

# A Growth That Endures...



A VERSE BY  
VERSE  
EXPOSITION  
OF THE  
EPISTLE OF  
2ND PETER

## When the Truth Is Twisted 2 Peter 2:1-3 (730)

The churches of Asia Minor had been infiltrated by men who were teaching doctrinal error. These men were also living godless lives and encouraging the members of the churches to join them in their recklessness. The doctrinal and moral stability of the church was being threatened. II Peter was written to check this devastating influence. Peter's aim is to stabilize the Christians. His primary strategy is to saturate the believers with the truth of the gospel so that the destructive errors (in doctrine or practice) would be recognized and resisted. Indeed, the big idea for the entire letter of II Peter is that growth in the truth of the gospel fortifies the church against the destabilizing influence of error. So important are these gospel truths that Peter says in **verse 12**, *Therefore, I shall always be ready to remind you of these things*. Peter was committed to the principle that the truth bears repetition. It is God's desire that we keep the truth of the gospel in our minds all of the time. God has called us to live gospel-conscious lives.

The reason for this is because the strategy of every false teacher is to disparage, to misrepresent the truth of the gospel; to have it perceived as something other than what it is. That strategy is behind their assertion that what the apostles have taught and preached are nothing more than *cleverly devised tales* (**1:16**); that the gospel has been concocted by misguided men; that the whole thing was made up.

So in **1:16-21** Peter argues that what they have been taught is true. He says in verse 16, *we did not follow cleverly invented stories when we preached the gospel to you* (**1:16**). Peter is “defending the authenticity of the gospel he and the other apostles have preached. His strategy is to call two sets of witnesses to testify - the New Testament apostles (**1:16-18**) and the Old Testament prophets (**19-21**).

Two weeks ago we considered the eye-witness testimony of the apostles in verses **16-18**. *For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty.*<sup>17</sup> *For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Glory, “This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased”* --<sup>18</sup> *and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain.* The testimony of the apostles is based upon the fact that, at the Transfiguration, they were *eye-witnesses of Christ’s majesty* (**1:16b**). Peter says we know about the coming of the Lord. We have been granted a foretaste, a preview of it. We were actually present at His Transfiguration. We saw Christ’s glory. We heard God the Father speak from the cloud.

Last Sunday we looked at the prophetic witness as explained by Peter in **1:19-21**.<sup>19</sup> *And so we have the more sure prophetic word, to which you do well to pay attention as*

*to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts.* <sup>20</sup> *But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation,* <sup>21</sup> *for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.* Those men moved by the Holy Spirit were the prophets of the Old Testament. What a privilege for a people to receive a word from heaven. But we must recognize that there are forces within the church itself that would undermine, indeed, silence the voice of truth. We resume our study of II Peter in Chapter 2, verses 1 through 3.

**2 Peter 2:1** *But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves.* <sup>2</sup> *And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned;* <sup>3</sup> *and in their greed they will exploit you with false words; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.*

**2:1. But false prophets also arose among the people.** The obvious point is that not all who claimed to speak for God did in fact speak for God. In other words there were those who falsely claimed to be prophets and whose words found their source in the very father of lies, the devil himself. Mixed in with those beautiful voices that communicated eternal truth were voices that spoke lies; voices that distorted the truth; voices that challenged God.

Peter wants to make sure that his readers understand that what is happening among them is nothing new. In regard to trials he told them earlier in his first letter, *Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you ... as though some strange thing were happening to you (I Pet. 4:12).* Now he is saying the same thing

in regard to the teachers of error. There were false prophets among the Old Testament people of God **just as there will also be false teachers among you.** The presence and influence of error then is no occasional irritation. Rather, it is a persistent state or condition with which the church has always had to contend.

Notice that Peter uses two different terms - *false prophets* and *false teachers*. A prophet is a man whose message comes as the result of a direct revelation from God. It may have come to him in a vision, a dream, a theophany, direct divine speaking, or some other way. A teacher is that man whose message is the fruit of the study of Scripture. The point is that the effect of false prophets and false teachers upon the people of God is similar.

As we make our way through this text I want to point out five warning signs. Five features that when noticed should cause one to halt and to take a closer look at a man's teaching and his life.

False teachers are those **who will secretly introduce destructive heresies.** So the first warning sign is unorthodox teaching. Not every voice of error is a loud one. Indeed, the preferred strategy of errorists is secrecy. "Stealth aircraft are designed to either absorb or misdirect virtually all of any radar waves they come in contact with, thus almost completely disabling the opposition's ability to get an accurate read on the identity and size of the craft from the ground or the air. For example, the radar signature of an F117 Nighthawk is reported to have the cross section the size of a bumblebee. The definition suits them well: dark, mysterious, unseen, and extremely deadly" ([www.lowobservable.com](http://www.lowobservable.com)).

In the same way, these teachers like to approach undetected. Weasel their way into the community of faith. Participate in the body life of the church. They establish relationships. Usually they possess a measure of biblical and theological knowledge. Such knowledge enables them to gain a hearing among those whom they carefully select. Like a big cat stalking and selecting its prey, they pursue the young, the weak, the unaware, those who have wandered away from the others.

Certainly some false teachers often enjoy a high profile. Nevertheless, they still **introduce destructive heresies** like a disease that is **introduced** into a population and spreads from one person to the next. Like drug runners they smuggle in their errors, their heresies. **Heresies** are opinions, teachings that are contrary to the revealed truth of God as contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. In the 4<sup>th</sup> Century a man named Arius introduced a doctrinal error. He denied the genuine deity of Christ. Arius argued that Christ was a created being and, as such, was not of the same essence as God. His view was condemned as heresy at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD. When we recite the Nicene Creed we affirm the orthodox view in the matter. Beloved, we have a God-given standard of truth by which all teaching is to be evaluated. Paul, speaking of the Bereans, said in **Acts 17:11**, *Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, **examining the Scriptures** daily, to see whether these things were so.*

Heresies are **destructive**. Error in doctrine and/or practice destroys. It destroys as surely as a well-aimed bullet or an F5 tornado. It can severely damage the very faith of some. It can alienate believers from their solid, Biblically orthodox churches. It can destroy personal relationships within those churches. It can

destroy the harmony within a fellowship. It can destroy the reputation of a local church within the community. It can siphon away the joy. It can retard the growth of the ministry. It can hinder the advance of the gospel as energy is redirected to internal affairs. It can destroy life itself as individuals get sucked into the downward spiral of sin and reckless living. It can destroy families as fathers and mothers, husbands and wives embrace beliefs and practices contrary to the principles that God has ordained for the home. For these and a multitude of others reasons error is destructive.

While strategy is often subtle we must not think that error is simple a deviation from the apostolic faith at a few secondary or tertiary points. The error of such men can go so far as to **deny the Master who bought them**. Their error will strike at the heart of the faith – the person and work of Christ. They will reach the point at which they actually repudiate their profession concerning Christ. They become apostate.

When Peter talks about *the Master who bought them* he is placing emphasis upon the work of Christ on the cross - no secondary matter. Michael Green points out that “in the cross, as in the Exodus, we see God’s personal intervention for his people, not only to deliver them from a fate of bondage and death, but also to redeem them as ‘a people for himself’ “ (p. 106).

“The false teachers are rejecting [this most basic of doctrines]. Yet in so doing they are not merely expressing a human opinion but deliberately refusing to accept divine truth as revealed in the inspired Scriptures and in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. These men are not simply misguided, but heretics

who have refused divine light, preferring their own views on spiritual matters” (Hillyer, p. 183).

“As an inevitable consequence they are **bringing swift destruction upon themselves**” (Hillyer, p. 183). This doesn’t mean that these guys will be taken out immediately and summarily executed. Peter speaks of an inevitable consequence. “Ironically, the very truth these men deny is creeping up on them. They are ... mocking any idea of judgment; but they will very soon find that their destructive heresies rebound in destruction, as the very teaching they deny comes true” (Lucas, p.90). So the first warning sign is unorthodox teaching.

**2:2.** The second warning sign is loose lifestyle. **And many will follow their sensuality.** *Sensuality* means licentiousness, wantonness, unbridled lust, excess (**I Pet. 4:3; II Pet. 2:7, 18**). Notice that the emphasis here is on ethical behavior rather than on doctrine. Did you know that a man can deny Christ by the way he conducts himself? Sensuality is a powerful force. Advertisers know this very well. Why else would sexual images and innuendos be used to sell everything under the sun? It’s because such things appeal to our fallen nature. Sensual conduct is like a lure used to attract and snag a fish. Not a few are taken in by the bait.

This leads to the third warning sign – broad popularity. Indeed, **many will follow (1:16; 2:2, 15)**. Nisbet observes, “It is not strange to see the most dangerous heretics have many followers; every error being a friend to some lust” (p. 247). Yes, false teachers will gain a hearing. Yes, there will be circles in which they will be popular. And why not? False teachers supply a rationale for people to do what they have wanted to do anyway. They have nursed an attraction to

certain sins and now the occasion and the grounds for pursuing their sinful desires is opened up to them by godless men they accept as authoritative teachers.

**And because of them the way of the truth will be maligned.** Here's the fourth warning sign that should cause us to halt – the reputation of the church is marred. *The way of truth* refers to the gospel method of salvation as well as the manner of life prescribed for those who claim the name of Christ. The scandalous behavior of these men who are identified with the Christian community will bring reproach upon the name of Christ. It will give Christianity a bad name among outsiders. I think of pastors recently accused of sexual misconduct or financial impropriety as examples.

**2:3. And in their greed they will exploit you with false words.** Here's the last of the five warning signs – questionable motives. Verse 3 speaks to the motive that drives these false teachers. It is simple greed. We too often limit greed to the desire for more and more money. But it is a broader term here meaning “an unlawful desire to grasp more than one's due” (Hillyer, p. 183). Greed includes money, illicit sexual indulgence, the lust for power and influence over others, a lavish lifestyle, any kind of gain at the expense of others. By the way these guys have elevated greed to an art form. **2:14, having a heart trained in greed.** Indeed, that is the whole idea behind the word “exploit” - to make unjust use of something for one's own advantage. We often hear of children being exploited by being forced to work long hours at pitifully low wages. We hear of the exploitation of the environment – damaging or defacing the natural habitat for one's own gain.

If all this is so why doesn't God do something? Why does God not snuff such men out? Just leave them as smoking cinders since they cause such damage? God is working out His eternal purposes. His permissive will is inscrutable. We submit to that about which we know little or nothing. His ways are past finding out. Nevertheless, God's judgment will be carried out perfectly in terms of degree and in terms of timing. "Peter reminds us [**in verse 3**] that God has decided on the verdict already – *condemnation* – and on the sentence – *destruction*" (Lucas/Green, p. 93). **Their judgment from long ago is not idle and their destruction is not asleep.**

Remember Elijah's taunts to the prophets of Baal in **I Kings 18:27**? "*Call out with a loud voice, for he is a god; either he is occupied or gone aside, or is on a journey, or perhaps his is asleep and needs to be awakened.*" The Bible affirms in **Psalm 121:4**, *Behold, He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.* Such men poke fun at God. These in II Peter had accused the living God of dozing off. But God is fully awake; awake to bring both salvation and judgment.

"Doubtless such stringent condemnations as Peter's appear to twentieth-century readers as old-fashioned and inappropriate, because we have largely lost any sense of the diabolical danger of false teaching, and have become as dulled to the distinction between truth and falsehood in ideas as we have to the distinction between right and wrong in behavior" (Green, p. 108). Beloved, make no mistake. Error in doctrine and practice exists in the church. Error in doctrine and practice is a deadly thing. And lastly, God is passionately opposed to those who would promote error in doctrine and practice among His people. We will begin to see this in disturbing terms next week.

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