February 17/18, 2018

Rescued From Judgment

Hope Filled Living in a Culture of Despair

2 Peter 2:1-10a

Pastor Bryan Clark

Those of us who consider ourselves to be serious Christ followers would understand that our beliefs and our behavior are surrendered to the truth of the Word of God—that we continually try to adjust our beliefs and behaviors according to what we learn to be true from the Scriptures. But someone that is what we might call just a cultural Christian—somebody that is a little bit religious in our culture, somebody that just wants to be spiritual—often it's the opposite. They formulate their beliefs primarily based on their own opinions; out of their beliefs flow their behaviors, and then they pursue a church or a preacher to accommodate those beliefs. Basically, at the end of the day, you can find a church and a preacher that will agree with just about everything. In some ways it seems kind of clever—you know, you can *have your cake and eat it too*. I'll determine my own belief system; I'll determine how I want to live; now I just need to find a preacher that will tell me God's okay with it. But Peter would say that is actually the road to destruction. That's what we want to talk about today. If you have a Bible, turn with us to 2 Peter, Chapter 2. Last week Peter reminded us that our source of truth needs to be the authoritative, inspired, reliable Word of God, and reminded us of the prophets of old proclaiming the message of Jesus. But then that raises a concern! Chapter 2, verse 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.**
>
> (*NASB, 2 Peter 2:1)

Now we know through the history of the Old Testament that there was always a problem with **false prophets...false teachers.** Think of it this way: Any time there is something of great value, there is going to be a counterfeit of that. That's true of truth! Paul referred to Satan as a liar, as the father of lies; he's the master of the counterfeit. So the prophets proclaimed the truth, but there was always a concern with false prophets that led people astray. Peter then says, "This is going to be equally true for us. There is truth, but there's also counterfeit truth. There's a deceiver that wants to lead people astray." It's worth noting that the concern is not with the atheist; the concern is not with the secularist. The concern is with that which rises from within—we might say under the umbrella of Christianity—those that seem to be saying the right thing, but they are actually in error and they lead people astray. The word that Peter uses is **secretly**...a word that means they *smuggle in* that which is untrue. Paul, writing about this in 2 Corinthians chapter 11, says that **"**Satan disguises himself as an angel of light." Clearly Paul is talking about religion and the Judaizers in that part of Corinthians. Someone comes along and smuggles in something that's just a little off, and little by little people are led astray. Paul uses the exact same language in Galatians chapter 2. His concern is for the legalists and he says, "They smuggle in that which sounds right, but it's actually not right and little by little it leads people into bondage." Peter says they **secretly introduce destructive heresies.** That word **heresies** in my mind is a little bit misleading. It makes it sounds like these are really overt, obvious errors, but the Greek word carries the idea simply of a sect, s-e-c-t. It's just the idea that it's a slight diversion from the truth that begins to create a following, and little by little they get farther and farther off the track. He says **even denying the Master who bought them**.

It would be right to say Jesus died for everyone, and yet Jesus' redemption is not appropriated to someone's life until that person chooses to receive God's gift of salvation. So the Savior that **bought them**, that Savior has been denied by the false teachers; therefore it swiftly leads them to **destruction**. Now there are different ways to deny Jesus and the core of the gospel. It's really important we understand there's a difference between churches having *differences* and that which is *heresy*, a false teacher. So, for example, there are many gospel preaching, Bible-believing churches where we disagree on End Times Theology; we disagree on Mode of Baptism or whether babies should be baptized. We disagree on the way we organize ourselves; we disagree on whether or not people speak in tongues today and some of those types of things. Those aren't false teachers; they are just differences. False teaching goes more to the heart of the gospel—what we would often refer to as the Person and work of Christ. To be a Christian church you must believe that Jesus is the eternal Son of God, the Creator of the Universe, who took on human flesh, lived a sinless life, was crucified for the sins of the world, was buried, rose again, and is coming back, and offers salvation freely as a gift of His grace. To deny any of that would be outside the boundaries of Orthodox Christianity, would be false teaching. So how might that show up in our day? Well there are a couple of different ways. Go back to Galatians chapter 2 when Paul uses almost the identical wording as Peter—that there are those who introduce, smuggle in, teachings that are off from the message of the gospel. Little by little they lead people astray. He says at the end of chapter 2 that actually if you add one work of the Law to the gospel of grace, it ceases to be the gospel of grace and has become salvation through the Law. He ends that chapter by saying, "If you do that, you have actually nullified the gospel of grace and Christ died needlessly"—almost identical to the language of Peter—that you have **denied the Master who bought you**. You're determined to save yourself through your own self-righteousness. Now this is really important to understand because I think we have a tendency sometimes to think if people get the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus right, it's somewhat insignificant if they add additional works to salvation. We tend to think of it as, "Well, they have the core right; the rest is just like extra credit." But you have to listen to the words of Paul in Galatians, "No, actually if you add one work to the gospel of grace, it ceases to be the gospel of grace and you have actually nullified the death of Christ on the cross for your sins." That is a form of false teaching that **denies the Master who bought them**. In this case, Peter's concern is with probably the early forms of Gnosticism. That's the false teaching that most scholars think this is. The Gnostics' views were kind of confusing, but they did not believe that Jesus was fully God and fully man, and they certainly did not believe that Jesus was coming back. So there was denial around the person and work of Christ. They were **denying the Master who bought them**, who died on the cross for their sins **bringing swift destruction upon themselves**. Verse 2:

> **Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; and in *their* greed they will exploit you with false words;** (Vs. 2-3a)

This is one of the clues that leads people to think that the false teachers are the Gnostics. The Gnostics believe that there was a separation between the physical and the spiritual. So, the spiritual was the part that connected with God and the physical was irrelevant to that. Therefore, what they taught was that you could indulge the flesh, live any kind of sensuous life you wanted to, and it had virtually no affect on your relationship with God. This is what was being promoted—this idea of **sensuality**—and Peter says **many will follow** that. Paul says that people find a message that *tickles their ears, that tells them what they want to hear.* "I want to find a preacher that will tell me that I can live as I please, indulge my flesh, and God is okay with that." Many will follow that message. He says the result of that is **the way of the truth is maligned**—it is discredited—**and in *their* greed they will exploit you with false words**.

Now we could ask the question, "What would be the motive of the false teacher? Why would they teach such a thing?" One option is they are simply mistaken. For one reason or another they sincerely believe this to be true; they are just simply mistaken. That is certainly a possibility, but I would suggest to you that the overwhelming majority of false teachers have a much more sinister motive. Peter identifies it as **greed**—greed for money, greed for power, greed for control. I think the history of religion is the history of money, power and control. False teachers, in pursuing their greed for money, power and control, are willing to tell people anything they want to hear in order to pursue their agenda. Where the English text says *they exploit you,* the Greek is they literally *merchandise you*. You are not someone they genuinely care about; you are not someone they are genuinely trying to help with the truth; you're merchandise. You're a means to an end. They merchandise you for money; they merchandise you for power; they merchandise you for control. The false teachers are trying to figure out, "What do I need to tell these people in order to tickle their ears, in order to get them on board because I need their money, I need them for power, and I need them for control." So Peter identifies the false teachers make up whatever they need to, to merchandise the people, to pursue their own corrupt agenda.

> **...their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.** (Vs. 3b)

Idle means basically *a do-nothing* so essentially Peter is saying, "Don't mistake the patience and mercy of God as if God is a do-nothing and God has fallen asleep on the job. Just because God has not zapped the false teachers dead today doesn't mean He's okay with it." There is a judgment coming and people will be held accountable—accountable based not on people's own relative standard, but on the absolute standard of righteousness of the character of God. Starting in verse 4, then he's going to support that case using three examples:

> **For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to the pits of darkness, reserved for judgment;** (Vs. 4)

First example: the **angels**. When the angels sinned God judged them, **cast them into hell**. It's the Greek word *Tartarus* that would have been the Greek concept of hell—basically a place of judgment—to be chained in darkness awaiting final judgment. So the first example is the angels.

> **...and did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a preacher of righteousness, with seven others, when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly;** (Vs. 5)

Second example is Noah. Noah was **a preacher of righteousness**. This affirms our interpretation from 1 Peter chapter 3, that Christ spoke through Noah as a preacher of righteousness, warning the ungodly that judgment is coming. How many years did Noah warn the people? Answer: 120 years! Can you imagine that? It took him 120 years to build the ark, to build a monstrous boat on dry land. Just imagine the level of mockery and laughter that he put up with for 120 years as year after year he tried to tell them, "Judgment is coming!" Don't mistake the patience and mercy of God for a God who is a do nothing or has fallen asleep on the job. Judgment is coming, and it did come and only eight were rescued: Noah, his wife and his kids.

There are two parts to the historical record that Peter is reminding us of. One is: God has a consistent pattern of judgment; don't think He won't do it. But the second is: God has a consistent pattern of rescuing his children from judgment, and you can trust Him with that, which leads to the third example, verse 6:

...and *if* He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing *them* to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly *lives* thereafter; and *if* He rescued righteous Lot, oppressed by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men (for by what he saw and heard *that* righteous man, while living among them, felt *his* righteous soul tormented day after day by *their* lawless deeds),
(Vs. 6-8)

The third example is **Sodom and Gomorrah** that was judged for their wickedness before God. It's interesting Peter tells us clearly why that was done: as a warning to *the ungodly that would come thereafter.* God is serious about judgment. Don't mistake his patience or mercy for a God who will not act. Judgment will come. But in the midst of that is also the reminder that *God has also been faithful to rescue His children.*

Now Lot makes for an interesting discussion. There's a lot of discussion around calling Lot **righteous**. What is the basis for that? I would say—to use New Testament, new covenant language—Lot was a believer. Even in the old covenant people weren't made righteous on the basis of their works, but on the basis of their faith. Lot was Abraham's nephew and Lot had come to believe by faith in the God of Abraham, in the righteousness of the God of Abraham. So in today's language, Lot was a believer, but I could not find a single commentator that believed that Lot is being referred to as righteous because he made such good decisions in the Lot story. Actually quite the opposite and I think that's a significant part of the point. If you're not familiar with the story, Lot was Abraham's nephew. Lot went with Abraham when Abraham went down into Egypt. Lot liked Egypt. In a sense, Egypt got into Lot's heart, so when Abraham and Lot came back into the Land of Promise, God so blessed Abraham and they had so many cattle and livestock that they could no longer stay together because they needed more grass to sustain the livestock. So Abraham said, "We need to separate," so he said, "Lot, you choose the direction you want to go and then I'll go the other way." Lot specifically chose the valley of Sodom. The text tells us in Genesis it was because the valley reminded him of Egypt. Also, there is an editorial comment in that part of Genesis that says, "Sodom was an exceedingly wicked city!" There's no question that the comment is made to tell us this was a very foolish decision. Lot moves into the valley, eventually moves all the way into the city of Sodom. God comes to Abraham and tells him, "I'm going to destroy Sodom because of their wickedness." Abraham pleads with God on the basis of the righteous in Sodom, and basically God promises to spare Lot and his family. So he sends his angels into Sodom. What we are told here is that Lot lived in the midst of such gross, sensuous sin that it tortured his soul every day. The text is saying Lot was not participating. Lot still believed in the God of Abraham, still believed in the righteousness of the God of Abraham, but without question Lot had lost his way and put himself in a very miserable position. As a matter of fact, the Greek really reads that Lot *tormented his own soul*, meaning he made the decisions to put himself in the midst of this wickedness, and now it tortured his soul every day. But God is so committed to His children that before He cast judgment on Sodom, he rescued Lot and his family. If you go back and read the story in Genesis 19, the angels literally had to grab Lot by the wrist and drag him out of Sodom. Whatever reason, he was so stuck on being in that place that God had to drag him out to rescue him before judgment fell. This is a very important part of the story.

The fact of the matter is false teachers are very clever; they are very good at what they do. They are very good at smuggling in that which sounds right—that this is the way of happiness, that this is the way of life, that this is what's going to fulfill me—and little by little you get farther off the track until one morning you wake, and you wonder, "How did I get here?" My soul is tormented by the evil all around me now and you start to wonder, "Have I drifted so far off the path that there is no

longer any hope for me?" The point of the Lot story is that God has a clear pattern of judgment, but he also has a clear track record of faithfully rescuing His children, which is exactly where Peter goes with the story.

> ***...then*** **the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment, and especially those who indulge the flesh in *its* corrupt desires and despise authority.** (Vs. 9-10a)

So Peter affirms that God has a track record of rescuing his children, but He also has a track record of judging the ungodly. Verse 10 I think beautifully describes our culture today—those who indulge the flesh. Those who are false teachers and those who willingly follow want to formulate their own beliefs, their own behaviors and to convince themselves somehow God is okay with that, so they indulge the flesh. Then someone like me comes along and has the audacity to say that actually that behavior before a holy God is offensive and sinful. When people in our culture hear that, they are outraged! "How dare you judge me? How dare you tell me that I cannot live as I please?" They **despise authority.** They despise the concept that God is God—that God has absolute truth, that God has absolute morality—and at the end of the story God will judge and the judgment will not be on the basis of a manmade, relative standard, but on the basis of His own righteousness!

The false teachers and those who follow them today should not mistake God's mercy and God's patience for a God who is idle and asleep on the job. God has a very clear established track record. He will ultimately judge evil. There's also a message for those who have been deceived, those who have listened to the false teachers and little by little have drifted off the path of life. Some of you woke up this morning, you looked in the mirror, and you thought to yourself, "How did this happen? How did I make such a mess of my life? How did I end up in such bondage?" And honestly, when you walked through those doors, you thought to yourself, "I'm not sure there is any hope for me." God has a clear, established pattern of rescuing His children, even if He has to grab you by the wrist and drag you out of your mess. God has always been in the business of rescuing His children. For all of us, we need to be reminded that there are false teachers all around us. Every one of us is bombarded by hundreds of lies every single day. It is not possible to keep up with all the lies. Therefore, there is only one hope, and that hope is, "You must know the truth!" As long as you know the truth, the truth exposes the lie. If you want to travel down the path that will deliver what your soul is longing for—the path of life—we need to take seriously the words of Jesus. *"You shall know the truth and it is the truth that will set you free!"*

> *Our Father, we celebrate that it is Your truth that sets us free, but we also acknowledge this morning the enemy is clever; the false teachers are subtle and sometimes we go in a drift and we wake up one morning in a place we never thought we'd be. God, I know there are people here this morning, that is their story. They are wounded; they're broken; they are hurting; they are disillusioned; their souls are tormented day after day, "How did this happen?" and they are wondering if there is any hope. God, remind them anew and afresh this morning that You have a clear and established pattern of rescuing Your children and there is every reason for hope. It's in the name of Jesus, we pray, Amen.*

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Hope-filled Living in a Culture of Despair

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Opening Discussion

1. Who are the false teachers most likely to lead "Christians" astray?

2. In what ways do you see "cultural Christians" today constructing their theology to fit their morality? In what ways are preachers "tickling the ears" of people for personal gain?

Bible Study

1. Read II Peter 2:1-3. Peter warns of those who "secretly" introduce that which is destructive. Discuss a similar warning from Paul in Galatians 2:4 and II Corinthians 11:13-15. Also, Jesus' words in Matthew 24:4, 11, 24. Based on these texts, what might this false teaching be that secretly sneaks into churches?

2. How do these false teachings malign the way of truth?

3. Peter says these false teachers in their greed "exploit you with false words." Literally exploit you means "to merchandise you." What is the motive of false teachers today? How do they merchandise people and what is their gain?

4. Read II Peter 2:4-10a which is one long sentence in the Greek language. Peter illustrates the reality of judgment using 3 examples. What do you learn about Judgment from each one and what do you learn about God's faithfulness to rescue in the story of Noah and Lot? Compare Jesus' words in Luke 17:26-29.

5. In what ways might you feel like Noah or Lot living in the midst of such sin? What does Peter remind us of that should help us to remain faithful?

6. Peter describes the false teachers and those who follow them as those who "indulge the flesh in its corrupt desires and despise authority." How do you see this description applying to our culture today?

Application

1. What are some practical things we can do as Christians to make sure we don't get lured away by false teaching?

2. What are 3 things we need to remember from this text to help us stand strong in the midst of a culture of despair?

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