

Destruction Is not Sleeping

- Resource by John Piper
- Scripture: 2 Peter 2:1-10 Topic: False Teaching

The main point of 2 Peter 1 which everything else supports or elaborates is verse 10: "Brethren, be the more zealous to confirm your call and election; for if you do this, you will never fall." Peter wants us to enjoy the certainty of our salvation. He wants us to be so firmly established in God that we cannot be shaken by any temptation or false teaching. In 3:17 he draws his letter to a close with this admonition: "Beware lest you be carried away with the error of lawless men and lose your own stability." Peter devotes his last will and testament (1:14, 15) to help us be firm and stable and unshakable in our faith.

The way he helps us in chapter 1 is by reminding us about God's precious and very great promises. He assures us that if we trust firmly in these, God's power will flow into us and enable us to "escape the corruption that is in the world because of passion" (v. 4), and to grow in godliness and self-control and love (vv. 6, 7). He reminds us that the source of these promises, the Scriptures, "did not come by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (v. 21). And not only that, but we have this prophetic word made even more sure by the eyewitness experience of Peter who saw Christ's majesty on the mount of transfiguration (v. 16). In summary, then, the confirmation of God's Word leads to confidence in his promises, which brings power for godliness, which gives us a personal, experiential confirmation of our call and election.

Same Goal, Different Approach

And now comes chapter 2, and a very significant change in Peter's approach. I say a change in his approach, not his goal. His goal is still to make us firm and stable and unshakable in our faith. But his approach is very different. Chapter 1 is mainly an encouragement to avail ourselves of God's power to lead lives of godliness and love. Chapter 2 is mainly a warning against the destruction that will befall those who don't avail themselves of this power. If chapter 1 is the carrot, chapter 2 is the crack of the whip over our heads. There are no commands, no admonitions, no imperatives in chapter 2; just pure, terrifying description of what will happen to those who fall prey to the false teachers in the church.

The main point of chapter 2 is expressed in four places. The last part of verse 1: those who deny the Master who bought them bring upon themselves swift destruction. The last part of verse 3: "from of old their condemnation has not been idle, and their destruction has not been asleep." Verse 12: "But these, like irrational animals, creatures of instinct, born to be caught and killed, reviling in matters of which they are ignorant, will be destroyed in the same destruction with them, suffering wrong for their wrongdoing." The last part of verse 17: "For them the nether gloom of darkness has been reserved." The main point of the chapter is a warning that destruction awaits the false teachers and their followers. Chapter 2 is the other side of the coin from what Peter said in 1:10, 11. There he said, "Be zealous to confirm your call and election, for if you do this, you will never fall; so there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ." Here in chapter 2 he says, if you contradict the doctrine and the character of God's elect, you *will* fall, and there will be no entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord, but instead eternal destruction in the gloom of hell.

Not Playing Games

2 Peter 2 is aimed at keeping me from being a heartless pastor. It aims to keep me from playing games in this pulpit. It aims to keep my sermons from dissolving into pep-talks about the power of positive thinking. It aims to make me earnest about my calling and angry about false teaching and grieved over the destruction of the ungodly. This chapter is no accident in Holy Scripture. It is the Word of God and is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness, that all of us might become very, very zealous to confirm our call and election.

False Prophets Who Deny the Master

Let's look at the first 10 verses today. Verse 1: "But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction." Wherever important truth is at stake, counterfeits will be offered. In the Old Testament men claimed to speak from God when he had not sent them (Deuteronomy 18:20), and in the New Testament church there arose those whose explanations and applications of apostolic doctrine were false and destructive. Even though Peter says these false teachers *will* arise in the future, it is clear from the rest of the letter that the prophecy is already being fulfilled. The false teachers are on the scene.

The first thing we learn about them is that they are denying the Master who bought them. What does this mean? As with most heresies, Jesus Christ is in some way being diminished. Some aspect of his personhood or his work is being denied. But Peter never tells us what aspect. In fact, you get the impression from chapter 2 that the error of the false teachers was an error in morality, not doctrine. But the two are never really separate. How you live and how you esteem Christ always rise and fall together. It is possible to live in such a disobedient way that Christ is scorned and belittled by our very behavior. That seems to be what was happening here.

There is a clue to this in the little phrase, "Master who bought them" (v. 1). In 1 Corinthians 6:20 Paul says, "You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your bodies." And Peter said in his first letter (1:18), "You were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers . . . with the precious blood of Christ" (cf. Revelation 14:3, 4; Acts 20:28). When the apostles spoke of being bought or ransomed by Christ (as Peter does in verse 1), they pictured us as slaves of sin and Satan, being purchased and made free from sin to serve Christ and glorify God. And the context in both 1 Corinthians and 1 Peter 1 has to do with sexual morality (1 Peter 1:14 and 1 Corinthians 6:18, 19). To be bought by Christ is to be freed from the domination of sexual passions that drive one into sexual preoccupations and illicit sexual intercourse. We belong to a new master whose promises are so superior to the promises of sex that (as 1:4 says) we can escape from the lordship of passion. When this happens, we exalt Christ and affirm his worth. But if we live in the grip of sexual domination, we belittle Christ and "deny the Master who bought us."

There are some indications in the text that, in fact, the false teachers were propagating sexual immorality in the name of Christian freedom. For example, verse 2: "Many will follow their licentiousness, and because of them the way of truth will be reviled." Notice that right after saying they deny the Master who bought them, it says that their seductive danger lies in their *licentiousness*. "Licentiousness" is a fancy word for "blatant sexual immorality"—sexual immorality with an arrogant (cf. 2:10, 18), debauched flare (see especially Romans 13:13; 2 Corinthians 12:21; 1 Peter 4:3). Do you remember what happened at Corinth? In 1 Corinthians 5:1 Paul says, "It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and of a kind that is not found among pagans; for a man is living with his father's wife. And you are arrogant." This same attitude seems to mark the false teachers in 2 Peter. In 2:18 it says, "For, uttering loud *boasts* of

folly, they entice with *licentious passions of the flesh* men who have barely escaped those who live in error." In these false teachers arrogance and immorality go hand in hand. Notice verse 10: "they indulge in the lust of defiling passion and despise authority. They are bold and self-willed." They "despise authority" because they cannot stand any controls on their passions. This helps us to understand verse 1, where it says they deny the *Master* who bought them. They don't want a master. A master means authority and submission. But they despise authority.

This begins to shed a lot of light back on chapter 1. For example, verse 4, where Peter tells us that the promises of God enable us "to escape from the corruption that is in the world because of passion." And verse 6 where Peter stresses that we add to our knowledge "self-control." It becomes clear that already in chapter 1 Peter was choosing his words in view of the false teaching he opposed.

But it seems almost impossible that such a thing as arrogant sexual immorality could actually be taught in the church. What did the false teachers say? Verse 3 tells us, "In their greed they will exploit you with false words." They didn't just come in and seduce people with good looks. They taught. They gave reasons why people should abandon their rules about sexuality. They probably would have said, "It's OK for kids to experiment sexually. It's OK for a couple to live together out of wedlock. It's OK for a husband and wife to gratify their desires with a prostitute or another person's partner." There is nothing new about the contemporary assault on the sanctity of sexual intercourse in marriage. Jesus wasn't gone for more than 30 years before false teachers in the church were announcing open sex as a legitimate Christian lifestyle. So listen, young people. You know who the real old fogies are today? They are the swingers who live together unmarried, the wife-swappers, the prostitute patrons, the kids at school who twitter about their weekend connections. It's all old-fashioned; and even its perverted Christian authorization is as old as the church.

You can see it in verse 19: "They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption." Sound familiar? The push for free sex was there long before we had any puritanical or Victorian ethic to rebel against. The false teachers were taking the grace of God and perverting it into licentiousness (Jude 1:4). They were saying that what we do with our bodies does not matter, and in fact the more sensuality you pursue, the more you show your true Christian freedom from the law. In the name of grace and in the name of Christ they perverted Christian moral teaching, and in that way denied the Master who bought them.

The answer to give to a person (inside or outside the church) who says that we are enslaved to an old-fashioned sexual morality is this: 1) All immorality is just as old-fashioned as biblical morality. 2) Why should it be called slavery when we freely choose to govern our passions according to divine principles, but be called freedom when you follow the dictates of your passions? If we choose to follow God and you choose to follow your impulses, who's the fool? Listen! Don't let the world shape you! The world is covered with darkness (1:19). It is enslaved to irrational passions. And unless it turns and repents, it is doomed.

God's Past Judgment

That's what the rest of our text is about. The point of verses 4–10 is to warn us that since God has punished unrighteousness in the past, he will punish it in the future. Peter illustrates God's wrath with three cases in verses 4–8 and then draws his conclusion in verses 9 and 10. First, in verse 4 is the case of the fallen angels. "If God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of nether gloom (or chains of darkness) to be kept until judgment . . ." What a lesson there is here! Angels are the most glorious and mighty beings under God. But all their power and dignity was of no use when they sinned. God was unsparing in his sentence. They were cast out of his presence and have been reserved in darkness, until the great day of judgment when they will be consigned

to the "lake of fire and brimstone to be tormented day and night forever and ever" (Revelation 20:10). The false teachers should learn from this that if they "despise authority" (v. 10) and reject the lordship of Christ (v. 1), they will hear the sentence of Jesus which he foretold in Matthew 25:41, "Depart from me, you cursed, into eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels."

The second illustration of God's judgment is the case of Noah's generation in verse 5: "If he did not spare the ancient world but preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven other persons, when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly . . ." If the false teachers do not learn the lesson from the fallen angels, let them learn it from the flood. God swept away the ungodly in judgment. And even though the rebellious and the licentious today may think they are safe, they should learn that "from of old their condemnation has not been idle, and their destruction is not sleeping" (v. 3). It will come upon them with horrifying swiftness.

The third illustration is the case of Sodom and Gomorrah in verses 6–8. "If by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes he condemned them to extinction and made them an example to those who were to be ungodly; and if he rescued righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the licentiousness of the wicked (for by what that righteous man saw and heard as he lived among them, he was vexed in his righteous soul day after day with their lawless deeds) . . ." If the case of the fallen angels and the case of Noah's generation do not deter people from following the false teachers, then surely the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah will wake them up to God's wrath. For these cities were judged for the very licentiousness that the false teachers commend.

To make the lesson of history perfectly plain Peter states it in verses 9 and 10: "So the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial (like Noah and Lot), and he knows how to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment, and especially those who indulge in the lust of defiling passion and despise authority." And, of course, Peter doesn't just mean God *knows how* to do it. It means he has done it in the past; he will do it in the future. Destruction is not sleeping.

Lessons for Today

What, then, do we learn for our life today? First, the church is not immune to false teachers. We must make every effort to keep ourselves rooted and grounded in the Word of God lest we lose our stability and be carried away in error (3:17).

Second, advocating sexual immorality is a heresy. It is an offense against Jesus Christ the Lord. The practice and propagation of sexual activity outside marriage is a denial of the Master who bought us, because he died for us to free us from the domination of sexual passion. We should glorify him in our bodies by submitting to his pattern of sexual fulfillment. There is nothing new about free sex. And we should resist it today as resolutely as the apostles of old.

Third, divine judgment is coming upon those who deny Christ in this way. And it is heartless to encourage people to go about their business and live their lives as though nothing very significant were at stake. Heaven and hell hang on whether we follow Christ in righteousness or deny him in immorality.

Fourth, you can be saved from judgment if you repent and trust the Master who bought you by his blood. When it says the Lord knows how to deliver the *godly* (v. 9), it doesn't mean he only delivers the *perfect*. Lot was far from perfect. If you put your trust in Jesus Christ and press on to love what he loves, "then you will never fall, and there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

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