Paul's Letters

2 Peter 3:14-18 — Understanding I and II Peter Series, Part 12

By Escape the Mustard Tree

Introduction

Near the end of his last letter Peter says something easy to read past:

> "and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures." (2 Pet. 3:15-16)

Two claims sit in that sentence, and both can be checked. The first is "has written to *you*." Paul wrote letters to these very people about these very things. The second goes further: "as also in all his epistles." Not one letter. All of them.

So this last message is a test. If Peter is right, then everything we've spent eleven weeks on — an inheritance reserved in heaven, a salvation ready to be revealed, suffering before glory, growing up toward a goal, an abundant entrance into a coming kingdom, and false teachers who go after all of it — is not Peter's private emphasis. It's what Paul taught the same congregations, and what he wrote everywhere else besides.

I. "Wrote to You"

Where would we look for what Paul wrote to these people? Start with how much time he spent among them.

At Ephesus he "went into the synagogue and spoke boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading concerning the things of the kingdom of God." Then he moved to the school of Tyrannus, "and this continued for two years, so that all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 19:8-10). Years later he reminded the Ephesian elders, "for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears," and then he commended them "to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:31-32). Three years of teaching, and the word he leaves them with is *inheritance*.

Now look at which of Paul's letters went into that same region. Galatia, Ephesus and Colossae are all in Asia Minor. So are the men he wrote to personally: Timothy, who was stationed at Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3), and Philemon, whose household church met in Colossae's neighborhood (Philem. 1-2).

That's five or six letters into the territory Peter's two letters went to. And every one of them was written *after* those years of teaching, to churches already established. So when you open Colossians

or Ephesians, you aren't opening a primer on how a man first comes to God. You're reading a follow-up letter to people who had been taught, written to press them on toward what they'd been taught to expect.

II. One Letter, Front to Back

Take Colossians and read it with Peter's vocabulary in your ear.

Paul names it in his opening thanksgiving: "because of the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, of which you heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel" (Col. 1:5). Laid up in heaven. Set that beside Peter's first paragraph: "an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you" (1 Pet. 1:4). Two apostles, the same deposit, in the same place.

Then Paul's prayer for them:

> "that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy; giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love." (Col. 1:9-13)

Count what's in that prayer. Knowledge, and then increasing knowledge. A walk worthy of the Lord. Being fruitful. Patience. And at the end of it, the inheritance. That is Peter's first chapter almost item for item: knowledge growing to full knowledge, qualities that keep a man from being "barren nor unfruitful," perseverance, and an entrance supplied abundantly (2 Pet. 1:5-11).

And read verse 13 carefully, because it is a verse people stumble over. "He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love." Both of those verbs are aorists, which is Paul's way of saying a thing already done and settled. Not a process, and not a promise. What has already been moved is a man's citizenship. Paul says it to the Philippians in the present tense: "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Phil. 3:20). His word there is *politeuma*, the commonwealth a man belongs to. So a Christian is already enrolled, and he is still waiting for the King to come from the place he is enrolled in. That's why verses 12 and 13 sit together. The citizenship is settled; the inheritance that goes with it is what Paul prays they'll be partakers of.

It keeps going. Paul speaks of "the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints," and he says what it is: "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:26-27). Hope, and glory, in one phrase. He wants their hearts "attaining to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God... in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:2-3). Hidden treasure, to be dug for.

Then a warning that could have come straight out of Peter's second chapter: "Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind" (Col. 2:18). A man can be cheated out of a reward, and the one doing the cheating is a teacher inside the assembly who talks about angels

and visions and is "vainly puffed up." Peter said his false teachers were "presumptuous, self-willed" and "not afraid to speak evil of dignitaries" (2 Pet. 2:10).

And here's where Paul puts the payoff: "For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory" (Col. 3:3-4). At His appearing, glory for them too. That is the order Peter had in his first letter, "the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow" (1 Pet. 1:11), and the thing Peter was an eyewitness of on the mountain.

Then the line we already read when we were in chapter three of Peter's first letter: "And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ" (Col. 3:23-24). The inheritance is called a *reward*.

One letter, start to finish, and Peter's whole subject is in it.

III. The Rest of the Region

Colossians is not a lucky pick.

Ephesians. Paul prays that God "may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints" (Eph. 1:17-18). Knowledge, hope, calling, glory, inheritance — five of Peter's words in two verses. Then the charge: "walk worthy of the calling with which you were called" (4:1). And later, writing to people he has just called saints, he says that no fornicator or covetous man "has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God" (5:5). Inheritance language, kingdom language, addressed to the saved.

Galatians. The letter opens on a defection: "I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ" (Gal. 1:6-7). Men troubling a church and bending its message, which is Peter's second chapter in one sentence. And near the end Paul puts it in terms of a harvest: "whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting [*aionios*, age-lasting] life. And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart" (Gal. 6:7-9). That is life in the age to come, the same life Paul told Timothy to lay hold of. A harvest in a season still ahead, and a warning about losing heart before it comes.

First and Second Timothy. We've already spent time here. Peter's blueprint sat beside Paul's list to Timothy — righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness, and "lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called" (1 Tim. 6:11-12). Paul's warning that "in latter times some will depart from the faith" (1 Tim. 4:1) and that men "will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables" (2 Tim. 4:3-4) sat beside Peter's false teachers and his mockers. We kept ending up in Timothy, and that is exactly Peter's point.

IV. "And in All His Epistles"

Peter didn't stop at the letters that came to Asia. He said *all* of them. Here are two we haven't opened in this series.

Writing to Corinth, Paul puts his own life in it: "Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown.... But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified" (1 Cor. 9:24-27). A prize to be obtained, a crown that doesn't perish, and an apostle who will not assume he has it. Paul's word for that imperishable crown is the same word Peter used of the inheritance in his opening paragraph: "an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you" (1 Pet. 1:4). Peter held out a crown too, "the crown of glory that does not fade away" (1 Pet. 5:4).

And in his second Corinthian letter: "Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:9-10). A reckoning for conduct, which is what Peter told them about in his first chapter, the Father "who without partiality judges according to each one's work" (1 Pet. 1:17).

Now think back over the last eleven weeks. We read Romans on suffering with Him in order to be glorified with Him. We read First Corinthians on work tested by fire. We read Second Corinthians on a weight of glory and on the gospel of the glory of Christ. We read Philippians on pressing toward a resurrection Paul would not claim he'd already attained. We read First and Second Thessalonians on the day of the Lord coming as a thief and on being counted worthy of the kingdom. We read Titus on looking for the blessed hope. We never went looking for Paul in any of that. Peter's own words sent us to him every time.

Peter said Paul writes about these things in all his letters. We spent eleven weeks demonstrating it without setting out to.

V. Why Peter Brings Paul Up Right Here

Look at where this sentence sits. Peter has just finished with the mockers and the dissolution of the heavens, told his readers to be found "without spot and blameless," and called the Lord's longsuffering salvation. Then Paul, and then this: "in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures" (3:16).

Peter admits the difficulty. Some of this is hard. But notice who comes to grief on it. Not the slow, and not the troubled — the *untaught* and the *unstable*. Untaught is a man who never grew; Peter's answer to that has been the same since his first chapter, "add to your faith." Unstable is the very word he used for the people the false teachers hunt, "enticing unstable souls" (2:14). And

"destruction" is the word that has run through this whole letter, the loss of what was held out to them.

So Peter's mention of Paul is not a courtesy to a colleague. It's a last warning. The deepest things in Paul's letters are precisely these things, and they are where the twisting happens. A man who stays untaught and unstable around material like this will not come out of it with what he could have had.

VI. "All Those in Asia"

There's a sad postscript to all of this, and it comes from Paul.

Peter had written his second letter to the region warning them what was coming. Paul wrote to Timothy again afterward, and said this:

> "This you know, that all those in Asia have turned away from me, among whom are Phygellus and Hermogenes." (2 Tim. 1:15)

Asia. The region that heard Paul preach the kingdom of God for three months and the word of the Lord for two years more, that he warned night and day with tears for three years, that received Galatians and Ephesians and Colossians and both letters to Timothy, and that received both of Peter's letters. Those people. They turned away from the man who taught them, and Paul names two of them.

Being thoroughly taught is not the same thing as holding fast. That is the whole burden of Peter's two letters, and here it is in history.

But Paul doesn't end the paragraph there. The very next words are about a man who didn't:

> "The Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me, and was not ashamed of my chain; but when he arrived in Rome, he sought me out very zealously and found me. The Lord grant to him that he may find mercy from the Lord in that Day—and you know very well how many ways he ministered to me at Ephesus." (2 Tim. 1:16-18)

A man from Ephesus, in the same region, who went looking for a prisoner nobody wanted to be associated with. And Paul's prayer for him points at the same place everything else in these letters points: "that he may find mercy from the Lord *in that Day*."

VII. The Final Charge

> "You therefore, beloved, since you know this beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen." (2 Pet. 3:17-18)

"Since you know this beforehand." That is what twelve weeks of this have been for. They were warned ahead of time, and so have we been.

Then the two halves. "Beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness" is the guard. "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" is the remedy, and it's the

same remedy he opened with: "giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge" (1:5). Peter's last written word to the church is *grow*.

Applying "Paul's Letters"

Peter's claim about Paul holds up. Read Colossians or Ephesians or Galatians with Peter's two letters in mind and you find the same hope laid up in heaven, the same inheritance, the same walk worthy of a calling, the same reward that can be lost to a teacher who cheats you out of it, the same glory at His appearing. Read further out into Paul's other letters and it's still there: a prize, an imperishable crown, a judgment seat, a harvest in due season.

That matters for how we hold all of this. If this were one apostle's favorite theme you could set it to one side. It isn't. It's what the men who planted these churches taught them, in person for years and then in letter after letter, and what they both spent their last written words pressing on them.

And the end of the story in Asia is the reason to take it personally. Those people had more teaching than most Christians will ever have, and they still turned away. So the charge lands where Peter put it. Don't fall from your own steadfastness. Don't stay untaught, and don't stay unstable. Grow.

A Closing Word

This study began with a man — impulsive, loud, sure of himself, and then broken over a fire of coals in a courtyard. Jesus put him back together on a beach and told him to feed the sheep.

Thirty-odd years later, with his death in view, that same man is still doing it. "I will be careful to ensure that you always have a reminder of these things after my decease" (2 Pet. 1:15). Two letters, written to people he would never see again, about an inheritance he hadn't received yet either.

He saw the glory once, on a mountain, and he spent the rest of his life telling other people how to get there.

Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.