

False Teachers



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *2 Pet. 2:1–22, John 8:34–36, Matt. 12:43–45, Jude 4–19, Gen. 18:16–33.*

Memory Text: “They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption; for people are slaves to whatever masters them” (*2 Peter 2:19, NRSV*).

In his first epistle, Peter, with great pastoral concern, sought to encourage readers in regard to the perils of persecution. Though we don't know exactly what form of persecution he was specifically addressing, we do know that the church would face terrible trials as the pagan Roman Empire sought to extinguish the growing movement of people called “Christians.”

Satan launched a two-pronged attack. Certainly, persecution from the outside—that is, brute force and violence—was a powerful tool. But the church faced another threat, one perhaps even more dangerous than outside persecution. And that was the threat from inside. Just as the Jewish nation in the past had to deal with false prophets, the follower of Jesus in Peter's day had to deal with false teachers who would “secretly introduce destructive heresies” (*2 Pet. 2:1, NIV*) into the church itself. And, even worse, Peter warned that many would follow these “destructive ways” (*2 Pet. 2:2, NKJV*).

What were some of these teachings that Peter was warning about? How did Peter react to them, and what lessons can we take from his warnings for ourselves today, as we also face threats from within?

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, June 10.

False Prophets and Teachers

It's sometimes easy to idealize the early church, to think of it as a time of great peace and harmony among the earliest believers in Jesus.

That would be a mistake. Even from the days of Jesus the church faced struggles, often from within (think of Judas). As the New Testament epistles show, many of the problems came from false teachings in their midst. The early church struggled, not just with persecution from the outside but from problems within, as well. In this letter Peter deals with some of those internal challenges. What are they? "But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber" (*2 Pet. 2:1–3, NKJV*). It hardly sounds like a time of great peace and internal harmony among the brothers and sisters, does it?

Read 2 Peter 2:1–3, 10–22. What is Peter warning about here? What are some of the false things that were being promoted in the churches?

Second Peter 2:1 most likely reveals the reason the Lord inspired Peter to write the letter. He was warning them that just as there had been false prophets in the past, there will be false teachers in the future. Peter outlines quite a litany of charges against these teachers, everything from "destructive heresies" (*2 Pet. 2:1, NKJV*) to leading the unwary into bondage (*2 Pet. 2:19*) and a host of other errors, as well. From what he wrote, we can see that these were indeed very dangerous teachings, which explains why he reacted so strongly against them. Peter knew nothing of the idea that doctrine doesn't matter.

Look at how strongly Peter reacts to these false teachings. What should this tell us about how important truth is? How can we protect ourselves against any and all attempts to bring false doctrine into the church?

Freedom in Christ?

“For they mouth empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of the flesh, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error” (2 Pet. 2:18, NIV).

What is Peter warning about in this verse? What does he say in 2 Peter 2:19 that helps explain his concern? What is the importance of the word *freedom* (NIV) or *liberty* (NKJV) in verse 19?

In the strongest possible language, Peter was giving his readers a warning against the dangers of false teachers. In 2 Peter 2:18–21 he warned that these false teachers, while promising liberty and freedom, would actually lead people into bondage.

What a complete perversion of the gospel! Freedom in Christ should mean freedom from the slavery of sin (*Rom. 6:4–6*). Any concept of freedom in Christ that leaves a person in the bondage of sin is the kind of error that Peter is warning about. Though scholars have debated the precise heresy that he was dealing with here, it’s clearly linked to the whole question of sin and one’s being a slave to it.

Read John 8:34–36. How do Christ’s words here help us to understand what Peter is saying?

Whatever these false teachers were presenting, they were leading their victims—people who had recently found the Lord Jesus—back to their old sinful way of life. It’s easy to imagine some kind of cheap grace gospel that downplayed the need for purity and holiness, something that caused them to be caught up again in the very “corruption” (2 Pet. 2:19) of the world they had just escaped from. No wonder Peter spoke so sharply and strongly against these teachings and warned about what the result of following them would be.

What do you understand freedom in Christ to be? What has Christ freed you from?

A Dog Returns to Its Vomit

Read 2 Peter 2:17–22 and Matthew 12:43–45. What are the dangers when a convert to Christianity returns to his/her former lifestyle?

Peter was particularly concerned about the fate of those whom the false teachers entice back into their former sins (2 Pet. 2:18). The false teachers promise freedom, but as Peter points out, the freedom that they promise is radically different from the kind of freedom that Jesus promised those who followed Him.

Look at the powerful warning Peter gave. It would have been better never to have “known the way of righteousness” (2 Pet. 2:21) than to have known it and then turned back to their old ways.

Of course, this doesn’t mean their case is hopeless. We all know stories of those who have turned away from the Lord and later have come back. And we know that the Lord is very glad when they do and happy to take them back. (See Luke 15:11–32.) It means only that turning away is a very dangerous course to take, nor is it a pleasant one either. A dog returning to its own vomit is a crude and harsh way to describe it, but Peter makes his point with that image.

Perhaps the echo of the words of Jesus in 2 Peter 2:20 is intentional (see Matt. 12:45, Luke 11:26). Jesus tells the parable of a man who has been freed from an unclean spirit. The spirit wanders without a place of his own, and then returns to see “ ‘my house from which I came’ ” (Matt. 12:44, NKJV). He arrives and finds it empty and put in order. He then moves back in, but he brings with him several other spirits more wicked than himself. As Jesus says, “ ‘the last state of that man is worse than the first’ ” (Matt. 12:45, NKJV). The danger Jesus illustrates and Peter describes is real. The new believer needs to ensure that the things of the Spirit replace the things that used to dominate his or her life. If involvement in church and the sharing of the new faith do not replace the earlier secular activities, it is too easy to revert to one’s old ways.

What are ways we as a church family can better nurture and disciple all our members, especially newer ones?

Peter and Jude

Many people have observed that Jude 4–19 largely repeats the message of 2 Peter 2:1–3:7. Whenever Scripture repeats a message, we should be aware that God wants to convey something important. In these similar passages, Peter and Jude take great lengths to notify us of an important truth: God is in control of the destinies of the wicked. Both Peter and Jude leave us with no doubt that God is closely monitoring evil. Whether unrighteous humanity or the fallen angels, God has taken special note of their evil and has planned their punishment on the day of judgment (*2 Pet. 2:9, 17; Jude 6*).

Read 2 Peter 2:1–3:7 and Jude 4–19. What examples of God’s earlier vengeance do Peter and Jude give to punctuate the fact that God means business in dealing with sin?

Peter and Jude record three examples of God’s vengeance in the past. They include the destruction of the antediluvian world by the Flood, the incineration of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the chaining of angelic beings for destruction (*2 Pet. 2:4–6; 3:7; Jude 6, 7*). All of these episodes are laced with a lingering sense of finality. Though Scripture speaks a great deal about God’s mercy and grace, God’s justice also plays an important role in the final destruction of sin.

What were the sins that engendered such severe punishment? They include introducing destructive heresies; despising authority; enslavement to whatever has mastered them; perverting the grace of God into a license for immorality; denying Jesus Christ as the only Sovereign and Lord; polluting their own bodies; speaking empty, boastful words; and slandering (*2 Pet. 2:1, 10, 19; Jude 4; Jude 8; 2 Pet. 2:18; Jude 10, NIV*).

Interestingly, these descriptions do not include violent acts and other wicked atrocities that often outrage us. Instead, they describe more subtle sins that have one commonality. They are sins that are sometimes excused within the church community itself. This fact should awaken us to the great need for sincere repentance and reformation in the church.

Read 2 Peter 2:12 and Jude 10. Here Peter and Jude describe those who are facing destruction as having degraded into “unreasoning” (*2 Pet. 2:12, NIV*) or “irrational” animals (*Jude 10, NIV*) ruled by instinct. How does that description compare to how God originally created humanity, and how can you prevent that from happening in your life?

More Old Testament Lessons

Read 2 Peter 2:6–16. What other examples does Peter use to give his warning about what wickedness will lead to?

The first substantive reference to Sodom in the Bible is Genesis 13:12, 13. Lot and Abraham decided to separate for “financial” reasons. Lot chose the Jordan valley and “pitched his tent toward Sodom” (*Gen. 13:12*). The Bible then comments, “Now the people of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the LORD” (*Gen. 13:13, NRSV*). Later, when God warned Abraham that He was planning to destroy Sodom, Abraham negotiated an agreement that God would not destroy it if ten righteous people were found there (*Gen. 18:16–33*). The unlikelihood of finding even ten righteous people in Sodom was amply demonstrated by what happened to the messengers sent to visit Lot. The city was duly destroyed; only Lot and his two daughters escaped (*Gen. 19:12–25*).

Peter derives two lessons from this story. First, the two cities provide an example of the punishment coming to the ungodly (*2 Pet. 2:6*). Second, it shows that the Lord knows how to rescue the righteous from trial (*2 Pet. 2:7–9*). Peter then notes some of the characteristics of those who were destroyed at Sodom and Gomorrah: they indulge their flesh in depraved lust, despise authority, are bold and willful, and do not hesitate to slander the angels (*2 Pet. 2:10, 11*). These characteristics have similarities to how Peter describes the false teachers and their followers.

The story of Balaam is found in Numbers 22:1–24:25. He had been hired by Balak, king of Moab, to curse the Israelites. At first reluctant, he was eventually persuaded to take on this task by the offer of a larger sum of money (*Num. 22:7–21*). On his way he was confronted by an “angel of the LORD” and was saved from death only when his donkey turned aside. Balaam then beat his donkey and realized his mistake only when his eyes were opened and he saw the “angel of the LORD” himself (*Num. 22:22–35*). In the end, Balaam ended up blessing Israel (*Num. 23:4–24:24*). Peter used Balaam as an example of those enticed by adultery and greed (*2 Pet. 2:14, 15*). Such people are like Balaam. They have left the path that they should follow.

Think about all that we have been given, both in the Bible and in the writings of Ellen G. White. Thus, why can we as Seventh-day Adventists never say that we haven’t been warned?

Further Thought: So often we hear Christians talk about “freedom in Christ.” And, of course, this is a valid concept. To be free from the condemnation of the law and to have assurance of salvation because of what Christ has done for us and not from our own works is indeed to be free. The story of Martin Luther and the bondage from which he suffered before he understood grace is a great example of what this freedom can mean. However, as we saw in Peter, the wonderful truth can be twisted. “The great truth of our entire dependence upon Christ for salvation lies close to the error of presumption. Freedom in Christ is by thousands mistaken for lawlessness; and because Christ came to release us from the condemnation of the law, many declare that the law itself is done away, and that those who keep it are fallen from grace. And thus, as truth and error appear so near akin, minds that are not guided by the Holy Spirit will be led to accept the error and, in so doing, place themselves under the power of Satan’s deceptions. In thus leading people to receive error for truth, Satan is working to secure the homage of the Protestant world.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ Triumphant*, p. 324.

Discussion Questions:

- ① Meditate on 2 Peter 2:19 and the other things Peter says about the results of the false teaching. Why must we be sure to learn for ourselves the crucial truths we believe? How important is it that we all agree exactly on what we should believe? When does it become “dangerous” to think ideas that are different from the rest of our fellow believers?
- ② Look at some of the strong language of Peter in regard to the whole question of punishment and judgment: “bring upon themselves swift destruction” (2 Pet. 2:1); “shall utterly perish in their own corruption” (2 Pet. 2:12); “to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished” (2 Pet. 2:9); “and their destruction does not slumber” (2 Pet. 2:3, NKJV). What should these texts tell us about not only the reality of judgment but about how strongly God condemns those who will lead His people into error?
- ③ What do you think it means when those who talk about “freedom in Christ” generally do so, not in the context of the law in general (though some do) but in the context of keeping the fourth commandment, the Sabbath commandment? How does this argument help us to see another way that the idea of “freedom in Christ” can be twisted?