

2 Peter 2:17-19

Introduction

You could say that in 2 Peter chapter two Peter is on a mission to inoculate us against the kind of false teachers and false teaching that had arisen in the church in his day. His purpose is to make us wholly immune to any appeal from these false teachers or to any of the “attractions” of their false teaching. And so what he does is he keeps on driving home many of the same themes and ideas over, and over, and over again. Most of what we’re going to say this morning has basically been said before (more than once!), but Peter is repetitious for a reason, and so we’re going to let Peter repeat himself, believing that that repetition is exactly what we most need.

I. 2 Peter 2:17a — These [false teachers] are springs without water and mists driven by a whirlwind.

It’s difficult for us to feel the sense of disappointment and disillusionment and even hopelessness in these words. We aren’t too concerned when a spring dries up because we’re not dependent on natural springs of water to quench our thirst. We drill deep wells and we have city water and faucets all over our house. Water is one of those essential commodities that we very easily take for granted. But here Peter seems to be assuming the dry and arid setting of a place like Palestine where springs of water could be truly essential to life. Can you imagine in a place like this coming to the spring and looking for water and expecting to find water and instead finding it dry? I’m reminded of the imagery Job uses to describe his faithless “friends”:

□ Job 6:15–20 — My brothers are treacherous as a torrent-bed, as torrential streams that pass away, which are dark with ice, and where the snow hides itself. When they melt, they disappear; when it is hot, they vanish from their place. The caravans turn aside from their course; they go up into the waste and perish. The caravans of Tema look, the travelers of Sheba hope. They are ashamed because they were confident; they come there and are disappointed.

Peter also mentions mists driven by a whirlwind. Mists, of course, are made up of water droplets and so they would seem to promise moisture and rain. A farmer seeing these mists would be tantalized with the “taste” and the thought of rain. But the mist that Peter speaks of here is only “the haze that [comes before] dry weather and is quickly dispersed by [hot gusts] of wind” (Bauckham). The spring that’s dried up, the mist that’s blown away and dispersed by the wind—both seemed to hold the promise of water, and yet in the end they both fail of their promise – leaving the weary traveler still thirsty, and the thirsty ground still parched.

In the book of Proverbs, water from the spring is a picture of the life-giving, spiritually refreshing teachings of wisdom and of righteousness.

- Proverbs 10:11 — The mouth of the righteous is a fountain [spring] of life.
- Proverbs 13:14 — The teaching of the wise is a fountain [spring] of life.
- Proverbs 14:27 — The fear of the LORD is a fountain [spring] of life.

What Peter seems to be saying here, then, is that the false teachers are promising *life* – a full life, and a happy and satisfied life, and even eternal life; but in the end—just like springs without water and mists blown away by the hot wind—these false teachers fail, utterly, of all their promises and leave those who’ve followed them only to despair and disillusionment. They leave them ultimately to perish for lack of the true life-giving water. Peter continues:

II. 2 Peter 2:17b — These [false teachers] are waterless springs and mists driven by a whirlwind **for whom the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved.**

Notice how Peter changes metaphors now from the want and the absence of water to the want and the absence of light. What do water and light have in common in the Bible? Both water *and* light are used as symbols and metaphors for “*life*” – not just life as it’s measured by breathing or by a beating heart, but life as something that’s abundant and full and satisfying, and characterized by an abiding peace and joy and true well-being. Think again of a spring bubbling up out of the ground or of the life-giving rains falling from heaven. And then look at these verses from Psalms and Proverbs:

- Psalm 56:13 (cf. Ps. 27:1) — You have delivered my soul from death... that I may walk before God in the **light of life**.
- Proverbs 6:23 — The commandment is a lamp and the teaching a **light**, and the reproofs of discipline are the way of **life**.

In Psalm 36 we have the themes of “water” and of “light” brought together in one place:

- Psalm 36:7–9 — The children of mankind... feast on the abundance of your house, and **you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain [spring] of life; in your light do we see light.**

When we see the connection between these two metaphors or symbols of water and light, then we can see the irony in Peter’s words. The false teachers promise those who listen to them life-giving water and spiritual refreshment, and yet it’s these very false teachers for whom the darkness of an eternal, spiritual death has been reserved. The NASB says, “for whom the black darkness has been reserved.” That should be a really terrifying thought for anyone. This black darkness—this gloom of utter darkness—is an existence that’s totally cut off from anything that’s associated with true “life” – with any kind of life that’s in any way worth living no matter who you are. It’s the blackness that results from being completely cut off from the light and the life of God and so it’s the blackness of an eternal, spiritual, “living” death. We could also think of the darkness of the coming “day of the Lord” to mete out vengeance and eternal punishment.

- Amos 5:18–20 (cf. Jer. 13:16; Isa. 59:9) — Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD! Why would you have the day of the LORD? It is darkness, and not light, as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him, or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him. Is not the day of the LORD darkness, and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?

So now listen again to these terrible words: “These [false teachers] are waterless springs and mists driven by a whirlwind for whom the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved.” The very *opposite* of what the false teachers claim to be able to give to others by the message that they preach—the very *opposite* of that is what they themselves will ultimately inherit. They promise life, but they themselves will inherit death. They promise life-giving water, but think about it: If the gloom of utter darkness is what’s reserved for them, then certainly they themselves—and all their teachings—must only be springs *without water* and mists that are *blown away with the wind*, leaving those who seek there for water disillusioned in the end and without hope. Peter’s point is that these false teachers are the very last place to which anyone should be going if he would find water – if he would find true “life.” He continues in verse 18:

III. 2 Peter 2:18a — For, speaking grandiose words of emptiness...

This translation captures the irony that Peter’s trying again to communicate to us. Do you see again the difference between appearance and reality? On the one hand, the false teachers’ speech is “empty.” The adjective that’s related to this noun is always translated “vain,” or “futile,” or “worthless” (cf. Acts 14:15; 1 Cor. 3:20; James 1:26). So the talk of these false teachers is “empty” (“vain” and “futile” and “worthless”) in the sense that it’s ultimately a deceit and a lie – once again never giving what it promises. So why in the world would anyone listen to the false teachers? Why does anyone ever pay any attention to them? The answer, at least in part, is because what they really are is not how they appear.

Peter says that they’re not just speaking words of emptiness – they’re speaking *grandiose* words of emptiness. We could think of grandiose words of vanity; grandiose words of futility; grandiose words of worthlessness. In other words, these false teachers have an outward show of great power and persuasiveness (cf. Moo). They speak with that certain air of authority as those who must be especially knowledgeable and wise. We have to be careful today about who we listen to. It can sometimes be easy for us to be swept off our feet by the “experts” – by those who really sound like they know what they’re talking about; not realizing that no matter how spiritually knowledgeable and authoritative they may sound, the grandiose outward appearance of their words is just a cover for the hollow “emptiness” underneath.

Peter says that for all the outward show of wisdom and power and persuasiveness in their talk, the teaching of the false teachers is actually vain, and futile, and worthless. In other words, it’s “*false*” – not just in the sense of being factually untrue, but “false” in the sense of belying its promise—of never finally giving what it promises to give. “Springs without water.” “Mists driven by a whirlwind.” “Grandiose words of emptiness.”

IV. 2 Peter 2:18b — For, speaking grandiose words of emptiness, **they entice by sensual passions of the flesh those who are only just escaping from those who live in error.**

Who are the people who are “*only just escaping* from those who live in error”? They’re brand new, “baby” Christians who’ve not yet been firmly established in the faith. In light of everything we’ve been reading in 2 Peter, “escaping from those who live in *error*” is language we’d most

naturally associate with the false teachers. But here Peter uses this language not to describe the false teachers within the church, but the pagan, unbelieving world outside the church. When we hear the word “error,” we might think of someone “messing up” or making a mistake (like a baseball player committing an “error”), or even doing something wrong (“the error of his ways”). But the word for “error,” here, actually refers to a deceit or an illusion; it refers to “the *content* of that which misleads or deceives” (Louw-Nida).

- Matthew 27:64 — “Order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, ‘He has risen from the dead,’ and the last **fraud** will be worse than the first.”
- Ephesians 4:14 — ...so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in *schemes* of **deceit**.
- 1 Thessalonians 2:3 — For our appeal does not spring from **error** or impurity or any attempt to *deceive*.
- 2 Thessalonians 2:11 — Therefore God sends them a strong **delusion**, so that they may believe what is *false*.

Are you getting a sense of the flavor of this word? “Error” is that which deludes and deceives by *appearing* to be true, so that people actually “believe” what is false. Therefore, to *live* or *conduct oneself* (*anastrepho*) in error is simply to live in the light of that lie or that falsehood that I’m believing. To live my life in error means to be living my life in light of that which I’ve convinced myself to be true, but is actually, in reality, a lie. One Greek dictionary describes the ways that the verb form of this word for “error” could be translated: “to cause what is false to *seem* like what is true,’ ‘to make a lie *appear* true” (Louw-Nida).

So that’s how Peter describes all unbelievers: Every non-Christian has in some way caused what is false and a lie to *seem* to him or to *appear* to him as that which is true – and then he lives his life accordingly; he builds his life on the foundation of that lie. Peter’s thinking especially of the pagan non-Christians of his day who had convinced themselves that there was no such thing as a righteous Judge, and no such thing as a final judgment, and no such thing as the resurrection of the dead. The philosophy of many of the pagans in Peter’s day could be summed up in the words of that famous saying: “Let us eat and drink [and be merry], for tomorrow we die” (1 Cor. 15:32). That’s exactly what Peter has in mind when he speaks of those who *live* or *conduct* their lives *in error*. They’re living their life based on an empty fantasy – on that which appears to them to be true and “real,” but is actually an illusion. It’s this life lived in error that the new believers in the church are only just escaping from, not yet being firmly established in the truth (cf. 2:14), when the false teachers inside the church come along with their own “grandiose words of emptiness”—with their own “*error*”—seeking to “entice” them “by sensual passions of the flesh.”

And what are the false teachers saying? They’re saying that the old way of life wasn’t really so wrong or so dangerous after all because, in fact, there really isn’t any final judgment according to works. If there’s no final judgment according to works then why should you deny any of your physical drives in this life? The false teachers aren’t throwing all morality out the window. A

certain amount of “morality” makes sense even from the perspective of an “enlightened *self-interest*” just with regard to *this* life (Davids). That’s why to some extent there can be such a thing as “moral” pagans and unbelievers. But what about the morality that only finally makes “sense” in the light of a righteous Judge and Lawgiver and so also in the light of a coming final judgment according to works (not meritorious works, but works as the fruit borne by those who in Christ have died to sin and been made alive to God)? (cf. Davids) Now that’s what changes *everything*, isn’t it? That’s what results in a radically different approach to all of life – to every part of life. The false teachers used grandiose speech (confident, and persuasive, and authoritative sounding speech) to tell those Christians only just escaping from error that they could essentially still live however they wanted *and also* still inherit eternal life.

Today, we might not find as many false teachers in the church denying the reality of *any* final judgment at all, but there is a false teaching that’s been very common in the church which denies that this final judgment according to works has anything to do with the Christian. This teaching says that there’s actually a separate judgment for Christians and that this special “Christian judgment” really has nothing to do with inheriting eternal life, but only with how many “jewels” you get in your crown – in other words, it really only has to do with how many rewards we’ll receive in heaven or how many rewards will be lost. But throughout this letter, Peter hasn’t once mentioned anything about levels of reward or a special “Christian” judgment. He’s only talked about being granted entrance into the kingdom of heaven or being denied entrance. The issue for Peter throughout this entire letter is only this: life or death; heaven or hell; eternal salvation or everlasting destruction. For Peter, it’s these two ultimate destinies and the final judgment according to works that will decide which destiny one inherits that makes the lives we live today, and the “way” we walk in today, of such ultimate importance.

Peter’s not saying that we’re saved by works – certainly not. But what he is assuming from start to finish is that we are saved *unto* works, or for the express purpose of doing works – which God himself prepared for us that *we* should walk in them (cf. Eph. 2:10). What Peter’s assuming from start to finish is that God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world not just so that we should be declared righteous (justification), but also that we should be made personally and experientially holy and blameless before Him (sanctification and glorification; Eph. 1:4). What Peter’s assuming from start to finish is that Christ gave himself for us not simply to redeem us from the penalty of sin (justification), but also to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works” (sanctification; Titus 2:14). What Peter’s assuming from start to finish is that in salvation God actually puts His Holy Spirit within us, causing us to walk in His statutes and be careful to obey His rules (cf. Ezek. 36:26-27; cf. Rom. 8:1-4).

Salvation isn’t just a fire insurance policy or a “ticket” to heaven. God’s salvation is the “whole package,” from the pardon of all our sin and being justified (being declared righteous on the basis of *Christ’s* righteousness imputed or reckoned to our account) to being progressively sanctified (made more and more righteous and holy in our personal experience and even in the midst of many failures) to being finally perfected and glorified (wholly conformed to the image of Christ our Savior when we stand in His presence and see Him face to face). *That’s* our salvation. That’s the whole package!

We must not confuse justification and sanctification and glorification. If we confuse justification and sanctification we end up with a merit based, works based salvation and therefore the possibility that true salvation can be earned or lost. If we confuse sanctification and glorification we end up with the idea that we can attain a kind of “perfection” in this life, leading either to pride or to despair. We cannot confuse justification and sanctification and glorification. We have to keep them always distinct.

And yet on the other hand, these realities can never be separated from one another because they all flow together—and they all flow together *necessarily*—from that *one* reality of our union with Christ. In other words, it’s because of the reality of our union with Christ that justification (flowing, as it does, from this union) can never ultimately exist apart from sanctification (which also flows from this same union), and sanctification (flowing as it does from our union with Christ) can never exist apart from ultimate glorification (which is also the fruit of this same union with Christ). Do you see how our entire salvation from start to finish—past, present, and future—is all accomplished in the single, self-same reality of union with Christ?

Now, of course, the mystery is that in my past justification I was entirely passive. I didn’t *do* anything. *God* did *everything*. Whereas in my present “being sanctified” I *am* actively, daily “doing”—“working out” my salvation with fear and trembling, while knowing all along that it’s God who is at work in me so that I “will and act according to His good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12-13). This “fear and trembling” that Paul speaks of is not the fear and trembling of paranoia or of a frantic working to earn and merit salvation. It’s the very real “fear and trembling” that knows that if I’m not working out my salvation today and walking in the way of righteousness today I’ll never inherit eternal life; and yet at the same time I know that because of my union with Christ, not only have I been pardoned and justified, but now also it’s God who is at work in me so that *I* will always more and more “will and act [desire and do] according to His good pleasure.”

The false teachers in Peter’s day were saying there is no final judgment according to works. Today, there’s a false teaching which says that though there is a final judgment according to works, that judgment will have nothing to do with Christians. The result of both of these false teachings is ultimately to say that we can freely live however we want—indulging and gratifying the sensual desires of our flesh—and still inherit eternal life. And so we see in Peter that those who were only just escaping from the empty illusions and deceits of their former manner of life are once again being enticed by the very same illusions and deceits – only now the enticement is coming from inside the church. Now these illusions and deceits are presented under the name of “Christianity” as though they could actually be a source of life-giving water.

“Springs without water.” “Mists driven [away] by a whirlwind.” “Grandiose words of emptiness.” That’s been the theme so far, and now Peter makes one last effort to impress this on our minds and hearts:

V. 2 Peter 2:19 — They [the false teachers] promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved.

The freedom the false teachers promise is freedom from any final judgment, and therefore also freedom from moral restraints (cf. Vogtle; quoted in Davids). But their promises of freedom are empty, because the false teachers themselves are slaves of corruption. The NIV says “slaves of depravity,” but I believe “corruption” here refers to death, and decay, and ultimately to the reality of perishing eternally. Paul says in Galatians:

- Galatians 6:8 — The one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap **corruption** [death and destruction], but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.

In Romans chapter eight, Paul uses language similar to Peter here when he speaks of “the creation... [being] set free from its slavery to corruption [decay]” (Rom. 8:21). And just a few verses ago, Peter himself wrote these words:

- 2 Peter 2:12 — But these, like irrational animals, creatures of instinct, born to be caught and **destroyed [corrupted]**, blaspheming about matters of which they are ignorant, will also be **destroyed [corrupted]** in their **destruction [corruption]**.

So while the false teachers promise freedom from final judgment and therefore the freedom to live how we want while still inheriting eternal life, their promise is empty and futile and vain and worthless because they themselves are slaves of corruption and death – they themselves are doomed to perish and be destroyed precisely because they’ve given themselves over to the desires of their flesh. Because of their moral depravity they’ve been overcome and conquered by corruption and now they’re by default the “slaves of corruption” – destined to perish and be destroyed.

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, where is it that we are daily looking for that life-giving water? May we never be deceived by those springs without water or those mists that are driven away by the whirlwind. May we never be taken in by any grandiose teachings of emptiness that would entice us with the sensual passions of the flesh. May we never be deluded by a promise of “freedom” that results instead in our slavery to corruption. I think of Calvin’s words in his commentary on this passage:

“Let us be reminded of what we ought especially to beware of after having been once enlightened; that is, lest Satan entice us under the pretence of liberty, so as to give ourselves up to lasciviousness to gratify the lusts of the flesh. But they are safe from this danger who seriously attend to the study of holiness.”

In these last verses of chapter two, Peter echoes many of the very same words and concepts that he used at the beginning of chapter one. In reading these verses at the end of chapter two we’re meant to be thinking of these verses from chapter one:

- 2 Peter 1:3–4 — [Christ’s] divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and piety, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and virtue, by which He

has granted to us *His* precious and very great PROMISES, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having ESCAPED from the CORRUPTION that is in the world because of sinful desire [LUST].”

When we come to Christ in the Gospel, we’ll never be disappointed or disillusioned because what He has promised He is always able, and ever faithful to give. Through His precious and very great promises we become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption—from the bondage to death and destruction—that is in the world because of the lusts of the flesh. What Christ has promised He has given. He has granted us not only pardon for all our transgressions and His righteousness imputed and reckoned to our account in justification, He has also granted to us all things that pertain to life and piety (sanctification) through the knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and virtue. Calvin writes:

“The liberty which Christ has procured for us, and which he offers daily by the gospel, is altogether different [from that so-called ‘liberty’ offered by the false teachers], for he has exempted us from the yoke of the law as far as it subjects us to a curse, that he might also deliver us from the dominion of sin, as far as it subjects us to its own lusts. Hence, where lusts reign, and therefore where the flesh rules, there the liberty of Christ has no place whatever. The Apostle then declares this to all the godly, that they might not desire any other liberty but that which leads those, who are set free from sin, to a willing obedience to righteousness.”

When we come to Christ in the Gospel and cling to the promises that He has given in true obedience and submission, we will never be disappointed or disillusioned. His word is never “empty,” but always faithful and true.

□ John 7:18 — The one who seeks the glory of him who sent him is *true*, and *in him* there is *no falsehood*.

He is the spring of life-giving water that always satisfies and never, *ever* runs dry.

□ John 7:37–38 — On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink...”

□ John 4:13–14 — “...whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

All that *Christ* has promised in the Gospel, *He* is always able, and ever faithful to give.

□ Revelation 22:17 — The Spirit and the Bride say, “Come.” And let the one who hears say, “Come.” And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.