithful pastor.

So Peter warns us, but he also wants to reassure us. Two questions come to mind:

- Why doesn't God do something about these false teachers?
- How can I survive such pressure?

Peter answers both these questions in vv.3-9

## 2. THE POWER OF GOD TO JUDGE AND TO SAVE vv.3(b)-9

**3(b)** *Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping. 4 For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them in chains of darkness to be held for judgment; 5 if he did not spare the ancient world when he brought the flood on its ungodly people, but protected Noah, a preacher of righteousness, and seven others; 6 if he condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes, and made them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly; 7 and if he rescued Lot, a righteous man, who was distressed by the depraved conduct of the lawless 8 (for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard) – 9 if this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials and to hold the unrighteous for punishment on the day of judgment.*

God will deal with the false teachers! How do we know? Peter gives us three examples from history:

- **First example, v.4:** God judged rebellious angels. We might like more details, but we don't need them. The message is clear: no-one is so powerful as to be immune from God's judgement – certainly not the false teachers, whatever they may think.
- **Second example, v.5:** God judged the ancient world by a flood. The fact that the overwhelming majority rejected God's rule (*"Everybody's doing it!"*) gave them no protection whatever. Truth and morality are not decided by majorities.

But don't stop there: God knows how to judge His enemies but also how to save His friends! NOAH – what a hero of the faith! What patience, hammering away for years as scoffers walked by. He "preached" righteousness – explained what he was doing and why. Can you imagine the response? It was the response YOU get when you witness to Christ. But God kept him.

- **Third example, vv.6-8:** God judged the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah for their wickedness, but rescued Lot, *"a righteous man"*. ... That doesn't mean Lot was perfect! He was quite a

feeble character in many ways but Peter says he was godly enough to be distressed by the evil around him. To live in Sodom and Gomorrah and not get desensitized by the evil that's all around you – not get used to it, not gradually accept it – we've got a God who enabled Lot to live like that, and who rescued him.

And Peter's conclusion from these examples is v.9: the Lord knows how to do two things:

- the Lord knows how to rescue godly people from trials (as Noah and Lot would testify)
- the Lord clearly knows how to judge the wicked (as the fallen angels, and Noah's generation, and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah could testify).

This is good news – far better than the morally indifferent god of the false teachers. Think of all the victims of injustice, who watch their tormentors getting away with it. *"He's laughing his head off"* – and maybe he is, because if there's no Last Judgement wrong will never be righted. No doubt Noah's neighbours mocked the warnings of judgement, as did the thugs of Sodom and Gomorrah. But Peter tells us they're not laughing now.

And it's not because God is harsh or unfair! Those who were judged by God in these examples had all enjoyed great privileges. The angels lived in the presence of God! The people of Noah's day were patiently warned for many years! The cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were greatly blessed: *"the whole area was well watered, like the garden of the Lord"* (Ge 13:10). They were all shown such kindness – and they threw it back in God's face. His sentence on them was perfect justice – as it always is. Do you think God is less concerned with justice now? He will return in *final* judgement, as Peter will show in ch.3

If you read this portrait of the false teachers, recognize the corruption of this world and are heading for despair – you need to read v.9: we have a God who knows how to judge – AND how to rescue!

I want to end with this encouragement. We may think, *"How can the church survive in such a world?"* Well, it takes divine power to preserve us in a depraved world and a corrupted church. But Peter's point is: we have a God with that power!

- Where false prophets denied judgement, Noah preached it;
- Where others lived immoral lives, Lot resisted it (however imperfectly).

We can be like Noah and Lot! Not by our own power, but by the power of God given to us in Jesus. Don't forget 1:3: "His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life" – That's the gospel miracle. We need it!

We can't look down our noses at the false teachers, can we? By nature our hearts have the same seeds of evil. But we bring our evil, fallen hearts to the cross of Christ, and there we find the justice of God very clearly: sin is being dealt with. But we also see the mercy of God: sinners are being saved.

And when God loves sinful, rebellious people enough to die for them to make them His forever, that's a miracle. When people who have hearts that are attracted to arrogance, and immorality, and independence of God turn to Him and find mercy and grace because of Jesus, that's a miracle. When God adopts His former enemies as His beloved children and freely gives them all the treasures of His kingdom, that's a miracle. And that's what He does in Jesus! That's the Good News!

And if God wants to keep us out of the arms of the false teachers, it's because His love wants to fold us safely and forever into the arms of the Lord Jesus Christ. Is that what you want too?

**PRAYER:** Father God, have mercy on us. Have mercy on those in danger from false teachers; those tempted to turn back to what you've rescued us from; those who are tempted to deny the Sovereign Lord. Rescue your church from these dangers. By your Holy Spirit, make us watchful and wise; help your people to grow in grace and to receive a rich welcome into the kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, in whose Name we pray. AMEN.

**FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION:** Where are we most likely to be exposed to false teachers? How can we help to guard one another? How should Peter's teaching inform our search for a new senior pastor?