

1 & 2 Peter: Faith Under Fire

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!
According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the
resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and
unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith
for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.
(1 Peter 1:3-5 ESV)*

Ministry In The Meantime

February 24th, 2019

2 Peter 3:14-18

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Introduction:

Good morning church! I want to invite you to open your Bibles this morning to 2 Peter 3:14; that's on page 1019 in your pew Bibles. Today we come to the end of our journey through the letters of Peter to the churches in Asia Minor. If church history is correct then this letter may well have been the very last thing that Peter ever wrote on this earth. I mentioned that there is a tradition in church history that suggests that 2 Peter was written originally as a cover letter for the Gospel of Mark. The Gospel of Mark was written by Peter's secretary and travelling companion John Mark and was written because Peter had been arrested during a crack down on the Christian community in Rome under Nero. We believe that the Apostle Paul was re-arrested and subsequently executed during this same crack down. And so the early church was thrown into a bit of panic by these events. The major Apostolic figures were starting to disappear from the scene and there was an urgency to gather up and preserve all of their recollections and instructions concerning Christ. And so it isn't hard to imagine Peter dictating the Gospel of Mark through the bars of his prison window and then subsequently whispering out these final words of counsel to be delivered alongside. And then shortly thereafter, church history records that the Apostle Peter on direct orders from Nero was led out of his prison cell and crucified upside down.

And so it very much feels like we are standing on holy ground this morning doesn't it? There is something quite special about reading these last words of counsel and blessing from a faithful

spiritual father to his beloved children in the faith.

John G. Paton was a missionary to the New Hebrides Islands in the Pacific Ocean during the 1800's. He was from a poor family in rural Scotland and he won an internship that provided him an opportunity to go to school in order to prepare for the Lord's service overseas. In his autobiography he tells the story of the day he left his little rural village in Scotland to begin the journey that would eventually take him half way around the world:

“A small bundle, tied up in my pocket-handkerchief, contained my Bible and all my personal belongings. Thus was I launched upon the ocean of life. I thought on One who says, “I know thy poverty, but thou art rich.” My dear father walked with me the first six miles of the way. His counsels and tears and heavenly conversation on that parting journey are fresh in my heart as if it had been but yesterday; and tears are on my cheeks as freely now as then, whenever memory steals me away to the scene. For the last half-mile or so we walked on together in almost unbroken silence, - my father, as was often his custom, carrying hat in hand, while his long, flowing hair (then yellow, but in later years white as snow) streamed like a girl's down his shoulders. His lips kept moving in silent prayers for me; and his tears fell fast when our eyes met each other in looks for which all speech was vain! We halted on reaching the appointed parting place; he grasped my hand firmly for a minute in silence, and then solemnly and affectionately said: “God bless you, my son! Your father's God prosper you, and keep you from all evil!”

Unable to say more, his lips kept moving in silent prayer; in tears we embraced, and parted. I ran off as fast as I could; and, when about to turn a corner in the road where he would lose sight of me, I looked back and saw him still standing with head uncovered where I had left him – gazing after me. Waving my hat in adieu, I was round the corner and out of sight in an instant. But my heart was too full and sore to carry me further, so I darted into the side of the road and wept for a time. Then, rising up cautiously, I climbed the dyke to see if he yet stood where I had left him; and just at that moment I caught a glimpse of him climbing the dyke and looking out for me! He did not see me, and after he had gazed eagerly in my direction for a while he got down, set his face towards home, and began to return – his head still uncovered, and his heart, I felt sure, still rising in prayers for me. I watched through blinding tears, till his form faded from my gaze; and then, hastening on my way, vowed deeply and oft, by the help of God, to live and act so as never to grieve or dishonour such a father and mother as He had given me.”¹

That is exactly what we are reading here. These are the last words and blessing of a father to his beloved children about to go out into the world. He sees persecution and hardship in their future. He sees temptation and damnable error. And he knows that he cannot go with them on their way. And so he gives them what he can. Tears. Prayers. Blessings and godly counsel.

¹ John G. Paton, *John G. Paton The Autobiography O The Pioneer Missionary To The New Hebrides* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2016), 25-26.

That is the nature of this letter and particularly of this paragraph that we consider together today. Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 14:

Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. 15 And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, 16 as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures. 17 You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability. 18 But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen. (2 Peter 3:14–18 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Peter has 5 words of godly counsel for his dearly beloved children in the faith.

Final Words From Their Father In The Faith:

The first thing he tells them is that they must:

1. Be very diligent to root out sin and to develop godly character

You can see that in verse 14 where he tells them to be diligent to be found without spot or blemish – that’s the negative version of the teaching he gave positively in chapter 1 verse 10, using the same word, when he said:

Therefore, brothers, **be all the more diligent** to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. (2 Peter 1:10 ESV)

Now remember that Peter has written this letter, largely, to counteract the devastating influence of some false teachers who were saying that Jesus was never coming back, there would not be a final judgment and therefore people – as long as they believe in the basic facts of the Gospel – could do pretty much, whatever they want.

But that is a damnable heresy, Peter says. If you want to enter the kingdom of God then you **MUST MAKE EVERY CONCEIVABLE EFFORT** to develop Christ-like character.

Peter is trying to re-establish the connection here between believing in Jesus and obeying Jesus –

a connection that Jesus said was non-negotiable.

“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you? (Luke 6:46 ESV)

So people who TRULY BELIEVE in Jesus NEED TO BE VERY CAREFUL TO DO WHAT JESUS SAID. There must be a DIRECT LINK between the grace in your heart and the good in your life. Jesus said that – he said:

every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. (Matthew 7:17 ESV)

So every changed heart produces an increasingly holy life. There is no ambiguity here and no flexibility here. Jesus went on to say:

Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (Matthew 7:19 ESV)

Are you seeing that?

According to Jesus and the Apostles the connection between believing in Jesus and behaving like Jesus is SO VITAL and so RELIABLE that you can judge a person’s heart according to their deeds! That can be done – and it will be done by Jesus; that’s the whole point of the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. In that parable Jesus says that at the final judgment he isn’t going to be asking any theological questions – instead he is going to be conducting a thorough evaluation of how people have LIVED. Did you do this? Did you do that? Those are the questions he’s asking and that sounds for all the world like judgement according to works. And of course the Bible says this kind of thing all the time. Even the Apostle Paul – who loved to talk about grace – he said the exact same thing. He said:

He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. (Romans 2:6–8 ESV)

Everybody is saying the same thing. We are saved by grace but JUDGED according to our works. Which means – DEAR BROTHER AND SISTER – that there had better be enough evidence to convict you of being a follower of Jesus come judgment day.

Listen to me, dear brothers and sisters, any version of Christianity that tries to SEVER this connection between believing in the works of Jesus and obeying the word of Jesus is

demonstrably and damnably heretical.

Have nothing to do with it.

Rather MAKE EVERY EFFORT to eliminate SIN in your life and to develop Christ-like character.

The second thing he tells them is that they should:

2. Use this delay for the purpose of evangelism

Look at verse 15:

And count the patience of our Lord as salvation (2 Peter 3:15 ESV)

So again, these false teachers were saying that this long delay was proof that Jesus wasn't coming back and that there wouldn't be a final judgment – that's how they figured it, but you must not be like that. You should consider this delay as an extended opportunity for evangelism.

We talked about this last week.

Jesus did not say how long it would be before he came back. He said that nobody knew the day or the hour – and nobody knows the month or the year either – be careful of those people. The expression just means – NOBODY KNOWS so beware of people who think they know. Nobody knows. And when it happens, it will catch most people completely unawares – Jesus said that again and again and again.

Therefore, what we ought to be doing during this indeterminate delay is doing everything we can to get the Gospel out as far and wide as possible. That's what we ought to be doing! We ought to consider the patience of our Lord as SALVATION! This is a great grace for all those who have not yet heard!

And Jesus told a parable warning against self indulgent and wicked behaviour during the long delay. It is one of the scariest parables in all the Bible. It ends with a horrifying image. Jesus

says:

the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know 51 and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 24:50–51 ESV)

Are you hearing that?

When the Lord returns he will judge every WICKED SERVANT who used this long delay to feed himself and to indulge selfish and lustful desires.

So DO NOT BE ONE OF THEM, Peter says. Don't even come close to being one of them. Spend your time, spend your resources, use every opportunity you have to LEVERAGE THIS DELAY for purposes of salvation. As a church let's LEVERAGE this delay and let's deploy all our resources in pursuit of lost people from every tribe tongue and nation on planet earth.

And closer to home, brothers and sisters, let's use this delay to pursue the salvation of our lost sons and daughters and our lost grandsons and granddaughters.

Oh senior saints in this church, if I could speak to you for just a moment. Beware your self-indulgent hobbies and distractions! Beware your 10 week trips to Florida! Now, as you get older, I understand, you need rest and you need sunshine – I get that – but beware the temptation towards self-indulgence and LAZINESS that has come to be accepted AS NORMAL BEHAVIOR for people in our culture over the age of 65.²

Use this opportunity to pursue the salvation of your children and grandchildren!

Use this opportunity to mentor young people RIGHT HERE IN ORILLIA!

When Jesus comes back you don't want to be playing your 36th hole of the weekend – I think that's what I'm saying. I think that's what Peter is saying.

Consider this delay your opportunity to pursue the souls of the lost – at home, in this city and

² "The American ideal of retirement does not meet the Christian standard of faithfulness. For Christians the issue should be redeployment rather than retirement." - Al Mohler

even to the ends of the earth.

Thirdly, Peter tells them to:

3. Attend to the whole Word of God

You can see that in verses 15-16. I've mentioned a few times that one of Peter's purposes in writing this letter has been to wrestle the letters of the Apostle Paul out of the hands of these false teachers. Paul of course spoke very firmly about the priority of grace in the life of the believer.

He said things like:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8–9 ESV)

Ephesians is a letter that Paul sent to churches in Asia Minor so this is almost certainly one of the "letters" that Peter refers to in verse 16. These false teachers have taken this sort of teaching and said: "Well then, if we aren't saved by anything we do, then obviously what we do isn't very important. What's important is that we believe in Jesus, anything more than that is just so much legalism."

No!

That's not what Paul meant and you mustn't read him that way – that's what Peter is saying here. Now, he could have just said, "Stop reading those letters from the Apostle Paul, they are obviously leading you astray" but of course he doesn't want to do that – he wants to do the opposite of that. Peter considers the letters of the Apostle Paul to be SCRIPTURE. Look at verse 15, he says:

just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, 16 as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures. (2 Peter 3:15–16 ESV)

So these false teachers want to take the whole Bible away from you. They want to twist and distort and dismiss the whole Word of God! They want to explain away the Old Testament and they want to reinterpret the New Testament – do not listen to them! Beware of people who are experts in making the Bible mean the opposite of what it says.

To state that positively, Peter is telling them to attend to the whole Word of God.

I prefer to state it that way because while it was the letters of Paul that were being distorted in this particular community at that time, we have seen other parts of the Bible neglected or distorted at other times. We have seen the Epistle Of James distorted by some and disregarded by others, we have seen the Old Testament abused by some and completely ignored by others, we have seen the Book of Genesis ripped to shreds and subjected to ignorant and wicked mockery and more recently in my childhood I have observed the Book of Revelation being mangled and mashed by the masses and now almost completely marginalized by pastors and preachers as if it were some sort of embarrassing uncle we must quietly dispose of before the honoured guests arrive.

I think Peter is fighting desperately here to SALVAGE an important ASPECT of God's gift to the churches; Thomas Schreiner for example says:

“Peter referred to Paul, then, to reclaim him and to explain that Paul was not on the side of the opponents”.³

Yes – and I think we will have to do that sort of thing in every generation. We will have to reclaim the Old Testament or the Epistle of James or the Revelation of John or the Book of Genesis and we will have to explain how it is not on the side of those who oppose orthodox faith in Christ – we will have to do that – we will have to fight valiantly for our children's possession of and confidence in a WHOLE BIBLE – we will need to do that in every generation as indeed we see the Apostle Peter doing that for his children here.

Fourthly, Peter is telling them to:

4. Watch our for lawless people

You can see that in verse 17. He tells them to:

take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability. (2 Peter 3:17 ESV)

³ Thomas R. Schreiner, *1,2 Peter, Jude* in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2003), 395.

Like every good parent here Peter is concerned about the influence that can be exerted by unwise association.

The word that he uses here means “to be swept up” or “to be seduced away”. Peter understands that relationships are the main reason that people fall away. Young people do not generally THINK their way out of Christianity; rather they tend to be swept away and seduced away by their FEELINGS. Feelings of friendship and empathy generally with people who are walking on the wrong path. The thinking, if there is any, generally comes along much later. It is a form of post hoc justification – an attempt to explain after the fact but it is generally an explanation that has nothing to do with the facts. The truth is that most people who abandon the Christian faith do it because of a relationship – not because of an argument and not because of a fact. They do it because they married an unbeliever, have fallen in love with that unbeliever and now can’t believe in a God who would send such a person to hell. Or they do it because they’ve made friends with a bunch of people who are living lives of unfettered sexual expression, who are colouring way outside the lines, so to speak and they can no longer believe in a God who would exclude such people from his eternal kingdom.

That’s how apostasy happens.

We don’t THINK OUR WAY OUT – we are SWEPT OUT by feelings about and connections with other people.

And Peter knows that. He knows that the heart leads and the weaker the head the less resistance there will be so he tells them to GUARD THEIR HEARTS. Be careful about your friendships.

Paul said this kind of stuff too. He said:

Do not be deceived: “Bad company ruins good morals.” (1 Corinthians 15:33 ESV)

Don’t be naïve brothers and sisters – I spoke to the older generation a moment ago, can I speak to you now Millennials? Who you love will change what you believe and how you behave, so be on guard against too much and too intimate association with LAWLESS PEOPLE.

Now – that raises a half a dozen really important pastoral questions doesn’t it? How many unsaved friends should we have? What is the appropriate ratio between unsaved friends and

saved friends? Friends who build us up versus friends who might draw us away?

That's a good question.

Very quickly let me just say this, it probably has more to do with depth and nature than it does simply with sheer numbers. Jesus had many associations with lawless people – he was regularly found with tax collectors and sinners. But he said:

You are my friends if you do what I command you. (John 15:14 ESV)

So he was friends with obedient followers and he associated with sinners as a physician associates with the sick.

I think we are fools – little more than children really – if we aren't aware of how easy it is for our affections to lead us out of the faith.

So if we really love people we are going to cling to Christ, we are going to grow in community and we are going to go out into the world on mission – as a physician ministers to the sick. That is the most loving, wise and prudent thing that we could do.

And then lastly, Peter tells them to:

5. Grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ

He says that in verse 18. The Christian life is like riding a bicycle – if you aren't moving forward then you are falling down, it is just that simple. Therefore the best thing you can do to protect yourself from threats from the outside and subversive influences from the inside IS TO GROW. When the dam breaks and the flood comes all the little tiny shoots are going to be washed away and only the OAKS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS rooted DEEPLY in the grace and knowledge of Christ will remain – so that's what you want to do, Peter says, you want to grow up and you want to do that as fast as you can.

Now how do we do that? Peter is just reviewing here, he has already told them how to grow back in 1 Peter 2:1-3 – we preached on that back in September in a message called “How To Grow Up

In A Hurry”. Peter said:

So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. 2 Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation— 3 if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. (1 Peter 2:1–3 ESV)

So there Peter said it’s all about your inputs. If you hook yourself up to the poison hose of the world - if you are constantly watching TV and sucking up the fumes of the internet outrage machine – then you are going to wither, fade and die! But if you hook yourself up to the PURE SPIRITUAL MILK of the word, if you hook yourself up to the ordinary means of grace and if you LATCH ONTO THAT HOSE like a baby latching on to momma, then you are going to grow. You are going to GROW UP in salvation, you are going to grow up in grace and you are going to grow up in the love and knowledge of Christ!

So – grow! My dearly beloved children, I beg of you – GROW! Latch onto those things as if your life depended on it and grow!

Find a church that preaches the Word and be there every time the doors are open. Join a Small Group or a Men’s Bible Study or a Alpha Group on campus and talk about your walk with Christ and make some connections with other faith positive people. Read the Scriptures at home, listen to a podcast on your way to work, pray by yourself, in a group and with your family. Do those things – attend to the ordinary means – dear ones - and you will grow.

God will give you grace – if you meet him where he wants to be found.

He will build you up and he will hold you fast and you will SURVIVE AND THRIVE no matter the challenges, tribulations, persecutions, seductions and temptations that lie ahead.

And now my dear children - may the Lord bless you! May your father’s God prosper you and watch over you and keep you from all evil. To him be the glory both now and forever more – amen.

Amen; let’s pray together.