

## *Peter's Last Letter*

Opening Hymn: #266—"Soldiers of Christ"

Sometimes I've heard the hypothetical question, "If you knew your next talk to the brethren would be the last you would ever give, what subject or topic would you use? What would be some of the points you would cover?"

This is, of course, somewhat artificial since no one knows when a discourse may be his last one. But that was not true of Peter. When he writes what we call his second epistle, he seems to know this will be his last one:

2 Pet. 1:13-15 [Weymouth] I think it right, so long as I sojourn in this body, to arouse you by such reminders. **For I know that soon my body must be laid aside**, as indeed our Lord Jesus Christ revealed to me. So on every occasion I will also do my best to enable you to recall these things after my departure.

Since he believes this will be his last letter to the brethren, what did Peter think he should talk about? The first observation we can make is that he did NOT give a "public discourse." The opening verse says he is writing "to them that have obtained like precious faith with us." We also notice he was not interested in presenting new truths. What he did was remind them of what they already knew. These are his main points:

1. Hold fast to the word of God as given through His prophets.
2. Beware of false teachers who would lead you astray.
3. Don't weaken your faith by confusing God's patience with slowness.

### **Chapter 1: Encouragement**

You might think the word "divine" would be a common word in the New Testament. But the English word appears only in 2 Pet. 1:3,4\*. The **Greek word** translated "divine" in 2 Peter does appear in one other place: Acts 17:29 where it is rendered "Godhead" (KJV).

In verses 3 and 4 Peter refers to "divine power" [the power of God] and "divine nature" [the nature of God]. When we read "that ye might be partakers of the divine nature," many Bible Students think of some future reward, when we will receive immortal life if found faithful. Of course such a reward will be given to the faithful footstep followers of the Master. But it is possible that is **not** what Peter is thinking about. The text reads:

2 Pet. 1 :4,5 [NIV] He has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness...

Have you "escaped the corruption that is in the world" now or are you expecting that you will escape it after you die? In fact you have escaped the "corruption that is in the world" now if you are a new creature and are walking according to the Spirit. The eighth chapter of Romans begins by saying there

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\* In Heb. 9:1 the word "divine" is translator supplied even though it's not in italics--the Greek is the same as 9:6 where it reads "service of God").

is “no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.” That chapter continues by contrasting the fleshly, carnal walk with those who walk after the Spirit, who are the sons of God. If we have then escaped the corruption in the world, Peter says we are “partakers of the divine nature.” The implication is that we partake of that nature now, not later. The Greek word translated “nature” describes the attributes and characteristics of someone or something. That Greek word is used twice in...

Rom. 11 :24 For if thou wert cut out of the olive tree which is wild by **nature**, and wert grafted contrary to **nature** into a good olive tree...

What is the nature of God? Virtuous, knowledgeable, disciplined, patient, morally good, loving. ... Once we start it's hard to know where to stop. These are not arbitrary characteristics pulled out of the air. These are the ones Peter selects:

2 Pet. 1:5 For this very reason [much better translation than “And beside this”]  
add to your faith virtue...

Essentially Peter is saying that if we are partakers of God's nature, we ought to be copying his attributes and characteristics. He then mentions seven things that are to be added to faith. Peter assumes that we already possess faith since he addressed this letter to those who “have obtained like precious faith with us.”

This list is sometimes called the “graces of the spirit.” In Gal. 5:22 Paul lists what he calls the “fruit of the spirit” [love, joy, peace, longsuffering, etc.]. Often we say we have to develop the fruits AND graces of the spirit so we don't appear to be playing favorites with Paul's list rather than Peter's. But the objective of both lists is fruitage.

Following the list of characteristics we are to develop, Peter says:

2 Pet. 1:8 For if these things be in you and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor **unfruitful**...

An old, unfruitful tree is a sad sight, and is usually the result of neglect. You can't stick a baby apple tree in the ground, walk away from it, and then come back later expecting to find a lot of apples. The tree goes to wood making if left to its own devices. It must be pruned, fertilized, and be kept clear of the weeds that take the resources it needs to make fruit. An unfruitful tree is no good to anyone and is a good example of what we as Christians must avoid.

Peter calls his list of seven attributes that we are to add to our faith as “these things,” a phrase he uses five times in verses 8 through 15. Notice his comments about “these things”:

The phrase is first found in vs. 8: Having them makes you fruitful.

Next verse (9): Not having them makes you “blind.”

Next (10): Doing them gives you an abundant entrance into the kingdom.

Verse 12: I'm only reminding you about what you already know.

Finally vs. 15: But don't forget it even when I'm gone.

The idea of being or not being blind concerns one's vision or perspective. Here's a clever story about this subject:

In the center of a great forest a bird perched on the topmost branch of a tall tree is singing with all his might. A fox at the bottom of the tree asks what he is singing about. The bird says he cannot help but sing because the view is so wonderful. “What do you see?” asks the fox. “I see mountains and meadows, a great dome of blue sky and the sea far away.”

“I don’t believe a word of it,” said the fox. “I don’t see anything but these trees. In fact there isn’t anything else to be seen!”

Those who lack “these things” lack spiritual vision and cannot see beyond the “trees” of the present, temporal world.

Peter has supervised the instruction of those of like precious faith and he tells them they are “established in the **present truth**” [vs. 12], an expression we all love but is found only here. Of course he’s talking about the truths of the new Gospel dispensation as contrasted to the truths of the old Jewish dispensation. Although they are established in present truth, what is going to happen to them when he dies? That’s what worries him.

The problem gets down to a question of faith. What do you believe and why do you believe it? If you believe something for the wrong reason, you might find your faith shaken. So Peter first says what they have **not** done: “We have not followed cunningly devised fables” (vs. 16). In the next few verses he recounts his own personal experience on the mount of transfiguration when he had a glimpse of the future. And he uses that experience as an example of the importance of what previously was delivered by God through his prophets.

2 Pet. 1:19-21 [New English] All this only confirms for us the message of the prophets, to which you will do well to attend. ... But first note this: no one can interpret any prophecy of Scripture by himself. For it was not through any human whim that men prophesied of old; men they were, but, impelled by the Holy Spirit, they spoke the words of God.

At the end of chapter one Peter clearly states that those of “like precious faith” must look to God’s word for their guidance. That means what has been transmitted through the Old Testament prophets and—when he makes this point again at the start of chapter 3—“the commandment of us the apostles of the Lord and Saviour” (2 Pet. 3:2).

## **Chapter 2: Beware of False Teachers**

Yes, there were holy men who spoke the words of God. But Peter reminds us that there were others also. He begins the second chapter by pointing out the obvious: “But there were false prophets **also** among the people.” Peter is not guessing that perhaps history will repeat itself in his day. He knows it will. By the force of their authority, he and the other apostles were able to restrain the influence of false prophets. But the apostles were dying and soon he would be dead too. What would happen then? That’s his main concern: he fears the havoc that can occur because of false teachers who can spin “cunningly devised fables.” Notice the force of the New English translation of...

2 Pet. 2:3 [New English] In their greed for money they will trade on your credulity with sheer fabrications.

Can such things be true? We haven't seen any examples of this in the last couple of years, but we don't have to go back very far to observe the unbelievable credulity of those beguiled by Jim and Tammy Bakker, Rev. Sun Myung Moon and his Unification Church, L. Ron Hubbard and Scientology, Jim Jones in Guiana, and countless evangelists who, like Hawaii's first missionaries, "came to do good, and did very well."

The entire second chapter of this letter contains such a scathing denunciation of false teachers that it is hard to be sure just what lesson there is for us today. Sometimes there are situations when it appears a leader has so much influence over his flock that he does all their thinking for them. But even applying the widest definition of what constitutes our fellowship I don't know of any situation that could be described by these words:

2 Pet. 2:18 [New English] They utter big, empty words, and make of sensual lusts and debauchery a bait to catch those who have barely begun to escape from their heathen environment. [vs. 22] For them the proverb has proved true: "The dog returns to its own vomit. "

Peter says there are situations when it appears that there is no day of reckoning, no retribution for misconduct on the part of leaders or followers. Yet that is simply not true. Peter offers three examples as proof that God does take strong action when it is required: 1) the flood that destroyed the old world except for the righteous; 2) the fire and brimstone that destroyed those living in Sodom and Gomorrah except for the righteous; and 3) the restraints placed on the "angels that sinned."

2 Pet. 2:4 [Weymouth] God did not spare angels when they had sinned, but hurled them down to Tartarus and consigned them to caves of darkness, keeping them in reserve for judgment.

The King James gives the word hell for the Greek word *Tartaroo*. This is the only place in the Bible where this Greek word appears. Peter mentioned these fallen angels before. In his first letter, chapter 3:19,20, he describes disobedient spirits as "in prison." We do know that the freedom to materialize enjoyed by spirit creatures before the flood was taken from them after the flood. They may have been placed under other restraints as well. The point, however, is that God **does** take action when it is the right time to do so.

### **Chapter 3: Hold on to your faith**

What do you do when it appears that everything you believe is being rejected by those who claim to know more than you do? Consider the matter of the Lord's promise to return. Peter selects this doctrine for special attention:

2 Pet. 3:3 Knowing this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, and saying, Where is the promise of his coming [Greek: *parousia*]? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation.

These "scoffers" appear to be synonymous with the false teachers of chapter two. Does that mean that anyone who today thinks the Lord is not present is being one of the "scoffers" identified by Peter in this verse? Some say yes even though few would label any brother or sister as a false teacher who like a dog has returned to his own vomit. The "scoffers" in this chapter specifically are 1) walking in their own lusts ["of the flesh" an added modifier in chapter 2] and 2) rejecting the teaching that the Lord will ever come again at any time. They say he won't ever return because "all things continue as they

were from the beginning of the creation.” Certainly neither of these accusations can be leveled against our brethren who may disagree with how we read the “signs of the time” and what they mean to us. Our brethren who do not believe the Lord is present DO believe he will return a second time; they simply differ with us on the matter of timing. To apply 2 Pet. 3:3 to those who think the Lord’s second presence is yet future is using the scriptures as a club. It invites the response, “If any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there; believe it not” (Matt. 24:23).

The argument that “all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation” is summarily dealt with by Peter by showing that believing tomorrow will be like today meant disaster for those living just before the flood. What evidence was there that a flood of water was about to sweep them away? None. Well not exactly. There was one evidence: they had the preaching of Noah (and 2 Pet. 2:5 is the only place in the Bible where Noah is called a preacher). The people preferred their own unbelief. And they were wrong.

Righteous Noah and his family had to watch wickedness go unpunished year after year. It was the same in Peter’s day, during the dark ages, and during the last days in which we are living. Is this because God is slow to do anything? Not at all. Peter would have us understand that God does not measure time as we do. Only Peter supplies what has been a long-held Bible Student mathematical formula: 1000 years [of man’s time] = 1 day [of God’s time]. (2 Pet. 3:8) (The only other similar reference is in Psa. 90:4 where a thousand years are as yesterday AND a watch in the night.) God is NOT slow ... he IS patient. Things will be done according to His time clock, not man’s.

How will this present evil world come to an end? Peter—and only Peter—tells us it will be destroyed by fire:

2 Pet. 3:10 But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.

Many Christian fundamentalists believe this earth will literally be burned to a crisp as the faithful are caught away to heaven. One can understand why they think that way. Peter just said the old world was covered with literal water and it perished. It’s reasonable to assume he expected literal fire to destroy this present evil world. Of course he also says [in verse 12], “The **heavens** being on fire shall be dissolved.” But here our fundamentalist friends would say that refers to the earth’s atmosphere which disappears with the earth.

Did Peter expect the earth to be literally burned up? No, he did not! In Acts he said something quite different:

Acts 3:20,21 And he shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you: whom the heaven must receive until the **times of restitution** of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began.

Peter did not change his mind some 30 years later. He never changed his expectation that the times of restitution would take place on this literal earth. He did know that mankind’s present arrangements would first have to be swept aside before restitution could take place. That’s why he used the Greek word *kosmos* to refer to what would be destroyed. Although translated *world*, it really means

mankind's arrangements, not the literal world. When he wrote this last letter, Peter used fire as a metaphor for the destruction of man's works.

The last words of verse 10 ("the works that are therein shall be burned up") are not correct. Many translations\* based on older manuscripts say the works of the earth will "be laid bare." The "fires" that bring today's heavens and earth to an end will reveal the hidden works of darkness for all to see. Just as Noah and his family stepped out on the same literal earth that existed before the flood, so also will kingdom blessings be poured out on those living on the same literal earth as we have today. But the political, social, and religious arrangements will all have been swept away. This is called a "new heavens and a new earth."

At the end of his letter and after delivering the warnings about false teachers and the inevitability of the destruction of mankind's present arrangements, Peter admonishes us to be steadfast and "grow in grace." How do we do that? We follow the advice he gave us at the beginning of this letter: We work diligently to add fortitude, knowledge, self-control, patience, godliness, *philadelphia* love, and *agape* love to our faith. Perhaps that's why his list is frequently referred to as the "graces of the spirit"—they enable us to grow in grace.

## Conclusion

We have taken a close look at Peter's last written discourse. Since it appears he knew his death was near, it has been instructive to see what he thought he should tell the brethren. Of the many things we find in this letter, two topics are emphasized:

1. Guard against false teachers who will try to lead you into error.
2. Keep your faith strong by clinging to the words of the holy prophets and the Lord's apostles.

It was the condition of their faith that concerned Peter the most. He addresses his audience by acknowledging that they "have obtained like precious faith with us." That was a result of the Lord's blessing upon his ministry, Paul's ministry whom he specifically acknowledges at the end of his letter, and the other apostles. But he knows people get discouraged when things don't go the way they expect. So he emphasizes what they should do to keep their faith strong:

1. Consider the basis of what you believe. In the case of the gospel message, it was received first-hand from those like Peter who saw the glory and heard God's voice. This was fresh confirmation of the prophetic word previously transmitted to man by God. It surely was not the cunningly devised fables spun out by men.
2. It should be clear by now that God acts according to his own time-table, not man's. Don't let the apparent long passage of time discourage you.
3. Concentrate your efforts on acquiring the graces of the spirit so that you'll make your calling and election sure, so that you will never fall.

The words of this letter are almost 2000 years old, yet they speak to us with the same force as though Peter had written them this morning. Brethren, it is our faith that is being tried. We must not let either false teachers or discouragement lead us astray. Let us concentrate all our effort to add to our faith:

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\* NIV, New English, Rotherham, Diaglott footnote, etc.

fortitude, knowledge, self-control, patience, godliness, *philadelphia* love, and *agape* love. Peter ends with these words:

2 Pet. 3:17,18 [Phillips] But you, my friends whom I love, are forewarned, and should therefore be very careful not to be carried away by the errors of unprincipled men and so lose your proper foothold. On the contrary, you should grow in grace and in knowledge of our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ--to him be glory now and until the day of eternity!

Closing Hymn: #324 — Cause For Gratitude

*[First given in Detroit, August 1991]*