

THE LORD KNOWS HOW TO RESCUE AND PUNISH

2 Peter 2:1-22

Key Verse: 2:9

“...if this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials and to hold the unrighteous for punishment on the day of judgment.”

There was a man who feared God and kept his heart pure. He tried to live a godly life. But when he looked at the ungodly people around him, envy began to come into his heart. They seemed to be so prosperous. They had no struggles. Their bodies were healthy and strong. They seemed free from the burdens common to man. Pride was their necklace and they were clothed with violence. They scoffed, spoke with malice, and threatened oppression. They said, “How would God know?” Then the man said, “Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure...All day long I have been afflicted.” But later, when he entered God’s house, he understood their final destiny. This story is a summary of Psalm 73. It tells us that godly people are vulnerable to envying the ungodly, not knowing their final destiny. This weak spot in the godly makes them vulnerable to false teachers. In today’s passage Peter exposes false teachers in order to protect God’s flock. He tells us how God deals with the ungodly. He gives us a clear reason why we should live a godly life.

First, warning against false teachers (1-3; 10-22). In 1:16-21, Peter explained that both the apostolic witness and the prophetic message of Scripture testify that Jesus will come again in power and great glory. But there are those who deny this truth in the church. Their influence is poisonous and fatal. That is why Peter gives a serious warning about false teachers. Verse 1a says, **“But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you.”** Many texts in the Old Testament warn Israel about the danger of false prophets (Dt 13:1-5; Eze 13:1-23; Mic 3:5-12 et al.). False prophets spoke out of their own minds, imaginations and dreams as though it was the word of the Lord. They even performed signs and wonders to bolster the credibility of their teachings. In truth, they were controlled by the devil. It is no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light (2 Cor 11:14). Their motive was to lead people astray from the one true God. They promised peace when God was ready to judge the nation, planting a false sense of security and hindering true repentance. In the same way, false teachers are a serious danger to the Christian church, and many warnings are given about them in the New

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Testament (Mt 24:4-5,11; Ac 20:29-30; Gal 1:6-9; et al.) Verse 1b says, **“They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them....”** False teachers do not wear t-shirts declaring, “I am a false teacher.” They are sneaky. They secretly introduce teachings which contradict sound doctrine. To recognize them requires discernment. So Peter exposes their characteristics, motives and behavior.

The first and foremost characteristic is that they deny that Jesus is the sovereign Lord. What does this mean? It is to deny that Jesus is God. We Christians believe that Jesus is God with authority as the Creator, Redeemer and Judge. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus purchased us and deserves our worship and obedience. We are not our own; we belong to Jesus. We listen to Jesus and obey him. But these false teachers do not want Jesus telling them what to do. They want to do what they want to do. They also tell other people what they want to hear, not the truth that they need to hear. They say, “It is okay. There is no judgment; God loves you—you don’t need to repent.” In contrast, as God’s servants, our aim is to exalt Christ and lead people to Christ, recognizing Christ’s divine authority as God. We should lead people to Christ, not to ourselves. In order to do so, we should teach the full gospel message, not avoiding sin, repentance, judgment and hell. We should teach the truth, seeking God’s approval not man’s.

A second characteristic of false teachers is extreme immorality (2,12-14a). Verse 2 says, **“Many will follow their depraved conduct and will bring the way of truth into disrepute.”** Here **“depraved conduct”** refers to open, extreme immorality not held in check by any sense of shame. Let’s look at verse 12b. **They act like animals, following neither reason nor truth but instinct, ignoring even the most basic of human values.** Verses 13b-14a say, **“Their idea of pleasure is to carouse in broad daylight. They are blots and blemishes, reveling in their pleasure while they feast with you. With eyes full of adultery, they never stop sinning; they seduce the unstable....”** Their appetite for sin, especially sexual immorality, is never satisfied. Although they live in this way, they participate in church life with others, even the Lord’s Supper, as though they are holy people. Furthermore, they entice innocent people to join them, spreading their corruption like a cancer. Their scandalous lifestyle brings terrible reproach and a bad reputation to Christian faith. In contrast, God’s servants should live a pure life, not compromising with the corrupted culture. Their godly lifestyle and moral integrity honors God and gives credibility to Christian faith.

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A third characteristic is that they are greedy (3a,14b-16). Verse 3a says, **“In their greed these teachers will exploit you with fabricated stories.”** They are motivated by a desire for money. This is nothing new. Prophet Micah says, **“...her priests teach for a price, and her prophets tell fortunes for money”** (Mic 3:11a). In the New Testament as well, Paul warns Timothy about those who exploit Christian faith as a means to financial gain (1 Ti 6:5). Verse 14b says, **“they are experts in greed....”** **They commercialize the Christian faith for their own financial advantage, turning the church into a kind of marketplace. Greed is an inordinate desire, not only for money, but for anything.** That is why Paul said, **“...greed, which is idolatry”** (Col 3:5).

In verses 15-16, Peter used Balaam to illustrate his point. His story is written in the book of Numbers, chapters 22-24. Balak the king of Moab was terrified because of the Israelites. So he resorted to sorcery by inviting Balaam to curse Israel. God said to Balaam clearly, **“Do not go with them. You must not put a curse on those people, because they are blessed”** (Num 22:12). So Balaam refused to go, saying, **“The Lord has refused to let me go with you.”** Balak did not give up, but tried again to recruit Balaam, promising a handsome reward. Balaam refused to go, but said, **“Now spend the night here so that I can find out what else the Lord will tell me.”** Though he knew God’s will, he hoped God would change his mind. So God allowed him to do what he really wanted to do, because God does not force us to obey him. He wants us to serve him voluntarily, trusting him fully. At this moment, Balaam’s true color was revealed. He might have rejoiced and said, “Wow! God knows my deep heart. He changed his mind. He wants me to go!” His deep-seated, hidden desire for a handsome reward from Balak was exposed. So he went. But God was very angry when he went. An angel of the Lord stood in the road to oppose him. Balaam’s donkey saw the angel and veered into a field to avoid him. Then Balaam beat his donkey. When they came to a narrow path, the angel again stood in their way. The donkey pressed close to the wall, crushing Balaam’s foot against it. So he beat the donkey again. The angel appeared one more time and the donkey laid down under Balaam and would not move. This time Balaam was angry and beat the donkey with his staff. Then the Lord opened the donkey’s mouth, and it said to Balaam, **“What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?”** Balaam answered his donkey, **“You have made a fool of me! If only I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now.”** Then the

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donkey said, “**Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?**” “**No,**” answered Balaam.” Then the Lord opened Balaam’s eyes and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with his sword drawn. So he bowed low and fell facedown.

Here we learn that God tests people to expose the deep-seated, hidden desires of the heart. Sometimes, like Balaam, though we know God’s will, we try to change God’s will to satisfy our own desire. In Genesis chapter 22, God tested Abraham’s heart by commanding him to offer his son Isaac as a burnt offering. We think it was too extreme. But what God really wanted to know was Abraham’s deep desire. Was it to love God first, or his son Isaac first? If he loved his son first, he can be an idol, even though he was God’s blessing. When Abraham was ready to sacrifice Isaac from his heart, God was pleased with him and established a firm foundation of world salvation based on his own promise and Abraham’s obedience. In this way, Abraham was able to receive the full measure of God’s blessing. At this moment, we need to check our deep-seated, hidden desire. Is it really to please God?

A fourth characteristic is that they are arrogant (10-11). False teachers follow the corrupt desire of the flesh and despise authority. They are bold and arrogant. They are unafraid to heap abuse on celestial beings, though even holy angels are afraid to do this. It is because they put themselves in the place of God as though they are the judge. In contrast, God’s servants should be humble and God-centered. God opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble (1 Pe 5:5b).

A fifth characteristic is that they are hypocritical and apostate (17-22). Verse 17 calls false teachers “**springs without water,**” and “**mists driven by a storm.**” They have big mouths and they are full of boastful words. Yet their lives are empty. Though they are slaves of immorality, they promise freedom. Verses 20-22 describe their apostasy, concluding with the proverbs: “**A dog returns to its vomit,**” and “**A sow that is washed returns to her wallowing in the mud.**” A sow is a female pig. As a boy, I watched my father raise pigs on a small farm. From time to time, he would wash them with a garden hose. But even before they could dry off, they went and rolled in the mud to make themselves dirty again. In contrast, godly people grow in Christ’s likeness steadily. Peter began this letter by telling us that Christ’s

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divine power has given us everything we need to live a godly life. As we struggle honestly before God, he will surely help us progress in godly life.

In light of Peter's description of false teachers, we should be aware that the threat is real; we need to be prayerful about the ministry of God's word. We should examine ourselves and repent of any elements of false teachers within us. But most of all, we should set apart Christ as Lord in our hearts. In this letter, Peter repeatedly refers to Jesus as God: **“God and Savior Jesus Christ”** (1:1), **“Jesus our Lord”** (1:2), **“His divine power”** (1:3), **“our Lord Jesus Christ”** (1:8,14,16), **“our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ”** (1:11; 2:20; 3:18), and **“our Lord and Savior”** (3:2). When Christ rules our hearts we can live godly lives and be good Bible teachers as well. Apostles Peter and Paul were both men of passion, in their own respective ways, before knowing Jesus. They boldly influenced people, but in wrong ways. Yet when they repented their sins and accepted Christ as Savior and Lord they became the greatest teachers in Christian history. Like them, let's ask Jesus to reign in our hearts and teach his word boldly and diligently in our times.

Second, God rescues the godly and punishes the ungodly (4-9).

Throughout his teaching in chapter 2, Peter warns of the serious consequences awaiting false teachers. He used the expressions: **“bringing swift destruction on themselves”** (1b), **“their condemnation has long been hanging over them and their destruction has not been sleeping”** (3b), **“They will be paid back with harm for the harm they have done”** (13), **“Blackest darkness is reserved for them”** (17b), and **“they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning”** (20b). Peter was not expressing his own sentiment toward the false teachers, but the certainty of God's judgment based on what God has done throughout history. In verses 4-9, he uses three illustrations that reveal how God judges the ungodly, and rescues the godly.

First of all, God did not spare angels when they sinned (4). Angels are ministering spirits created to serve God and his people (Lk 1:19,26; Heb 1:14). They have a great privilege to share God's important messages with his people. According to Ezekiel 28, they were the seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. God adorned them with precious stones and anointed them as guardian cherubs. But in their hearts, they became proud on account of their beauty. They corrupted their wisdom because of their splendor. Then God drove them in disgrace from the mount of God. Verse 4b says, **“God sent them to hell, putting them in chains of darkness to be**

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held for judgment...” (Jude 6). Though it might have been painful, God could not but punish angels when they sinned, because he is holy, righteous and just.

Peter’s second illustration is the ancient world and Noah (5). In Noah’s time every inclination of the thoughts of people’s hearts was only evil all the time (Gen 6:5). They were full of corruption and violence. If just a branch is diseased, it is possible to save a tree by cutting off the branch. But if the root is diseased, the whole tree becomes worthless and beyond cure. The only thing to do is to pull it out and burn it in a fire. God’s judgment upon the ancient world was inevitable. So God brought a flood on it; everyone perished except Noah and his family. Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord (Gen 6:8). He was a preacher of righteousness. It was not easy for him to stand against the strong pressure of wickedness. As many people have experienced, peer pressure is hard to bear. In Noah’s case, it was not just peers, but all people on the earth. Noah could endure only because he had a personal relationship with God. He feared God, not people. God was his source of strength and comfort. Here we should realize that though the vast majority lived a sinful life, this could not justify them before God. Even if they passed laws by majority vote, God did not recognize their government. God did not change his holy standard based on their elections. God destroyed them all, according to his righteousness and justice.

Peter’s third illustration is Sodom and Gomorrah and Lot (6-8). Genesis describes the people of Sodom like this: **“Now the people of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord”** (Gen 13:13). The Lord told Abraham, **“The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me”** (Gen 18:21). So Abraham began to plead with the Lord to save them. He bargained with God to spare the city of Sodom for the sake of 50 righteous people, 45, 40, 30, 20, and finally 10. In spite of Abraham’s sincere prayer struggle, Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by fire from the Lord out of heaven. But God remembered Abraham’s prayer and rescued Lot. This is the Genesis account. But Peter interpreted Lot’s rescue from a different perspective. Peter describes Lot as **“a righteous man who was distressed by the depraved conduct of the lawless”** (7). Peter added, **“for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard”** (8). Was Lot really a righteous man? The

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righteous are not perfect. Righteousness comes through faith (Ro 1:17). Lot showed evidence of having some faith in God. When angels of the Lord visited Sodom, Lot welcomed and served them, even with toast. He tried to protect them, though in a strange way. Anyway, Peter credited him with righteousness. And God rescued him in the midst of judging Sodom and Gomorrah.

In verses 4-9, Peter uses a rabbinic form of proof to make his case. By means of “if,” “but,” “then” conjunctions, he makes the argument that if God judged angels, the ancient world, and Sodom and Gomorrah, how much more will he judge the false teachers and their followers. Let’s read verse 9. **“...if this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials and to hold the unrighteous for punishment on the day of judgment.”** The conclusion of Peter’s argument is that God will surely judge the ungodly and rescue the godly. “The Lord knows” means that he knows the hearts of all people and he never fails to discern between the godly and ungodly. It also means that he has the power and the wisdom to both judge and rescue at the same time. There will be no accident, mistake or injustice when the Lord judges and rescues. We must know the true God. He is not only the God of love, but also the God who judges.

The public atmosphere in America seems to become more and more ungodly. Last week a brilliant CEO was dismissed from his position because he expressed Biblical morality. Despite this trend, the message of many leaders is limited to tolerance and acceptance. But when we know God, we don’t need to be distressed such things. God will surely judge the ungodly. God is able to rescue the godly in any situation. We can trust God fully. Let’s love God with holy fear and depend on God alone.