

GOD WITH US
Part 11: LATER LETTERS
Message 10 – 2 Peter & Jude
Dangers Ahead

Introduction

Second Peter and Jude both deal with “dangers ahead” for the early Christians. False teachers were infiltrating the churches introducing destructive heresies and immoral practices. Both Peter and Jude felt compelled to address these issues. Peter makes it clear that his life and ministry was nearing the end (1:14), thus he wanted to put some things in writing so that the church could refer back to his teaching after he was gone (1:13-15). Along with the letter he was writing, he may have been referring to the final composition of the Gospel of Mark which, according to tradition, was the record of Peter’s oral preaching in Rome. This would explain his reference to events in the life of Christ (1:16-18) right after mentioning his desire to put things in writing for the longer-term benefit of the churches. Thus, before his life ended, he was giving significant attention to literary works that would benefit the church in the future.

2Peter chapter 2 and Jude are very similar. It seems likely that Jude, the half-brother of Jesus and brother of James, (both were children of Mary and Joseph after the virgin birth of Christ) wrote his letter first, giving a strong warning against the danger of false teachers. Peter used Jude’s letter to shape his own warnings concerning the same danger (ch.2). While Jude focuses solely on this one theme, 2Peter presents several other themes. We will focus this commentary on 2Peter and make brief comments on Jude at the end.

Salutation: 1:1-2

“Simon Peter, a bond-servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who have received a faith of the same kind as ours, by the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ: Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord . . .” (1:1,2).

Peter was addressing those who “*have received a faith of the same kind as ours.*” This was important at the outset because false teachers were at work behind the scenes, corrupting the teaching and introducing false kinds of “faith” (beliefs). The true faith is always

built on the righteousness of Christ, that is given to the believer when we place our trust (faith, confidence) in Him. The false teachers changed the focus to attaining salvation through human effort and religious rituals, along with allowing other behaviors many of which were attached to the religions of the nations.

Partakers of the Divine Nature: 1:3-4

In a way that somewhat resembles Paul's letter to the Ephesians, Peter begins with by recounting *the blessings that have come to the believer, by the grace of God, through faith in Christ.*

“ . . . seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust” (1:3,4).

We have been granted everything that we really need to live a godly life, because we have been made “*partakers of the divine nature.*” We still have a sinful nature living inside of us, right alongside the divine nature (see Romans 7 and Galatians 5 for descriptions of the battle between the flesh and the Spirit); but because Christ dwells in us, we have what we need to live in a way that pleases God. The key, as the next section will show, is that we must cooperate with God's work within us in order to realize on the outside more and more of what dwells on the inside – the very nature of God.

Pursuing Godliness: 1:5-11

In Philippians 2:12,13, Paul told believers to “*bring forth the full fruit of their salvation,*” since it was “*God who is at work in them, to will and to work for His good pleasure.*” Growing in the Christian life is always a cooperative effort between the Spirit of God Who dwells within us (i.e., the divine nature) and the believer's desire and effort to “*keep in step with the Spirit*” (*Galatians 5:25*); to make choices to let go of, or “*take off*” attitudes and behaviors, and “*put on*” the new ways of Christ take effort (*Colossians 3:1-17, Ephesians 4:22,23*). Peter is teaching the same idea here. He had already spoken of **God's part** in granting us the divine nature; now he emphasizes **our part** in pursuing Christlike character. Notice how Peter begins by urging believers to *apply diligence* in their walks with God.

“Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness, and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these qualities is blind or shortsighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins. Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble; for in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you” (1:5-11).

The list of virtues (1:5-7) would have been familiar to Greek readers who were acquainted with the philosophical writers of that day, because such “virtue lists” were a common part of the philosophers’ teachings. But for the Christian, the virtuous life is anchored upon the divine endowment within. It is not something we produce, rather, it is a fruit that we allow to be grown within us as we learn to walk with God.

Peter urges these believers not to be “useless or unfruitful” in their knowledge of Christ (1:8). Yet, this is precisely what happens with believers when we neglect our walk with Christ and slip into old patterns of living. We may become “blind or shortsighted” and lose sight of the divine endowment within, never achieving the kind of spiritual growth and fruitfulness that God intends for us. It is imperative that we learn to remain deeply rooted and connected to Christ and His Word, which Christ likened to being a branch drawing nourishment from a grape vine, if we are to grow in Christlikeness and bear much fruit (John 15:1-9). What steps are you currently taking to strengthen your relationship with Jesus?

The Importance of God’s Word: 1:12-21

Peter gave significant attention to the importance of the written Word of God. He was being diligent to capture essential teachings in writing so that the early Christians could refer back to his words after he was gone (which, according to v.14, would be soon).

“Therefore, I will always be ready to remind you of these things, even though you already know them, and have been established in the truth which is present with you. I consider it right, as long as I am in this earthly dwelling, to stir you up by way of reminder, knowing

that the laying aside of my earthly dwelling is imminent, as also our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. And I will also be diligent that at any time after my departure you will be able to call these things to mind” (1:12-15).

Peter recounts the time he saw Jesus transfigured on a mountain in Galilee (see Mark 9:1-10). Why does he make this reference here? Because he wanted to make the point that the stories he recounted about the life of Jesus were not “*cleverly devised tales*” (Greek, literally *mythoi* or *myths*). They were real, historical events that he and the disciples actually were intimately a part of.

“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. 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’ – and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain” (1:16-18).

Peter emphasized specifically the words declared over Jesus when Peter, James and John saw Moses and Elijah (probably on Mount Tabor) with Jesus and wanted to make all three of them equally significant. However, God the Father corrected Peter’s misunderstanding and made sure he knew that only Jesus was the rightful “Son” to be listened to, deserving worship (Mark 9:2-9; Matt.17:1-8; Luke 9:28-36).

Just as in the time of Christ when Peter wanted to equal Jesus with Moses and Elijah, in the 21st century many view Jesus as less than “God” and place him on an equal status with other world religion founders. This account gives us an inside look at God the Father’s view of His Son, Who is and was more than a mere mortal and religious founder. Read the account of Jesus’ transfiguration in the Gospels; study how it is retold by Peter in his 2nd letter. Explore what the Bible declares about Jesus the Christ, the Son of God, Whose WORD is above all human words. As the Father declared about His Son: “Listen to Him!”

2Peter 1:16-18 is an important passage, for our understanding of the reliability of the historical narratives of the life of Jesus. It has long been suggested by liberal scholars that the miraculous events of Jesus’ life did not really happen; rather, they were myths that the early Christians created to make Jesus look like a divine being. It is

true that Christianity was born in a world full of myths and legends surrounding the many Greek and Roman gods and goddesses. Yet, Peter was distinguishing the historical reality of the life of Jesus from such myths. The transfiguration of Jesus would certainly qualify as a miraculous event/story; but Peter was adamant about the fact that he and his companions literally saw and heard the event in person. They were eyewitnesses and their testimony could be trusted. They were telling stories that were true, not mythological.

But what is even more important than Peter being an eyewitness of that miraculous event is the fact that we have *written Word of God that is trustworthy because it was produced by the Holy Spirit guiding the writers.*

“So we have the prophetic word made more sure, 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. But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (1:19-21).

How did Scripture come about? Men were “*moved by the Holy Spirit,*” thus they “*spoke from God.*” The word “*moved*” was used to describe ships being “*driven along*” by the wind. In a similar way, the biblical writers were “*driven along*” by the Spirit of God, so that what they wrote was *the Word of God.*

“*The prophetic word made more sure*” is a “*lamp shining in the darkness.*” In this context, the “*prophetic word*” refers to the fuller revelation of Christ provided by the inspired record of the apostles. The O.T. prophets foretold His coming (1Peter 1:10-12); while the N.T. prophets and apostles recorded His arrival and His life, under the guiding hand of the Holy Spirit.

What does Peter mean by *the Morning Star arising in people’s hearts*? Jesus declared of Himself: “*I am the bright and Morning Star*” (*Revelation 22:16*). Christ the “Morning Star” would arise and shine in the hearts of all who took the prophecies seriously and believed that He was the long-awaited Messiah and Son of God.

The living Word, Jesus, became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:1), revealing God to us (Jn. 1:14). The written Word (2Peter 1:19-21) completes this revelation of God to the world. Peter and John,

two of Jesus' closest disciples, spent their entire lives, after Christ's resurrection and ascension to heaven, pleading with the 1st Century population to believe in Jesus. Today, their testimony lives on through the written Word of God.

Regardless of whether you lived in Peter's day or live in our day, God's Word (living Word + written Word) poses a challenge to religious pluralism (the idea that there are many equally valid paths to God). Either Jesus was and is Who He claimed to be: the eternal Son of God and the only way to God (John 14:6), or else He was a liar. Such exclusive truth-claims also pose a challenge to Christ-followers in every generation – for it is not easy to stand for “truth” in a world that welcomes inclusivity and shuns exclusivity. Those who, like Peter, have been willing to stand for God's Word have often died for their faith. How about you? Are you willing to identify with Christ and hold Him up to your world as the true Morning Star that brings light and life to all who believe in Him?

The Danger of False Teachers: 2:1-22 (and Book of Jude)

Why was Peter so emphatic about the priority of listening to God's Word? Because false teachers were infiltrating the church and believers needed to be able to identify them. It appears that Peter used Jude's short letter as the basis for this chapter, adapting it to his own purposes and style. He had just spoken about how the prophets of old were led by the Spirit to speak and write God's Word. Now he reminds his readers that there were also false prophets back in that day, just as in the present situation.

“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. 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; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep” (2:1-3).

The emphasis that follows is on *God's judgment of false teachers*. Three examples are given of God's righteous judgment: fallen angels, Noah's generation, Sodom and Gomorrah. His point comes in verses 9,10:

“... 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” (2:9,10).

There follows an extended description of the character and actions of the false teachers (2:10-19). They are brash in the way they pretend to wield spiritual authority against demonic forces. They are immoral and sensual as they carouse among the Christian communities. They deceive and entice unstable believers into immoral behavior. They are well-trained in the art of greed. They are following in the path of the false prophet Balaam (see Numbers 22 for that story). They are slaves of corruption. They are arrogant and vain. Peter comes to his final evaluation of these false teachers:

“For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them. It has happened to them according to the true proverb, ‘A dog returns to its own vomit,’ and, ‘A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire’”. (2:20-22).

This is a difficult passage in that it *appears* at first glance to teach that these false teachers were real Christians and then they “lost their salvation.” But a key to understanding this is a comparison with Jude’s parallel description. Note this from Jude 19 . . . they are *“devoid of the Spirit.”* Thus, these false teachers were never really made alive to God and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. These were people who initially had escaped some of the world’s corruption by associating with the community of believers. Over time, however, they began to veer off course, even as they simultaneously rose to positions of prominence and power in the local churches. In the end, however, they reveal their “true nature,” thus the twin sayings: a dog returns to the ways of a dog, and a pig returns to the ways of a pig (i.e., their nature was never infused with the “divine nature”).

The Coming Day of the Lord: 3:1-18

Peter’s fourth and final theme concerns the certainty of the eventual arrival of “the Day of the Lord” (the end of all things and the establishment of God’s rule on earth). Once again, false teachers and mockers would deny not only the realities of the 1st coming of

Christ (ch.1), but also the reality of His 2nd coming (ch.3).

“Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, and saying, ‘Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation.’ For when they maintain this, it escapes their notice that by the word of God the heavens existed long ago and the earth was formed out of water and by water, through which the world at that time was destroyed, being flooded with water. But by His word the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (3:3-9).

The First Century Christians lived with the expectation that the 2nd coming of Christ might happen in their lifetime. As time progressed, and the first generation of believers began to die off, the question arose: Is Christ really going to return at all? Did we misunderstand His teaching concerning His return? Mockers would press this point upon believers saying that they were fools for having a false hope in some “return of Christ.” Peter makes it clear that the sole reason for the seeming ‘delay’ in the return of Christ is the *patience of God Who is waiting* for more and more people to come to know Him. Then, Peter describes how swiftly and powerfully the “Day of the Lord” will come upon humanity:

“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells” (3:10-13).

Note the literary structure (paralleling) in the above verses:

1. *The heavens will pass away with a roar.*
2. *The elements will be destroyed with intense heat*
3. *The earth and its works will be burned up.*

Be watching for this day, and be living in light of it!

1. *The heavens will be destroyed by burning.*
2. *The elements will melt with intense heat.*
3. *The new heavens and new earth will appear.*

The literary structure causes the emphasis to fall on the attitude of *preparedness* in light of the *certainty* of the eventual arrival of the *Day of the Lord* (the return of Christ). Verses 14,15 summarize this attitude well:

“Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless, and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation . . .” (3:14,15).

When Jesus taught about His 2nd coming, He always infused His teaching with ideas concerning “imminence” – the idea that He could return “at any moment” and that, as a result, His people needed to “always be ready.” Thus, the first-century believers lived in expectation of Christ’s soon return, as should we today. At the same time, these verses about the patience of God should remind us that He might delay His 2nd coming even longer. I often think about the reality that from the time of Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, to the time of Christ, there passed more than 2,000 years. The people of the Old Testament waited a long time before Christ came the first time, even though His coming was prophesied all throughout those many centuries. Similarly, we have waited more than 2,000 years for the promised 2nd coming of Christ; but someday He will come. Are you expecting His arrival? Will you be ready? Does the emphasis on “the patience of God” that waits for those who still need time to believe encourage you to PRAY for your loved ones?

In a final note of warning concerning teachers who would try to distort the apostolic teachings, Peter slips in a comment about the apostle Paul’s writings (which were already in circulation). Peter puts Paul’s writings on the same par with “*the rest of the Scriptures*” (v.16), indicating that the first century Christians had already recognized certain letters of the apostles as the inspired Word of God.

“. . . just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction. You therefore, beloved, knowing

this beforehand, be on your guard so that you are not carried away by the error of unprincipled men and fall from your own steadfastness, but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory, both now and to the day of eternity. Amen” (3:16-18).

Peter’s comments about Paul’s writings being “hard to understand” are a bit humorous, because much of this particular letter seems just as hard to understand as Paul’s writings! However, we do get insight into the respect Peter had for the authority of God’s Word spoken through the apostle Paul.

Brief Notes on Jude

Jude was the brother of James the apostle and half-brother of Jesus. He was also called Judas. “*Then they scoffed, ‘He is just a carpenter, the son of Mary and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon. And His sisters live right here among us...’*” (Mark 6:3). Jude was among the family members who once thought Jesus was crazy when He was preaching, healing and teaching all around the region of Galilee and Judea (John 7:1-10). After Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension, he became a follower and a “*slave of Jesus Christ*” (Jude 1). Jude knew from his own life-experience with Jesus why it was difficult for people to believe that Jesus was truly the Son of God. He lived with Him and watched Him for 33 years . . . and yet, before he understood fully, he acted just like the false teachers he describes in this letter, denying that Christ and His word, was reliable and true!

Jude, like Peter’s 2nd letter, was written against the backdrop of false teachers infiltrating the church. He stated his purpose at the outset:

“Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints. For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.”

As in 2Peter, Jude focuses on God’s judgment against false teachers, as illustrated in various O.T. situations (5-7). The description of the character and actions of the false teachers, central to his letter, is longer and more vivid than in 2Peter. For example:

“These are the men who are hidden reefs in your love feasts when

they feast with you without fear, caring for themselves; clouds without water, carried along by winds; autumn trees without fruit, doubly dead, uprooted; wild waves of the sea, casting up their own shame like foam; wandering stars, for whom the black darkness has been reserved forever” (12,13).

Jude is also unique in that he cites non-biblical Jewish sources to support his argument. He cites “*The Assumption of Moses*” when making the point that the false teachers unwisely and arrogantly revile angelic beings, and “*The Book of Enoch*” to reenforce his teaching about the return of Christ. These books, along with many others, were held in high esteem by Jews, although not considered on the same level as the 39 canonical O.T. writings.

Note also his four-fold use of the word “ungodly” in one verse. This literary technique served to drive home the central issue with the false teachers.

“Behold, the Lord came with many thousands of His holy ones, to execute judgment upon all, and to convict all the ungodly of all their ungodly deeds which they have done in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him” (15).

Jude’s admonition to his audience is this:

“But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life” (20,21).

Jude ends with a beautiful, poetic doxology:

“Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen” (24,25).

Discussion Questions

1. Read 2Peter 1:3-11. How does the balance between God's part and your part strike you? What do you learn here about the need for *diligence* in the process of spiritual formation?
2. Read 2Peter 1:16-21. How does this passage shape your view of the inspired "Word of God?"
3. How does the juxtaposition between the TRUTH of God's Word (ch.1) and the ERRORS of false teachers (ch.2) help you answer this question: Aren't all religious ideas/teachings equally valid?
4. How does Peter's emphasis on the certainty of Christ's return (ch.3) impact you?