

## 2 Peter 1:20–21

### Introduction

We've seen over the last couple of weeks that Peter is refuting false claims that there really is no future coming of Christ in power to judge the living and the dead. We've seen that for Peter, this is far more than just a matter of correct doctrine, but rather a matter of how we live, and ultimately a matter of eternal punishment or of eternal life. In other words, as with *all* doctrine, this is for us a doctrine that *matters*. So how does Peter combat these false claims? How does he refute this false doctrine? The answer to this question is, really, extremely important. Peter starts by appealing to something that he himself had seen with his own eyes and heard with his own ears.

- 2 Peter 1:16–18 — For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were *eyewitnesses* of His majesty. For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, such a voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased”; and *we heard this very voice* borne from heaven, for *we were with him* on the holy mountain.

All of human society is at some level built on the importance and the validity of eyewitness testimony. No matter how sophisticated we get in our crime solving abilities, it's the testimony of eyewitness that will always carry a huge amount of weight in any court of law. Of course, everyone knows that there can also be false witnesses. That's why the ninth commandment says:

- Exodus 20:16 (cf. Deut. 19:16-19) — “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

In our courts of law, witnesses are asked: “Do you solemnly swear that you will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?” The character of witnesses is examined; the consistency of their testimony is examined; but all this only bears out just how irreplaceable and just how powerful is *eyewitness* testimony. It's not our job this morning to examine the character of Peter, James, and John, or to check the consistency of their testimony, but I will say that any thorough and objective investigation will reveal that their trustworthiness as eyewitnesses would meet the very highest standard in any American court of law. Somehow there's this idea today that while eyewitnesses in the courtroom must be taken seriously, and while the eyewitnesses of “secular” history must be taken seriously, the eyewitness testimony of the Apostles is automatically inferior and sometimes even assumed to be of no value at all. Why is this? It's because we don't like what they are testifying *to* and/or because we've already concluded something to be impossible. In reality, however, nothing could be more naïve. Brothers and sisters, there's nothing wrong with appealing to that most reliable eyewitness testimony of the Apostles. Our faith is rooted in “real” historically verifiable history.

- John 21:24 — This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true.

There's a sense in which our faith is built upon this eyewitness testimony.

- 1 John 1:1–3 (cf. Jn. 21:24) — That which was from the beginning, **which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands**, concerning the word of life— the life was made manifest, and **we have seen it, and testify to it** and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— **that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you**, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

I said there's *a sense* in which our faith is built upon this eyewitness testimony of the Apostles because the testimony of the Apostles is only testimony *to* the testimony of God. If you believe that Peter and James and John are telling the truth, but don't believe that God is telling the truth, then what's the point? Our faith is built on the eyewitness testimony of the Apostles *only in so far* as they are representing to us the testimony and the word of God which *He* has borne concerning His Son. Can you see, then, how ultimately our faith rests wholly upon the foundation of the Word of God? Jesus said:

- John 5:31–32, 37–38 — If I alone bear witness about myself, my testimony is not true. There is another who bears witness about me, and I know that the testimony that he bears about me is true... **The Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me.** His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen, and you do not have **his word** abiding in you, for you do not believe the one whom he has sent.

Are you beginning to see how the power of the Apostles' eyewitness testimony actually *derives* from what it is that they're bearing witness *to* (contrary to any other type of eyewitness testimony)?

It's the testimony of God that *gives to* the testimony of the Apostles it's true authority and authenticity. And then it's the testimony of the Holy Spirit in our hearts that *opens our eyes* to the truth of the testimony that the Father has borne to His Son and that has now been conveyed to us through the eyewitness testimony of the Apostles. So Jesus said to His disciples:

- John 15:26–27 (cf. Jn. 16:8-11) — When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, **he will bear witness about me.** And **you also will bear witness**, because **you have been with me from the beginning.**

Our faith is *built ultimately upon* the testimony and the word of God *conveyed to us* by the eyewitness testimony of the Apostles and *authenticated in our hearts* by the testimony of the Holy Spirit. But now we remember—as we already saw last week—that there's even more. What Peter and James and John *saw* with their own eyes was the honor and glory that God the Father bestowed on Jesus – *in fulfillment* of Psalm chapter eight. What they *heard* with their own ears was the voice borne to Jesus by the Majestic glory – *in fulfillment* of Psalm chapter two and Isaiah chapter forty-two. And so now we have the **testimony** of God on the holy mountain *in fulfillment* of the **testimony** that He had already given centuries earlier through the Old Testament prophets, conveyed to us through the eyewitness **testimony** of the Apostles and

authenticated in our hearts by the **testimony** of the Holy Spirit. Do you see how we have in all of this the strong—and even the unassailable—foundation of our faith? The *eyewitness* testimony of the Apostles gets its ultimate authority from the testimony and the word of God – both as promise and as fulfillment. So listen to these Scriptures:

- 1 Corinthians 15:3–8 — I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins **in accordance with the Scriptures**, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day **in accordance with the Scriptures**, and that **he appeared** to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then **he appeared** to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then **he appeared** to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, **he appeared** also to me.
- John 19:34–37 — But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. **He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—that you also may believe.** For these things took place **that the Scripture might be fulfilled**: “Not one of his bones will be broken.” And again another Scripture says, “They will look on him whom they have pierced.”

And Peter writes, after describing what he had seen and heard when he was with Jesus on the holy mountain:

- 2 Peter 1:19 — We have the prophetic word more fully confirmed...

Once again, are you seeing in all of this the strong—and even the unassailable—foundation for our faith? It’s only now, then, that we’re in a place to really feel the full weight of Peter’s argument in verses 20-21.

**I. 2 Peter 1:20–21** — ...**knowing this first of all**, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from [the prophet’s] own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

It’s important to understand here that Peter isn’t writing these verses to convince the skeptics and the unbelievers – much less the false teachers. Peter’s writing these verses to those who have already believed – like you and me – so we won’t be shaken but rather established immovably in the faith that we already have. Most translations start verse 20 as a new sentence and as a result they translate it as a command: “But know this first of all” (NASB), “Above all you must understand” (NIV). The big problem with this is that it can sound to us like Peter’s about to tell his readers something new. It can sound to us like Peter’s about to tell his readers for the very first time that the prophecies of Scripture are the word of God and that by giving them this brand-new teaching, now they’ll be fortified against the false teachers. But that’s not at all what’s happening here, and that’s why it’s so important that the ESV does *not* translate “**know** this first of all” but rather “**knowing** this first of all” (the Greek has the participle). In other words, what Peter’s saying is this: You already know this, and you already believe this, but now you must be careful to acknowledge in your heart and in your thinking the place of first importance that this truth holds. You already know and believe this, but what’s so imperative is

that you know and believe this “*first of all*” – as the starting point for all other knowledge and as the only standard by which any and all truth claims are to be carefully measured.

**II. 2 Peter 1:20** — ...knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from [the prophet’s] own interpretation.

When Peter speaks about prophecies of Scripture, he’s not talking about the whole Old Testament from Genesis to Malachi, but especially about those prophecies that speak clearly of God coming to judge all the world and to set up His kingdom and His righteous rule in all the earth. That’s Peter’s main agenda here – to remind us of Christ’s future coming in power, that we might know it fully.

But notice how Peter says, “no prophecy ***OF Scripture***.” The Greek word for “Scripture” is “*graphe*” from which we get the words “graffiti” and “graphic,” and so the word has the basic meaning of that which is “written” or “inscribed.” Of course, when the New Testament writers use this word, they’re not referring to just *any* writing or inscription, but rather to *the* inspired writings of the Old Testament – the whole Old Testament from Genesis all the way to Malachi. These writings are the “inscripturated”—or the *written down*—word of God. So the Apostle Paul says that:

□ 2 Timothy 3:16 — *All Scripture is breathed out by God...*

Jesus Himself, after arguing a point from Psalm 82, concludes:

□ John 10:35 — ...and Scripture cannot be broken.

Sometimes, when it was actually God who spoke in the Old Testament, the Apostle Paul will say that it was Scripture that spoke.

□ Romans 9:17 — For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.”

□ Galatians 3:8 — The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.”

Paul even quotes the angry words of Sarah in Genesis 21 and hears in these words God Himself speaking – or, as Paul says, the Scripture speaking.

□ Galatians 4:30 — What does the Scripture say? “Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman.”

The Old Testament narratives or “stories” are also appealed to as the very word of God, or as the Scripture speaking authoritatively.

- Romans 4:3 — For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.”
- Romans 11:2–3 — God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? “Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life.”

All throughout the New Testament, the Old Testament Scriptures are assumed to be authoritative as the *very* word of God.

- Acts 17:2 — Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures.
- Acts 17:11 — Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.

In light of all this, now maybe we can understand better why Peter says, “no prophecy *of Scripture* comes from [the prophet’s] own interpretation.” Peter’s simply reminding us that these prophecies of Christ’s coming in power are a *part of* Scripture – Scripture that’s breathed out by God, Scripture that cannot be broken, Scripture that *speaks* to us the *word of God*. And so we *know* that *no prophecy of Scripture* comes from [the prophet’s] own interpretation.

The word for “interpretation,” here, is the word that’s used in Genesis 40 when Joseph *interprets* the dreams of Pharaoh’s chief cupbearer and chief baker. In the same way, it was necessary that the prophets interpret and explain the meaning of the dreams that God gave to them and the visions that they saw. Have you ever asked yourself *how* the word of the Lord came to the prophets? Did the prophets sit down at a desk with paper and pen in hand and wait for God to audibly dictate to them word for word exactly what they should write down? There were certainly times when things like this would have happened, especially in the unique case of Moses with whom God spoke “mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles” (Num. 12:7-8). But Moses was apparently an exception to the general rule. It seems that God would more commonly give to His prophet a vision or a dream (Num. 12:6; Joel 2:28), after which it was necessary that the prophet himself “interpret” that vision or that dream and then proclaim—or prophesy—its meaning and its message to the people. It was in this process of “interpreting” that the unique vocabulary and writing style and personality of each individual prophet came into play. In other words, it’s because of this human process of “interpretation” that Isaiah can end up *sounding like* Isaiah, and Jeremiah can *sound like* Jeremiah, and Ezekiel can *sound like* Ezekiel. We say it’s a *human* process—which it was—and yet ultimately, just as Joseph’s interpretation of Pharaoh’s servants’ dreams was from the Lord (Gen. 40:8), so also none of the prophecies *of Scripture* ever came from the prophet’s *own* interpretation. Instead, Peter goes on to remind us in verse twenty-one:

**III. 2 Peter 1:21** — For no prophecy was ever borne out of the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were borne along by the Holy Spirit.

This is really an astonishing and a wonderful verse. Who spoke? *Men* spoke. It was the prophets themselves who spoke. It wasn't God speaking with their voices as though they were in a trance or as though they were mere puppets. It was the men themselves who were self-consciously speaking and authoring their own works. And yet Peter is also clear that these men spoke "**from God as they were borne along by the Holy Spirit.**" Just as the humanity and the deity of Christ united in *one* person is a mystery beyond our comprehension, so also—in perhaps a lesser way—is the sovereign working of God by which He gave to us *His own* infallible and authoritative word *through the very real human agency* of the prophets. "*Men* spoke — from *God*!" Here in these words is truly a mystery beyond my comprehension. And yet in the case of the Scriptures, we're never tempted to worship the book, but compelled instead to worship *God* — who has given such a book to us. How can it be that David could write these words:

- 2 Samuel 23:1–3 (cf. Acts 3:21) — The oracle of David, the son of Jesse, the oracle of the man who was raised on high, the anointed of the God of Jacob, the sweet psalmist of Israel: "The Spirit of the LORD speaks by me; his word is on my tongue.

How can it be that we should read in Jeremiah chapter one:

- Jeremiah 1:9 (Lk. 1:68-70) — The LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the LORD said to me, "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth."

How can it be that any of the prophets could ever say "Thus says the Lord" so that the word *they spoke* was truly and actually *the word of God*?

Peter wrote in verses 17-18: "When [Jesus] received honor and glory from God the Father, such a voice was **borne** to him **by the Majestic Glory**, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased"; and we heard this very voice **borne from heaven.**" Notice how Peter uses the word "borne"—or "carried" or "brought"—two times to describe how this "voice" came from God and how it therefore carried the full weight of the infallible and authoritative word of God. Now, in verse 21, Peter uses the same word twice more with the very same emphasis: "For **no prophecy [of Scripture] was ever borne out of the will of man**, but men spoke from God as they were **borne along by the Holy Spirit.**" Do you see how, for Peter, the inscripturated word of the prophets bears the same weight of authority as the word that he physically heard spoken to Jesus by the Majestic Glory on the holy mountain.

"Men spoke from God," Peter says, "as they were **borne along by the Holy Spirit.**" Peter's not giving us, here, a detailed theory of how inspiration "works." That's a wonderful, amazing mystery that can't be explained. But what Peter does very much want us to remember and fully know is that all of Scripture—including the prophecies of God's future coming in power—all of Scripture is, indeed, the inerrant, the infallible, and the authoritative word of God, and therefore all of Scripture, including all the prophecies of Scripture, *must* be fulfilled (Acts 1:16; Lk. 22:37; 24:44). Indeed, it's this very prophetic word that we—today—have even more fully confirmed in its fulfillment already on the holy mountain. And so it's this very prophetic word that we "do well to pay careful attention [to] as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in [our] hearts."

## Conclusion

Remember the very first words of our text this morning: “knowing this first of all.” Peter assumes that we already know and have already believed that the Scriptures are from God and are the very word of God. Yes, we already know this, but what’s so imperative is that we know and believe this “*first of all.*”

Remember how the power of the Apostles’ eyewitness testimony actually *derives from* what it is that they’re bearing witness *to*. It’s the testimony *of God* (both as OT promise and as NT fulfillment) that *gives to* the reliable and faithful testimony of the Apostles it’s true authority and authenticity. And then it’s the testimony of the Holy Spirit in our hearts that *opens our eyes* to the truth of the testimony that the Father has borne to His Son and that is now conveyed to us through the testimony not only of the New Testament Apostles, but also of the Old Testament prophets (law and prophets [former and latter]). Do you see how for us, there’s a sense in which the testimony of the prophets and Apostles comes first?—Because without their testimony we couldn’t know the testimony of God. But do you also see that the testimony of the prophets and the Apostles *depends entirely* for its power and authority—even its very legitimacy—upon the word and the testimony of God.

So which is it that truly comes first? What is it that’s really the ground of all true knowing – beyond even the shadow of a doubt? What is it that’s really the ground of that absolute certainty and assurance of what is true? It can’t logically be the testimony of the prophets or even the eyewitness testimony of the Apostles – as important and as essential as this is. For that matter, it certainly can’t be our own assessment of the reliability of the prophets’ and Apostles’ testimony – as legitimate as that, too, may be.

What is it that’s the only ground of that absolute certainty and assurance of what’s really *true – of whether Christ is coming in power or not*? It must be *nothing less* and *nothing more* than the word and the testimony of God. What other ground for true “knowing”—for true certainty and assurance—could there be in all the world? This has to be where we start. The testimony of God must be the presupposition (the foundation) upon which all the rest of our knowledge is built and against which we’re constantly, instinctively measuring any and all claims to truth. And it’s this word and testimony of God that’s been given to us so miraculously in the form of the Old and New Testament Scriptures – through the testimony of the prophets and apostles(cf. 2 Pet. 3:15-16). This is the strong and unassailable foundation that we have for our faith.

So then, brothers and sisters, are we truly *knowing* this – *first of all*? And knowing this first of all, do we truly have that joyful, and also that sobering, 100% certainty that Christ will come in power – that the day *will* dawn, and that the morning star *will* rise in our hearts? To what extent, then, has this resulted in a greater measure of hope and of holiness in our lives? We should never be tempted to worship the book, but we should be compelled to praise and worship *God*, who has given such a book to us – His own word and testimony inscripturated—written down—for us.

□ 1 John 5:9–12 — If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater, for this is the testimony of God that he has borne concerning his Son. Whoever believes in the Son of

God has the testimony in himself. Whoever does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne concerning his Son. And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.