

The Greatest Threat to the Church Is from Within

2 Peter: Faithful to the End

2 Peter 2:1-22

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Good morning. My name is Mike Andrus and I am a part-time Pastor to Senior Adults here at First Free. While Josh is on study leave, one of our pastoral residents, Dominick Wong, has organized a three-week study of the New Testament book of 2 Peter. He did a great job introducing the book last Sunday and sharing from chapter 1 how the apostle uses the hope of the second coming to encourage believers to live godly lives that are worthy of that coming glory. Dominick's enthusiasm for Scripture and for the Lord is infectious, isn't it? He will return next week to conclude the brief series with chapter 3, where Peter returns to the theme of the second coming and the moral imperative that places on our lives. I have been asked to take the middle chapter.

I think I picked the short straw. Second Peter 2 may be the most negative, depressing, and discouraging chapter in the entire New Testament. It is a diatribe against false teachers in the church, railing against them for their apostasy, heresy, arrogance, immorality, blasphemy, and greed. It promises divine judgment on them and the people who follow them. There is essentially only one positive word of hope in the whole chapter.

But, friends, when Paul writes that all Scripture is God-breathed and profitable (2 Tim. 3:16), he means *all* Scripture. That means this chapter is profitable for us to study; in fact, it may be one of the most relevant passages we could possibly study today. If you follow the religious news at all you are probably aware that over the past five years numerous high-profile church leaders have crashed and burned. And I'm not talking about liberal pastors from mainline churches, or Catholic priests practicing pedophilia, or charlatans perpetrating health-wealth heresy.

I'm talking evangelicals, mega-church pastors with international reputations who regularly speak on the pastors' conference circuit, write scores of books telling Christians how to live, and train thousands of other pastors how to do church.

I'm talking about famous pastors like Bill Hybels of Willow Creek, James MacDonald of the Harvest Bible Churches, Mark Driscoll of Mars Hill Church in Seattle and the Acts 29 Network, Darren Patrick of The Journey in St. Louis, Joshua Harris, pastor of Covenant Life Church and author of *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, who recently kissed his wife and his faith goodbye, Tullian Tchividjian the grandson of Billy Graham and pastor of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church, and the list could go on and on. There has been a veritable plague of evangelical pastors and leaders who have gone down the tubes due to spiritual arrogance, greed, immorality, and even apostasy.

I do not mention these names to cause further embarrassment to these leaders (after all, they have lost their reputations, their livelihoods, in some cases their families, and in one case even his life to suicide two months ago). Furthermore, I know several of these men personally, and their falls are a stark reminder that "there but for the grace of God go I." No, I mention these names to impress upon us that these words from Peter are extremely relevant today for gospel-believing evangelicals, and yes, even for us in the Free Church. We may be shocked by what we see among our leaders but we can't say we weren't warned.

Now it has crossed my mind that there may actually be a few listeners who take delight in this sermon. I'm talking about people who are heresy hunters, constantly looking for flaws in other people's lives, eager to share stories of failure. That would be unfortunate. Peter's ultimate intent is to address the danger for our own lives. In fact, he closes this letter by exhorting his listeners: "Take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability" (3:17).¹ If trained, gifted and successful leaders are succumbing to Satan's temptations, do we think we are not susceptible? "Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12).

Wherever you are listening I trust you have your Bible open as we read God's Word together as found in 2 Peter chapter 2. We're going to read just the first two paragraphs to begin with.

2 Peter 2:1-10a

¹But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. ²And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. ³And in their greed they will exploit you with false words. Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.

⁴For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment; ⁵if he did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; ⁶if by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes he condemned them to extinction, making them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly; ⁷and if he rescued righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked ⁸) for as that righteous man lived among them day after day, he was tormenting his righteous soul over their lawless deeds that he saw and heard); ⁹then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment, ¹⁰and especially those who indulge in the lust of defiling passion and despise authority.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Peter begins the chapter with the warning that . . .

FALSE TEACHERS ARE A SERIOUS THREAT TO THE CHURCH. (V. 1-3)

It's unusual for a chapter in any book to open with the word "but." That's a connecting word and immediately draws our attention back to the end of chapter 1 where Peter spoke of the great prophets who wrote the Old Testament as they were inspired by the Holy Spirit. Then, beginning in chapter 2 he adds, "But false prophets also arose among the people (i.e. among the people of Israel)." The holy were always opposed by the unholy, the true by the false. Moses was a true prophet of God but he had to contend with Korah and with Jannes and Jambres. Elijah had to go up against the four hundred prophets of Baal, and Jeremiah was opposed by Hananiah. Then Peter warns his audience that apostates and false teachers are also at work in the church.

One of the reasons false teachers are successful in infiltrating the body of Christ is that they typically bring in their destructive heresies "secretly" (v. 1). They never come to a pulpit committee and announce, "I'm an apostate and I'd like to lead this church into apostasy." Or, "I'm a false teacher and I'd like to propagate my heresy in your seminary." No, they pretend to be orthodox until they

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

gain a following or obtain tenure. They go through the motions, they use the traditional vocabulary of the faith, but their hearts and minds are far from the truth.

In other cases (and I suspect this is true of most of the names I mentioned earlier) they actually hold to orthodox theology but their lives become entrapped by fame, power, greed, or immorality. In either case, the sad result is that they end up, as verse 1 says, “denying the Master who bought them,” i.e. the Savior who gave his life to redeem them! Whether they deny him overtly through heretical teaching or inadvertently by their lifestyle, the result is tragic both for the church and for its witness to the world.

It’s destructive to the church because, as verse 2 notes, “many will follow their sensuality.” People tend to imitate the lives of their leaders more than their words. But it also damages the church’s mission, for he adds, “and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed.” The witness of the church in the world is destroyed as unbelievers observe the dichotomy between belief and behavior. Whenever a pastor or Christian leader renounces his faith or experiences a moral failure, the enemies of Christ have a heyday. The Chicago Tribune ran multiple stories when the pastors of the two largest evangelical churches there were fired for conduct unbecoming a minister. The world celebrates that.

But more important than what the world does with these failures, what is God going to do about it? Look at the end of the first paragraph: “Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.” God promises to bring the hammer down on those who mess with his church and cause innocent people to stumble.² And to prove that Peter now provides us with a sober history lesson.

FALSE TEACHERS FACE CERTAIN JUDGMENT. (VV. 4-10A)

I think the best way to grasp Peter’s logical argument here is to isolate certain phrases:

Verse 4: “For if God did not spare angels when they sinned but cast them into hell”; verse 5: “and if he did not spare the ancient world ...”; verse 6: “and if he condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to extinction ...”; verse 9: “then the Lord knows how ... to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment.”

In other words, if you consider how God has dealt with exceptional violations of his will in the past, you can be sure he will bring retribution on false teachers in the future. That is his basic historical argument and he supports it with three examples.

Example #1: The evil angels were incarcerated until the final judgment. What in the world is Peter talking about when he speaks of angels who sinned and were cast into hell? To answer that question we have to start at the beginning. At some point prior to the creation of Adam and Eve God created a species of beings known as angels. Since everything God creates is holy, we can be sure that all these angels were holy. But at some point in the distant past, as hinted at in Isaiah 14, Ezekiel 28, and Revelation 12, one of the choicest and most gifted of the angels, named Lucifer, decided to

² Do you recall what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3 about those who destroy God’s temple? Later in chapter 6 he warns us not to destroy the temple which is our body, but in chapter 3 the temple is the church. The personal pronoun “you” is plural. Here’s what he says in verses 16 and 17: “Do you not know that you (*plural*) are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you (*among you*)? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and you (*plural*) are that temple.”

stage a coup against God's authority. A large number of angels, perhaps one third of the total number, followed him in his rebellion and became what we know as demons or evil spirits.³

These fallen angels or demons are Satan's emissaries today to wreak havoc on the world and to undermine the spread of the gospel, but not all of them are loose to do Satan's bidding. Peter says some have been imprisoned by God and are bound with chains awaiting the final judgment. What did they do to merit this? Well, I believe the answer to that question is closely related to Peter's second example.

Example #2: The ancient world was destroyed in a great flood. The key to understanding both of these examples is probably found in Genesis 6:1-6: "When man began to multiply on the face of the land and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive. And they took as their wives any they chose. Then the LORD said, 'My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years.' The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of man and they bore children to them. These were the mighty men who were of old, the men of renown." Then immediately we read, "The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, 'I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them.' But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD."

Now whatever it was that happened here in Genesis 6 was so evil, so heinous in God's sight that he killed off the entire human race except for Noah and his family and started over. What would cause God to do this? I believe the sons of God mentioned in verses 1 and 4 were fallen angels or demons. (Every other time the phrase "sons of God" is used in the Old Testament it clearly refers to angels). I believe these demons assumed human bodies and had sexual relations with some wicked women, producing a race of beings that were demon-possessed from birth, called Nephilim or giants.⁴ As judgment for this ungodly liaison, God not only eliminated the bulk of the human race, he also imprisoned the evil angels who participated in it.⁵

Example # 3: Sodom and Gomorrah were wiped out. In verses 6-9 Peter recounts the disgusting story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18 and 19. I see a parallel between the perverted actions of the evil angels in Noah's day and what happened in these two cities. Modern scholars want us to believe the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was simply a lack of hospitality, but clearly it was unnatural sexual perversion. In both cases the basic sin was violating God's established order.

The message in all three of these examples is clear: if God judged evil angels this harshly, if he wiped out nearly the entire human race, and if he judged Sodom and Gomorrah to the point of extinction, do we think he's going to wink at apostasy and false teaching in his church? Of course not. But then

³ As far as I can tell, angels had only one opportunity to turn against God. If they remained faithful to him during this rebellion, they were confirmed in their holiness for the rest of eternity; if they followed Lucifer, they were confirmed in their wickedness forever.

There is no plan of redemption for angels, which is probably why they are fascinated by *our* redemption, as mentioned in 1 Peter 1:12.

⁴ The frequent mention of sexual demons in science fiction literature (beings called incubus and succubus depending upon their gender) may actually have a factual basis in this story.

⁵ If this seems preposterous to us it's probably because we don't understand the supernatural worldview of the Bible. Dr. Michael Heiser has recently written a book that will help the serious Bible student recover that worldview. It's called *The Unseen Realm*, and I recommend it.

why do we tolerate it? Why do we put leaders on pedestals when they have demonstrated by their teaching or their behavior that they do not belong there? Why are we so impressed with their degrees or their scholarship or their communicating ability that we are willing to follow them off the cliff?

But before leaving this sorry history lesson, I hope you noticed that there is a message of hope right in the middle of these stories of condemnation. God preserved Noah, a preacher of righteousness, when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly. And God rescued righteous Lot when he destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. A profound conclusion is drawn from those two men in verse 9: “the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials.” He doesn’t keep them from experiencing trials, but he is able to rescue them out of the trials. By the way, if you’re familiar with the accounts of Noah’s and Lot’s lives, you know they were not flawless men, especially Lot. When the writer calls him righteous he can’t be referring to moral perfection; he must be referring to the righteousness God imputes to those who put their faith in his.

Friends, when we see a plague of heresy and immorality and greed and arrogance all around us, even in the church, we need to keep in mind that God will deal with it, but at the same time he will also rescue the righteous. We need to thank God for the faithful preachers of righteousness in our churches; we need to honor those church leaders whose souls are vexed by sin rather than participating in it. And we need to pray for them. May their tribe increase!

FALSE TEACHERS ARE DESCRIBED SO WE CAN BE ALERT AND DISCERNING. (VV. 10B-19)

Let’s read again starting in the middle of verse 10.

2 Peter 2:10b-19

Bold and willful, they do not tremble as they blaspheme the glorious ones, ¹¹whereas angels, though greater in might and power, do not pronounce a blasphemous judgment against them before the Lord. ¹²But these, like irrational animals, creatures of instinct, born to be caught and destroyed, blaspheming about matters of which they are ignorant, will also be destroyed in their destruction, ¹³suffering wrong as the wage for their wrongdoing. They count it pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are blots and blemishes, reveling in their deceptions, while they feast with you. ¹⁴They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed. Accursed children! ¹⁵Forsaking the right way, they have gone astray. They have followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved gain from wrongdoing, ¹⁶but was rebuked for his own transgression; a speechless donkey spoke with human voice and restrained the prophet’s madness.

¹⁷*These are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm. For them the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved.*

¹⁸*For, speaking loud boasts of folly, they entice by sensual passions of the flesh those who are barely escaping from those who live in error. ¹⁹*

The best way I know to convey the essence of Peter’s argument from verse 10 and following is to just list some of the attitudes and actions that characterize false teachers. We can’t cover everything, but if we see these characteristics in our leaders it’s a warning to be watchful. And of course, if we see these tendencies in our own lives we should be even more concerned.

Arrogance

The terms Peter uses are “bold and willful.” One of the most common tendencies among seemingly successful spiritual leaders who crash and burn is spiritual arrogance. They get too big for their

britches, start believing their own press clippings, get used to the accolades of adoring parishioners, begin to manipulate others to get their own way, and reject accountability.

They become too busy to visit the sick or comfort the afflicted or counsel the hurting. Real pastoral ministry is relegated to other staff because they have to write another book or fly off to another speaking engagement. Such are the opposite of what Peter urged pastors to be in 1 Peter 5:1-5, which Pastor Josh expounded on so well a couple of weeks ago: “Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight . . . not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. . . . Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” Humility is one characteristic almost always lacking in a false teacher.

Undue Dogmatism

Look at the phrase in verse 12: “blaspheming about matters of which they are ignorant.” Years ago I heard a Christian businessman here in Wichita, a man well known for his strong opinions say, “I may be wrong, but I’m never in doubt.” Now, he said it in a self-deprecating manner and everyone laughed, but it’s probably not something to brag about. Dogmatism is only appropriate when speaking of essential truths where God has spoken clearly. Unfortunately, some spiritual leaders seem to speak with authority on almost anything and everything.

Interestingly Peter contrasts this with the attitude of the holy angels. Though they are far greater in power and might than these false teachers, the holy angels don’t act like that. In fact, Jude in a parallel passage to this one, gives the example of the highest of the angels, Michael the archangel, who found himself in a dispute over the body of Moses. God, you will recall, buried Moses himself in a place no man knew, but Satan apparently wanted to reveal the spot, perhaps so Moses’ followers would elevate the spot and begin to worship there. Michael opposed him but refused to rebuke Satan himself; rather Michael said, “The Lord rebuke you!” False teachers could learn a thing or two from the archangel regarding undue dogmatism.

Sensual and Immoral Behavior

Verse 13: “They count it a pleasure to revel in the daytime.” Then the next verse speaks of them having “eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin,” and then adds, “they entice unsteady souls.” I don’t need to remind you of the sexual scandals that have hit the clergy in our country, both Catholic and Protestant. When the Ashley Madison adultery website was hacked five years ago and millions of participants were outed, over four hundred pastors were found among them, including the Executive Vice President of our own denomination who was, of course, summarily fired.

The result of this immoral behavior is that the false teachers “will be destroyed in their destruction, suffering wrong as the wage for their wrongdoing” (vv. 12-13). The point of that play on words is that sin is always self-defeating. If a person dedicates himself to worldly pleasures, in the end he finds that those pleasures are subject to the law of diminishing returns.⁶ Do you remember the song by the Cathedrals Quartet years ago?

⁶ Barclay says, “For a while he may enjoy what he calls pleasure, but in the end he ruins his health, wrecks his constitution, destroys his mind and character and begins his experience of hell while he is still on earth.” Quoted by Michael Green, *The Second Epistle of Peter and the Epistle of Jude: An Introduction and Commentary*, 107.

*Sin will take you further than you want to go,
 Slowly but wholly taking control.
 Sin will keep you longer than you want to stay.
 Sin will cost you more than you want to pay.*

That's Peter's message, too.

Sin destroys not only the perpetrator's life but those who listen to him as well. I can't help but think of those religious leaders in the mainline churches who have developed ceremonies to celebrate divorce in the church. What's the result? Families are destroyed. Others promote same-sex marriage and even ordain gay clergy, and moral lives are destroyed. They protect and encourage abortion, and children's lives are destroyed. They condone rioting and looting and lawlessness, and the culture is destroyed. But don't get me wrong. These religious radicals aren't all bad. They do protect turtle eggs and care deeply about the rain forest! (Just a note of sarcasm there, in case you didn't pick it up!)

Deception

Verse 13 says they "revel in their deceptions while they feast with you." The feast here is undoubtedly the love feast, the Lord's Supper. Apostates don't mind participating in the church's most sacred rites, like communion, if that's what it takes to get what they want. Sadly, it is indisputable that on any given Sunday thousands of pastors and priests lead their people in communion, or the Eucharist, even though they don't believe the fundamental truths upon which it is based, namely that Jesus died for our sins, that his blood provides our forgiveness, and he is the only way to God.

Greed

This, too, is a huge issue among false teachers. It is mentioned first back in verse 2 where it says, "in their greed they will exploit you with false words." That is, their phony arguments are not designed to help their hearers but to fleece them. Verse 14 claims they have "hearts trained in greed." Verse 15 adds that they have followed the way of Balaam "who loved gain from wrongdoing." Balaam's story is fascinating and quite lengthy, as found in Numbers 22-24. Let me just summarize it by saying that this prophet, the only one to be rebuked by a speechless donkey, was a mercenary who saw ministry as an opportunity to get rich. This is a characteristic of apostates in the church today as well.

Slavery to Freedom

This the final characteristic I have time for this morning. Slavery to freedom sounds like an oxymoron, doesn't it? But it is a reality. Look at verse 19: "They promise freedom but they themselves are slaves of corruption. For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved." One of the common characteristics of false teachers is a strong emphasis on Christian freedom. With the Corinthian antinomians they love to chant, "All things are lawful for me ... all things are lawful for me" (1 Cor. 6:12). But they ignore Paul's strong retorts: "But not all things are helpful," and "I will not be enslaved by anything."

In his first epistle Peter had urged his followers to "live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God" (2:16). Paul said essentially the same

thing in Galatians 5:13: “For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.”

Peter has one more thing to say to us in this chapter, and that is ...

APOSTASY IS WORSE THAN UNBELIEF. (VV. 20-22)

I’ve used the term apostasy several times this morning but I haven’t actually defined it. The term literally means, “one who has fallen away from the faith.” The apostate differs from an ordinary unbeliever in that the apostate is knowledgeable about the faith and once practiced it at some level. But then for one reason or another (more often moral than intellectual) he abandons the faith, deliberately rejecting the truth after it has been known. That is the worst possible state to be in. Here’s how Peter concludes his diatribe in verses 20-22: “For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them. What the true proverb says has happened to them: ‘The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire’”

I suspect a few of you are asking yourself right now, “Doesn’t Pastor Mike believe in eternal security?” That’s the wrong question, friend. What difference does it make what Pastor Mike thinks? Here is a clear word from the Lord: “It would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them.” That’s not only a word for false teachers; it’s a word for each of us. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

Well, my time is up. This is probably not the kind of sermon you expected to hear today. Maybe it’s best they assigned me this passage because I’m retired and I have nothing to lose. But friends, the church has a lot to lose if we don’t deal with the leadership crisis in our own circles.

I close with a letter I found on Thursday. It was written last year by the Interim Pastor of the mega-church in Gaithersburg, MD, where Joshua Harris was the beloved pastor until he abandoned his wife and his faith.

Dear Covenant Life family,

This week our former Lead Pastor, Josh Harris, shared some significant news. First, he and his wife Shannon announced that they’re separated. Then in a follow up post, he said “by all the measurements that I have for defining a Christian, I am not a Christian.” These updates are hard to hear. We love Josh and Shannon. For most of us, Josh isn’t just some distant public figure. He’s a beloved former pastor and friend. So this news isn’t just a lot to process theoretically. It hits home personally. How do we process the news that someone who was a spiritual leader in our community, who taught us God’s Word, who ministered to us, no longer considers himself a follower of Christ?

Today, after I got the news, I read through Paul’s first letter to Timothy and found it very grounding. Several times Paul mentions former Christian leaders “swerving from,” “wandering from,” or “making shipwreck” of their faith. So while this is sad and confusing, it isn’t new. Christian leaders occasionally veered from faith at the very beginning. Paul says some had gone off course theologically. Others behaved in ways that violated Christian conscience. For others, it was

greed. In every case, Paul's hope was for redemption and restoration. That these leaders would develop "love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." (1 Tim. 1:5) That should be our hope and prayer for Josh as well.

Paul's primary instruction for us when leaders swerve from faith is that we make it an opportunity for greater resolve in our own faith, not less. Seeing leaders who taught us the gospel veer from it should deepen our commitment to "guard the good deposit" entrusted to us. And "pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness." (1 Tim. 6:11)

So, Covenant Life, pray for our friend Josh Harris. Pray with sincere hope for a redemptive end. And ask the God of all grace and power for fresh resolve in your own fight of faith. "Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called." (1 Tim. 6:12)

In Love, Kevin

Let's pray. Father, we're in a spiritual battle for sure. Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. So help us, Father, to put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, we may be able to stand our ground. Give us preachers of righteousness like Noah, who are willing to stand alone, if necessary, even when everyone around them is scoffing or caving to the culture. In Jesus' name, amen.