

2 Peter 2:20-22

Introduction

Throughout all of chapter two, Peter has been denouncing the false teachers in the strongest language possible. We could say that he's been seeking to "scare us away" from the false teachers so that we won't ever be deceived ourselves; so that we won't ever be swept away with them in their destruction. But that raises a question: If we're already Christians, then what is there to be concerned about? If we're already Christians, how could we possibly be deceived? How could we ever be swept away with the false teachers in their destruction – if we're already Christians? Our passage this morning will help us answer this question even as it brings this entire chapter to its terrible climax.

- **2 Peter 2:20–22** — 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. Is Peter teaching that true salvation can be lost?

Those are ominous words, aren't they? But what's Peter really saying? It sounds like he's saying that these false teachers were once saved, but now they're not – now they've "lost their salvation." Now we talk about the idea of someone "losing" their salvation, but I want to help us put that kind of language in right perspective.

To say that a person has lost his salvation is really to say that God had chosen him and called him, but now God has reversed that election and calling. At one time, God had made him alive as a new creation in Christ, granting him saving repentance and faith, but now once again he's dead in his sins. All of his sins had once been forgiven, having been reckoned to the account of Christ who actually paid the penalty for those sins on the cross, but now those sins are held against him once more and he himself must *also* pay the penalty – in addition to the penalty that Christ already paid. God Himself had once declared him righteous on the basis of Christ's righteousness which was *actually* reckoned and imputed to his account, but now that gift of righteousness has been withdrawn and God's judgment has been reversed – from justification to condemnation. He had once ceased to be an object of God's end-times wrath and been the recipient of God's saving grace and love, but now he's an object of God's wrath once again. He had once been formally and legally adopted by God as His beloved child, but now he's been disowned once again as His enemy. He had once been given the gift of the Holy Spirit and the promise of eternal life, but now both the gift and the promise have been withdrawn.

I hope you can see from this that if we're going to talk about someone "losing" their salvation, it's at least equally—and actually *more*—important to talk about God "losing" those whom He

has saved. The very nature of our salvation is that it's *God's* salvation and God's work from start to finish, and we know that what *God* has begun He has promised that He will complete (cf. Phil. 1:6). If we can speak about someone truly losing their salvation, then this means that the salvation they once had was ultimately of their *own doing* and not wholly a work of God's saving power and grace. When we truly understand what the Bible teaches about the nature of what our salvation is as the powerful, saving work of God from start to finish, we'll see that the Bible teaches everywhere that those whom *God* has once saved *He* will never lose. We read in Romans chapter eight:

- Romans 8:28–30 — And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom **he foreknew** he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom **he predestined** he also called, and those whom **he called** he also justified, and those whom **he justified he also glorified**.

This has been called the “golden chain” and also the “unbreakable chain.” God finishes what He starts. When God saves, He saves to the end and to the very uttermost. If He didn't, it wouldn't actually be “salvation” at all.

This morning I'm going to assume the biblical truth that true salvation cannot be lost *because* God cannot and will not lose those whom He has saved. But even as we assume this truth, shouldn't we always be full of a deep down joy and gladness? Shouldn't we love to be always saying with the Apostle Paul:

- Romans 8:38–39 — For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God [the powerful, saving, keeping, guarding, preserving love of God] in Christ Jesus our Lord.

So if these verses in 2 Peter are not teaching us that true salvation can be lost, then what are they teaching us? We have to be careful, here, that we don't try to find artificial ways to get around what the text seems to be clearly saying. Just because we believe that other passages of Scripture teach that true salvation can't be lost doesn't mean that we can be more “careless” with our interpretation of this Scripture.

II. Is Peter speaking hypothetically?

There are some who suggest that Peter's only speaking hypothetically.

- 2 Peter 2:20 (NIV) — ***If*** [the false teachers] have escaped the [defilements] of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and are overcome [something that actually didn't happen and is a complete impossibility], [then] they are [or “would be”] worse off at the end than they were at the beginning.

Maybe this whole thing is just a “hypothetical warning” – a warning of what *would* happen if in fact something *could* happen (but it actually can’t happen). But what good is a “hypothetical warning”? If someone scoffed at such a “warning” as really no warning at all, could you blame them? Everything about this warning and all of the context surrounding this warning tells us that Peter is in deadly earnest. Peter isn’t telling us that, hypothetically, it would be worse for the false teachers if it were really possible for them to have fallen away; he’s telling us that in actual reality it *is* worse for them and *will be* worse for them because they *have* fallen away.

- 2 Peter 2:21 — 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.

Peter says that the last state of these false teachers has truly become worse for them than the first because they *did* escape the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, after which they were again entangled in those defilements and overcome. There’s nothing at all “hypothetical” about these verses – or about any of the “warning passages” in Scripture. The situation Peter describes is only too real.

III. Is Peter purposefully choosing words that can describe a person who was never truly saved?

There are others who say that Peter purposefully chooses words that can describe a person who was never truly saved (cf. Blum). Peter says that the false teachers are those who had once “escaped the defilements of the world *through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*,” and he describes them in this way *because* this allows us to assume that “their knowledge was merely intellectual knowledge” (Kistemaker). It may be true that the false teachers had only an intellectual head knowledge of Jesus Christ, but I don’t believe this explains *why* Peter chooses to use the language he uses. Peter’s “copying” the same words he used at the beginning of chapter one:

- 2 Peter 1:3–4 — [Christ’s] divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and piety, **through the KNOWLEDGE** of him who called us by his own glory and virtue, by which He has granted to us His precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, **having ESCAPED** from the corruption **that is in the WORLD** because of sinful desire.
- 2 Peter 2:20 — 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.

Here in chapter two, Peter *purposefully* uses the very same language that he used in chapter one to describe *our own* saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and *our own* escape from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. “Knowledge” (*epignosis*) everywhere else in Peter refers to a *saving* knowledge (2 Pet. 1:2-3, 8; cf. *gnosis*, 2 Pet. 1:5-6; 3:18; 1 Pet. 3:7 and sermon notes). The language Peter uses for those who have now become entangled all over again in the

defilements of the world and overcome at the very least implies a Christian – not a false Christian, but a Christian, no different from any of the rest of us.

IV. Is Peter only warning of severe *temporal* consequences in *this* life?

There are some who might say that when Peter talks about becoming entangled again in the defilements of the world and overcome, he’s not actually talking about the kind of sin that leads to eternal destruction, but only something that leads to really severe consequences in this life so that in a *temporal, earthly* sense, they really were better off before they were saved.

In the first place, we know that this isn’t always how things happen. The false teachers very often live lives of comfort and luxury and ease. Not only that, but throughout this entire chapter Peter’s been using the language of eternal destruction. No matter how severe the consequences of our sin in this life and no matter how many “rewards” we could ever lose in heaven, it would still be impossible to ever say that we’re worse off now than we were before we were saved. If Peter’s not talking about the reality of hell and eternal punishment, it would be impossible for him to say what he says in verse twenty-one:

- 2 Peter 2:21 — 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’s at stake here, for Peter, is a worse eternal punishment now reserved for these false teachers than what was originally coming to them before they escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

V. What about 2 Peter 2:1?

- 2 Peter 2:1 — But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will bring in teachings that lead to destruction, **even denying the Master who bought them**, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.

The *explicit* and *pervasive* testimony of Scripture is that true salvation cannot be lost, which is to say that God cannot and will not lose any of those whom He has saved. So what is Peter saying here? Once again, this isn’t a hypothetical situation. It’s real. Once again, what’s at stake here is not just a temporal punishment or destruction in this life, but the reality of hell and eternal punishment. And once again, it surely appears that Peter’s using the language of true salvation (“even denying the Master *who bought them*.”).¹ So how are we to understand this?

¹ There are some who suggest that this isn’t really the language of redemption through Jesus Christ, but that Peter’s using this language in a more “generic” way (cf. Grudem; Vos). They may be right, but I’m personally not at all convinced. In the New Testament, every other time that the Greek word for “bought” is used in the context of *God* “buying” *men*, the point is always God’s redemption of men and women through the shed blood of Jesus Christ (see below; cf. Jude 4).

There are many people who think that when Christ died on the cross, he actually suffered the penalty for all the sins of all the people in the world; therefore, if He's already suffered the penalty for everyone, this means He's also paid the "price" and "bought" (or "purchased") all the people in the world – even the false teachers. I agree that *if* Christ paid the penalty for the sins of all the people in the world, then that means He's also bought and purchased all the people in the world. But wouldn't this be universalism (the doctrine that everyone, in the end, is saved and goes to heaven)? Those who hold this view answer, "no," they prefer to say that Christ paid a price sufficient to purchase *everyone* and with a desire to purchase *everyone*, but that that price isn't actually *applied* to anyone unless they believe. But do you see what we just did? We took "bought" (as in "bought off the slave market") and turned it into "deposit" (as in "deposited money to be held in a bank account). Instead of actually *purchasing* someone with the payment being applied to that person, we're saying that Christ has paid a price only sufficient to purchase everyone, but that he hasn't *actually* bought or purchased *everyone*. But Peter speaks very clearly here of the false teachers having been "bought"—not potentially bought, but *bought*—by the Master, Jesus Christ (cf. Jude 4). In *every* place where this Greek word (*agorazo*) is used in the New Testament it always assumes the idea of a completed transaction and the successful transfer of ownership. That's the meaning of the word "bought." This is equally the case wherever this word is used of men and women who have been "bought" or "purchased" by Christ (cf. 1 Pet. 1:18-19).

- Revelation 14:3-4 — They were singing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except *the 144,000* who had been **redeemed** from the earth... *It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes.* These have been **redeemed from mankind as firstfruits for God and the Lamb.**
- Revelation 5:9 — They sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you **ransomed** people *for God from* every tribe and language and people and nation.
- Galatians 4:4-5 — But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to **redeem** those who were under the law, **so that** we might [would] receive adoption as sons.
- Galatians 3:13 — Christ **redeemed** *us* from the curse of the law by becoming a curse *for us*.
- 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 (cf. 7:23) — Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, *for you were bought* with a price.

"Redeemed" is a word never applied to everyone, but only to some – to those who are *actually* "saved." This is a wonderful truth that highlights the personal love of Christ for us as He went to the cross bearing our names on His shoulders and on the breast piece over His heart as our great High Priest (cf. Exod. 28:9-12, 21, 29-30). When Peter says that the false teachers have denied the Master who bought them, he's not referring to the idea that Christ in His death on the cross has paid the price for everyone, depositing that payment into a cosmic bank account without actually buying—or "purchasing"—anyone. Instead, we could translate, "even denying the Master who ransomed and redeemed them." What Peter has in mind here is the reality of

redemption both accomplished on the cross and applied to all of those—and *only* those—for whom it was accomplished (cf. Jn. 10:16; Acts 18:10).²

So if Peter’s not teaching that God can lose those whom He has saved (and therefore he’s not teaching that we can “lose our salvation”), and if these are not hypothetical warnings, and if Peter’s purposefully using language that he uses in other places to describe true Christians, and if what’s at stake here is nothing less than the reality of hell and eternal punishment— then what are we to make of this? There’s obviously a very real tension here. And *whatever* our answer to this question is, it must leave us with that tension.

VI. Peter’s “tension” (a biblical and practical reality)

On the one hand we know (because the *Scriptures* are clear) that true salvation can’t be lost – which is the same thing as to say that God will not lose those whom He has saved. This is a wonderful truth that brings us immense comfort and peace and joy, and causes us to worship and give glory to God alone.

And yet how do we recognize “true” salvation? How do we recognize those whom God has “truly” saved – whether ourselves or others? Has God given any one of us our own earthly copy of the heavenly book of life? Do we have a certified list of names produced and signed by God Himself hanging on the wall so that we can infallibly identify all those who are *truly* regenerate and born again? Have I even seen my own name on such a list? These things are hidden from us so that we can’t “know” *in the same way* that God “knows.”³

We can’t know in the same way that God knows, but there is a sense in which we *can* still “know.” We “know” not by sitting in on the eternal counsels of God and not by infallibly seeing people’s hearts (not even our own hearts), but rather by the confession of people’s mouths and the fruit that they bear – and so also by the confession of our *own* mouths and the fruit that *we* are bearing. And this “knowledge” is, in turn, founded upon the given word and promises of God. So even though Peter uses the *same conversion language* to describe both the spiritual condition of the false teachers before their fall and also the spiritual condition of all of us, Peter’s using this language *as one* himself who has never seen the book of life and who isn’t able to see the hearts of men. Even though Peter uses “redemption” language to describe the prior relationship of Christ to the false teachers, he’s using this language *as one* who “knows” only as a human can know, and not as *God* knows.⁴

² When Peter says that the false teachers are “*even* denying the Master who bought them” he assumes that this was something *only* the false teachers could do *because* the false teachers had once been walking in the way of righteousness. In other words, it couldn’t be said of the false teachers in Jude that they were denying the Master who bought them because they were coming into the church from the outside—therefore, there was no sense whatsoever in which they could be said to have ever been bought by the Master (cf. Jude 4).

³ In his commentary on Hebrews 6:4 Schreiner points out that the writer of Hebrews “doesn’t assume a divine perspective of their [his readers’] ultimate fate.”

⁴ Schreiner speaks of Peter’s “phenomenological” perspective (“the language used in 2 Peter is phenomenological”).

The false teachers were still claiming to have been bought and redeemed by Christ. At one point, this claim had been backed up not only by their confession of faith, but also by the life they lived. So notice how Peter describes the false teachers' real apostasy only in terms of the *visible* fruit that they bear. In terms of the kind of "knowledge" or "knowing" that we have as finite human beings, at one point the false teachers were, indeed, Christians, *having escaped the defilements of the world* through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. In terms of the kind of "knowledge" or "knowing" that we have as finite human beings, at one point the false teachers did indeed *know* the "way of righteousness" in the sense that they were actually walking in it. They were confessing the name of Christ and living righteous lives as those *do* who have come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and who've been bought by the blood of Christ. And yet now, Peter says, they've "turned back" from the holy commandment delivered to them." Peter isn't distinguishing between an outward "turning back" that actually happened and an inward "turning back" that never *really* happened. That's not what he's doing. He doesn't make the point that these false teachers were never really Christians in the first place. Peter's just speaking and evaluating these false teachers from the perspective of a finite human being and in the light of the true Gospel. In terms of the kind of "knowledge" or "knowing" that we have as finite human beings, the false teachers *really have* "turned back" from the holy commandment delivered to them so that now it really will be worse for them than if they had never known the way of righteousness (cf. Mat. 10:14-15; 11:20-24; Lk. 12:47-48; Heb. 6:4-8).

The commandment delivered to the (now) false teachers is the *same* commandment that's been delivered to all of *us* as Christians and that Peter exhorts all of *us* to "remember" and to heed.

- 2 Peter 3:1-2 — This is now the second letter that I am writing to you, beloved. In both of them I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, **that you should remember** the predictions of the holy prophets and **the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles...**

In Jude's letter, this "commandment is "the *faith* that was once for all delivered to the *saints*" and for which we must daily contend (Jude 3; cf. 1 Cor. 11:2, 23; 15:3). The "commandment" that was delivered to the false teachers and to all the saints is the Gospel of our salvation in its entirety, which includes the gracious, Gospel command not only to believe in Christ but to live holy and sanctified lives. The Apostle Paul writes in 1 Timothy:

- 1 Timothy 6:13-14 — I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, to keep **the commandment** unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It's from this gracious Gospel command that was once delivered to them and which they had once obeyed that the false teachers have now turned back as is *evidenced* by the lives they're living and the bitter fruit they're bearing.

- 2 Peter 2:15 — **Forsaking the straight way [in which they were once walking], they have gone astray.** They have followed the way of Balaam...

- 2 Peter 2:22 — 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.”

Conclusion

We could spend all our time talking about how these false teachers must never have been true Christians in the first place – and that’s legitimate in its proper place (cf. 1 Jn. 2:19), but Peter doesn’t do that here.⁵ Peter isn’t concerned here to defend the doctrine of “eternal security”; he’s concerned simply to *warn us* and *exhort us* to persevere in faith and in the way of righteousness—in obedience to the holy commandment delivered to us—until the very end, never forsaking the “straight way” or “turning back” ourselves, *as the false teachers have done* (cf. 2:18; Heb. 6:11-12). Peter’s concern here is to *warn us* and *exhort us* so that we’ll never be like the false teachers, returning to the filth that we had once been rid of or wallowing again in the mire from which we had once been washed.

There are some people who say: “Well, I know that I *was* a Christian, so I *must* still be a Christian.” There are many parents who have comforted themselves regarding their children (and perhaps even given their children false assurance) by saying: “I know that he/she *was* a Christian, so he/she *must* still be a Christian.” But what we learn here from 1 Peter is that this is a dangerous and unbiblical way of thinking, because the danger of apostasy is real. *From the perspective* of those who have never heard the eternal counsels of God but can only hear the confessions that people make—*from the perspective* of those who have never *seen* the book of life but can only see the fruits that people bear (including our own), the reality of apostasy and falling away from the faith into eternal destruction is not at all something hypothetical, but real, and therefore Peter’s warning here is real. To ignore this warning and to live with the kind of carelessness or apathy that believes it’s impossible to fall is a foolhardy thing to do. On the other hand, to heed this warning and to tremble at it is only to be all the more **assured** that *God* is the one working in our lives and that what He has begun, He will be faithful to complete. Are you seeing this redemptive tension? In other words, it’s these *real* warnings of apostasy in Scripture that God actually uses as a “means” in His sovereignty to guard and keep His elect so that those whom *He* has saved will never fall away – so that *He* will never finally “lose” even a single one of those whom He has redeemed. And so in the end we come to rest again in Christ and in His promise to us – who has not only justified us, but also granted to us all things pertaining to life and godliness (2 Pet. 1:3-4). We rest wholly in Christ even as we heed the real warnings and always pursue that holiness without which no one will see the Lord (cf. Heb. 12:14). In closing, how appropriate are the words of the Apostle Paul:

- 2 Timothy 2:19 — God’s firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: “The Lord *knows* those who are his,” and, “Let everyone who names the name of the Lord *depart* from iniquity.”

⁵ Some people point out that in the “proverb” Peter quotes, even though the dog vomited, it was still an unclean dog and even though the pig washed, it was still an unclean pig (its true nature remained ever unchanged; cf. Mat. 7:6; Prov. 26:11). But even though in the end, I believe this is a true point, and even *if* Peter was intending to make this point (and that’s a big “if”), we still have to remember that when it comes to humans, we can’t see with our own eyes the fundamental “nature” of a man – whether he’s truly regenerate or not. We can’t even see or “know” our own hearts *in this way*. Only God sees and “knows” like this.