The Warning Against False Teachers

2 Peter 1:19-2:22 — Understanding I and II Peter Series, Part 9

By Escape the Mustard Tree

Introduction

Last time we ended chapter one with a lamp: "the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place" (2 Pet. 1:19). Peter's very next word is "But." The chapter break sits where Peter didn't put one: "But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you" (2:1). The light he has just told them to heed is the very thing these men will attack.

Chapter one laid the foundation for growth. Chapter two warns about what threatens it, and it is the deadliest pitfall of all, because it comes from the inside.

When we opened this letter, we said we'd read Jude alongside Peter's second chapter. The two letters begin in the same place. Peter writes to those who have "obtained like precious faith" (2 Pet. 1:1) and tells them to add to it (1:5). Jude set out "to write to you concerning our common salvation," but found it necessary to exhort them to "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). Jude's word for "contend earnestly" is *epagonizomai*, built on the word that gives us *agony*. A faith they share in common, and something each one is to do with it. Then both letters turn to the same men.

I. What They Malign

> "But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber." (2 Pet. 2:1-3)

Look at where Peter finds these men. The false prophets were "among the people," Israel's own prophets. The false teachers will be "among you." They don't arrive from outside with another gospel. They rise up from inside, as the false prophets rose up in Israel.

And look at what Peter says about them: "denying the Lord who bought them." The Lord bought them. Paul says the same to the Corinthians: "you were bought at a price" (1 Cor. 6:20). These are saved men. Peter's word for "Lord" here is *despotes*, the master of a household, and that's what they deny: the One who bought them as their Master.

What do they malign? Peter has just told us. The verse before the chapter break is about "the prophetic word" (1:19), and the verses before that are about "the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1:16). That's the target. Israel's false prophets did the same with what God said was

coming: "They speak a vision of their own heart, not from the mouth of the LORD" (Jer. 23:16). That's the reverse of what Peter has just said of true prophecy, which "never came by the will of man" (2 Pet. 1:21). The false teachers will take the word about the coming King and His kingdom and make it say what they please, and "the way of truth will be blasphemed" because of them.

Notice "many will follow." Many, not a few. And notice the motive: "by covetousness they will exploit you." Paul warned Timothy about the same men in the same region, men "who suppose that godliness is a means of gain" (1 Tim. 6:5).

Then there's the word Peter keeps repeating in these three verses: "destructive" heresies, "swift destruction," "destructive" ways, "their destruction does not slumber." It's *apoleia*, the word Hebrews uses when it says, "we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul" (Heb. 10:39). Its verb is the one Jesus used: "whoever desires to save his life will lose it" (Matt. 16:25). What these men bring on themselves is the loss of what was held out to them, the salvation of the soul. The Lord's purchase isn't undone. What they lose is what they were bought for.

II. The Lord Knows How to Deliver

> "For if God did not spare the angels who sinned, but cast them down to hell and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment; and did not spare the ancient world, but saved Noah, one of eight people, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood on the world of the ungodly; and turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes, condemned them to destruction, making them an example to those who afterward would live ungodly; and delivered righteous Lot, who was oppressed by the filthy conduct of the wicked (for that righteous man, dwelling among them, tormented his righteous soul from day to day by seeing and hearing their lawless deeds)—then the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgment." (2 Pet. 2:4-9)

Peter gives three examples of judgment: the angels who sinned, the ancient world, and Sodom and Gomorrah. When we studied 1 Peter 3, we saw why these are most likely the same imprisoned spirits Peter placed in "the days of Noah" (1 Pet. 3:19-20). His word for "cast them down to hell" is *tartaroo*, Tartarus, and it appears nowhere else in the New Testament. Peter doesn't explain it, and we won't either.

But in two of the three examples someone comes through: Noah, "one of eight people," and Lot. That's where Peter lands. "The Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgment." And the "unjust" here are the men this chapter is about, because Peter goes straight on: "and especially those who walk according to the flesh in the lust of uncleanness and despise authority" (2:10).

Jude's list is close to Peter's, but he starts somewhere else: "the Lord, having saved the people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe" (Jude 5). Then the angels and Sodom (Jude 6-7). Jude's first example is a people the Lord had already saved, the same generation we watched fall short of the land last time (Heb. 3:19). That's exactly what the false teachers are: men the Lord bought, turning back.

Now look at Lot. Peter calls him righteous three times in two verses. But look at how he came to be in Sodom. When raiding kings carried him off, Scripture names him "Lot, Abram's brother's son who dwelt in Sodom" (Gen. 14:12). Abram brought him back (Gen. 14:16), and Lot went back to Sodom. By the time the angels arrived, "Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom" (Gen. 19:1), where the city's business was done. All that time "that righteous man, dwelling among them, tormented his righteous soul from day to day." And when the angels came to bring him out, "he lingered," and they took him by the hand, "the LORD being merciful to him" (Gen. 19:16). The Lord did know how to deliver him, but he came out with almost nothing.

III. A Portrait from Peter and Jude

From here Peter describes the men themselves, and Jude describes them alongside him.

They speak evil of what's above them. "They are presumptuous, self-willed. They are not afraid to speak evil of dignitaries, whereas angels, who are greater in power and might, do not bring a reviling accusation against them before the Lord" (2 Pet. 2:10-11). Peter's word for "dignitaries" is *doxas*, glories, and the next verse shows he means angelic powers. Jude names one angel who held back: "Michael the archangel, in contending with the devil, when he disputed about the body of Moses, dared not bring against him a reviling accusation, but said, 'The Lord rebuke you!'" (Jude 9). Michael wouldn't revile even the devil. The position Satan holds was given to him (Ezek. 28:14), and his removal is the Lord's to carry out. David treated Saul the same way: "The LORD forbid that I should do this thing to my master, the LORD's anointed, to stretch out my hand against him" (1 Sam. 24:6). These teachers rush in where an archangel won't.

They don't understand what they attack. "Like natural brute beasts made to be caught and destroyed, speak evil of the things they do not understand" (2 Pet. 2:12; Jude 10).

They sit at your table. "They are spots and blemishes, carousing in their own deceptions while they feast with you" (2 Pet. 2:13). Jude says, "These are spots in your love feasts" (Jude 12). These are men inside the fellowship, eating with the saints.

They hunt for the unstable. "Having eyes full of adultery and that cannot cease from sin, enticing unstable souls. They have a heart trained in covetous practices" (2 Pet. 2:14).

They've left the right way. "They have forsaken the right way and gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness; but he was rebuked for his iniquity: a dumb donkey speaking with a man's voice restrained the madness of the prophet" (2 Pet. 2:15-16). The Angel of the Lord told Balaam, "your way is perverse before Me" (Num. 22:32). Jude adds two more: "they have gone in the way of Cain, have run greedily in the error of Balaam for profit, and perished in the rebellion of Korah" (Jude 11). Korah was a Levite who rose up against Moses and Aaron from inside the camp (Num. 16:1-3).

Jeremiah knew that "right way." "Stand in the ways and see, and ask for the old paths, where the good way is, and walk in it; then you will find rest for your souls. But they said, 'We will not walk in it'" (Jer. 6:16). And he knew it wasn't only the prophets' fault: "The prophets prophesy falsely, and

the priests rule by their own power; and My people love to have it so. But what will you do in the end?" (Jer. 5:31).

They promise what they can't give. "These are wells without water, clouds carried by a tempest, for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever [*eis aiona*, unto the age]. For when they speak great swelling words of emptiness, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through lewdness, the ones who have actually escaped from those who live in error. While they promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage" (2 Pet. 2:17-19). A well with no water looks like a well until you lower the bucket. And their targets are "the ones who have actually escaped," people who had already gotten clear. These men offer them liberty and lead them into bondage.

IV. Worse Than the Beginning

> "For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning. For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them. But it has happened to them according to the true proverb: 'A dog returns to his own vomit,' and, 'a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire.'" (2 Pet. 2:20-22)

"They" is still the false teachers. Every "they" and "them" in the chapter points back to the same men. And look at how they escaped: "through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." That's *epignosis*, the full knowledge Peter has been praying would multiply in his readers (1:2, 8). These men had it. They had been well taught. Paul had spent years in that region and "not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). They had all of it, and they forsook it.

How can the latter end be worse than the beginning? Because knowledge carries accountability. Jesus said, "that servant who knew his master's will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes.... For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required" (Luke 12:47-48). That's a servant, his master's will, and a reckoning. These men knew much and turned from it, "from the holy commandment delivered to them."

Then Peter gives two proverbs. The first is Solomon's: "As a dog returns to his own vomit, so a fool repeats his folly" (Prov. 26:11). The second is "a sow, having washed." Peter's word for "washed" is *louo*, the same word Jesus used to Peter on the night He washed his feet: "He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet" (John 13:10). The sow was washed, and the washing wasn't undone. She went back to the mire anyway. That's a man who was cleansed once (2 Pet. 1:9) and walked straight back into the filth he'd been brought out of.

This is God's own description of these men. We might want to put it more gently than He does. Peter doesn't.

V. The Leaven at Work

Peter isn't the only one who saw this coming. Jesus pictured it in parables: "while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat" (Matt. 13:25), and "the enemy who sowed them is the devil" (13:39). He told of leaven a woman "hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened" (13:33). Read across the New Testament and you can watch it working:

- **Galatia**, one of Peter's own regions: "You ran well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?... A little leaven leavens the whole lump" (Gal. 5:7, 9).
- **Thessalonica**, troubled by a message "as though the day of Christ had come" (2 Thess. 2:2). The prophetic word, twisted.
- **Ephesus**: Hymenaeus and Philetus "strayed concerning the truth, saying that the resurrection is already past; and they overthrow the faith of some" (2 Tim. 2:18). And Paul warned of a time when "they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables" (2 Tim. 4:4). "Fables" there is *muthos*, the same word Peter used when he said, "we did not follow cunningly devised fables" (2 Pet. 1:16).
- **Hebrews**: "Do not be carried about with various and strange doctrines" (Heb. 13:9).
- **James**: "My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment" (James 3:1).
- **Jude**: "certain men have crept in unnoticed" (Jude 4).

And when Jesus spoke to seven churches in Asia, Peter's own region, it was there too. Ephesus had "tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars" (Rev. 2:2). Pergamos had "those who hold the doctrine of Balaam" (Rev. 2:14), the same Balaam Peter just named. Thyatira allowed "that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants" (Rev. 2:20). And to Laodicea: "you are lukewarm.... you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked" (Rev. 3:16-17). Blind, the same condition Peter warned about in the man who stops adding to his faith (2 Pet. 1:9).

The tares were sown and the leaven was hidden in the apostles' own day, and the harvest is "the end of the age" (Matt. 13:39). What Peter saw beginning, Jesus pictured going on "till it was all leavened."

Applying "The Warning Against False Teachers"

The danger Peter describes doesn't come knocking from outside. It rises up from within, from men the Lord bought, who knew the way of righteousness and turned from it, and it goes after the prophetic word: the coming of the King and His kingdom. And many follow.

Peter's answer is the chapter he wrote before this one. Keep adding to your faith, so you don't become one of the "unstable souls" these men entice. Keep the lamp in view. Remember that the Lord knows how to deliver the godly, as He delivered Lot, but don't linger in Sodom the way Lot did. Contend earnestly for the faith. These men leave others "overcome" and "brought into bondage" (2 Pet. 2:19). Jesus' promise is to the one who overcomes: "To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne" (Rev. 3:21).

Looking Ahead

Next, Peter shows what these men mock. He opens with the same words he used for the prophetic word: "knowing this first: that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, 'Where is the promise of His coming?'" (2 Pet. 3:3-4).

Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.