

Special Studies in 2 Peter Guarding Ourselves Against Apostasy

Intro: In our earlier study of 2 Peter we took an overview of the text, seeking to understand the key ideas in each chapter. Peter's overall purpose is to help God's people remain faithful by remembering important truths the apostles have revealed. In chapter one he assures them that God has given them everything they need for salvation; and by applying the truth they can be assured that they will enter the eternal kingdom. This is because the message they have received is trustworthy its origin, verified by OT prophecy and apostolic testimony.

However in chapter two he warns that false teachers will arise that will lead the unsuspecting astray and gives a summary sketch of their behavior so that they can be identified. In chapter 3 he warns them about one particular doctrine of the false teachers--the denial of the second coming and its attending judgment.

Now Peter gives what might be considered a summary exhortation to the whole book:

You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, be on your guard lest, being carried away by the error of unprincipled men, you 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. (2 Peter 3:17-18, NASB)

In these final verses Peter gives two exhortations and one implied exhortation that will enable us to receive the promised reward of God.

We must keep guarding!

Peter's use of the Greek conjunction "dio" (therefore or for this reason) indicates that these exhortations are founded upon the information that he has previously given--namely that false teachers will arise, and especially those who deny the final coming of Jesus and its judgment. He then gives the appropriate response.

First be on your guard...

Peter gives his warning with an important predication...

You beloved...

We can easily associated warnings about apostasy as an unwarranted lack of confidence in others or an over-zealous obsession with error.

But Peter warns these disciples simply because he loves them. When we love people, we speak to them about real dangers to save them from the painful consequences.

So then God's people need such loving warnings today.

Knowing this beforehand

Disciples can sometimes be naive and too trusting of the good intentions of others.

Peter does not want that to happen. He has told them in advance what to expect so that they will not be unprepared. To be forewarned is to be forearmed.

Be on your guard

The idea is to watch for danger and take precautions to avoid loss. The Greek form suggests continuing effort--keep on guarding.

Nobody automatically drifts into spiritual growth and stability, but anybody can drift out of dedication and growth (Wiersbe, Be Watchful)

...Lest you fall

We live in a theological stream where many religious people deny the possibility of apostasy; but all throughout 2 Peter we see warnings again and again of that possibility. Some argue that such people who fall were never saved; yet consider Peter's statement of 2 Peter. 2:

"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 delivered to them." (2 Peter 2:20-21, NASB)

So then we must acknowledge that the danger is real.

Again Peter gives two qualifying clauses:

Lest you being let astray by the error of unprincipled men

In this summary statement Peter reiterates the warnings of the kind of false teachers he mentioned earlier, again reminding us that they are unprincipled men. He uses the word, "athesmos," which is unique to 2 Peter and found only here in the NT. Earlier he used it to describe the men of Sodom; and now again of the false teachers. They are "lawless" or "unprincipled."

For Peter, as we pointed out earlier in our studies, the false teacher has rebelled against the authority of the Lord and his behavior is shaped by his rebellion in order to practice a sinful way of life.

Their teaching and lifestyle could only be called "error"--the word from which we get our word "planet," since they appear to wander through the sky.

From your own steadfastness

The Greek word conveys a person who is grounded or whose feet are firmly planted; but then is made to fall from that firm footing.

The truth gives us a place to stand, a solid foundation rather than the shifting sand of human opinion. We need to plant our feet firmly upon it.

This exhortation is needed and practical

We need to be serious and aware of spiritual danger.

We need to listen to others with caution, knowing that false teachers are real.

We need to examine what we are hearing carefully by God's standard, the Scriptures.

By doing these things, we take the first step in protecting ourselves against apostasy!

But now Peter gives a second exhortation:

We must keep growing!

You might say that in the first exhortation Peter appeals for a good defense; but now he appeals for a good offense. And we might say, "A good offense is a good defense against apostasy." In other words, the proactive practice of spiritual growth will inoculate us against the contagion of false teaching. Let's take a closer look Grow!

The word can mean either to grow or increase; and the present imperative Peter uses again suggests continuing activity. So we have a lifetime responsibility. Too many Christians become too content too soon with their spiritual progress and put everything on hold. The maxim, "use it or lose it" holds here. In grace

Unfortunately we get a little inflexible with our definition of grace as "unmerited favor." That works well as an interpretive translation in contexts that contrast "grace" with "works" for example.

But the fundamental idea of grace is "favor" or "goodwill." In many texts, grace is the favor of divine bestowal or blessing; and that works well here. In other words, we grow in God's favor as we increase in the divinely bestowed blessings of spiritual life (what we sometimes call the Christian "graces.") Peter is probably here taking us back to his directions in chapter 1 where he urges us to add to our faith the qualities of godly character that God Himself displays and empowers us to possess.

In the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ

First it is helpful to remember who and what He is to us.

He is our Lord, our king. He rules over us.

He is our Savior. He delivers us from the evil in our lives and from the wrath of God to come at the judgment.

This is why His knowledge is supreme to us.

This knowledge provides the understanding of what it is we are trying to be and do. To know Jesus in the fullest way is to know what God wants us to be.

“Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; 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.” (2 Peter 1:2–3, NASB)

Practically speaking every day we have the opportunity to increase in knowledge and divine favor. These practical steps will help:

Set aside some time every day to expose your heart to the word of God, looking for an understanding of God in every text you read. Let the truth shine into your heart with openness and honesty, searching out the darkness in your life and character so that you can identify what must be changed and/or eliminated. Identify what replacement behavior must be added to fill the space of the wrong behavior. Pray to God about those areas of failure and ask for His help to increase. Observe in life the opportunities that God gives you to test your commitment to righteousness. You may at first feel like you're getting worse; but God gives us not only enabling grace. He also gives us enlightening grace. Sometimes we just need to see how bad we are before we can start taking positive steps in the right direction. Make yourself accountable to others in areas where you need prayer, support, and sometimes an occasional question about how you are doing.

We must keep glorifying!

Perhaps Peter could have closed his wonderful letter with a closing address to the faithful such as we have just considered. But even so, it is important to be reminded of what is the ultimate objective of all our efforts to guard and to grow.

To Him be the glory, both now and to the day of eternity.

Everything we do is ultimately for the glory of the Lord who loved and saved us; and for the glory of the heavenly father who from eternity past planned our future life with him in glory.

The more we become like the Lord, the less likely we'll glory in ourselves: "Look at us; look at what we've become." Instead we will lay it all at His feet. What we are is because of who is was, is and ever will be. He deserves to be glorified by us "now and to the day of eternity."

Conclusion: Every day we need to live out these two exhortations; and as we do, do it all for the glory of the one who loved and saved us. We must be guarding, growing, and glorifying the Lord, making the most of every opportunity to win

the lost and strengthen the saved. Be diligent! The ministry you save may be your own!