

The Prophetic Word

The Third in a Series of Sermons on 2 Peter

Texts: 2 Peter 1:12-21; Numbers 24:15-19

Peter is writing to warn those reading his second epistle of serious doctrinal error in the churches. Knowing that he does not have long to live, Peter leaves us with his testament (this epistle). In extending to us his final words, Peter includes an exhortation that Christians must strive to manifest those God-given virtues which flow from that eternal life given to us as a gift by the power of God. The desire to see these virtues manifest in the lives of God's people stands in sharp contrast to the desire to serve the flesh, which is characteristic of the lives of those who have departed from the truth. But in order to properly rebuke the false teachers, Peter must first establish his apostolic authority, as well as that of the prophetic word (the Scriptures). Peter has seen the glory of Jesus with his own eyes. The Apostle relates how the glory he has seen on the holy mountain is but a foretaste of much greater glory yet to come when Jesus returns at the end of the age. In Jesus Christ the prophetic word (the Old Testament) is confirmed because all such prophecy comes from God, not from the will of men. God's prophets are carried along by the Holy Spirit, giving to us that to which we commonly refer as "Holy Scripture."

As we continue to work our way through 2 Peter, we come to that section of this letter identified by some as Peter's "purpose statement" (to use a modern expression), or better his "testament." We read in verse 14 of the first chapter that the Apostle is well aware of his impending death. In light of this fact, verses 12-15 serve several important purposes. In his farewell "testament" Peter refers back to his previous "mini" sermon in verses 3-11, in such a way as to assure his readers that the exhortation in verse 10 (*"therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall"*) is intended as a pastoral reminder, and is not intended as a threat to those Christians with a troubled conscience.¹ Peter's testament also serves as a literary bridge from the previous discussion of those virtues which ought to be manifest in the Christian life (vv. 5-7), to the lack of such virtues apparent in the lives of those who teach false doctrine, or who have been taken in by it (chapters 2-3). The contrast between the virtues spelled out in verses 5-7, and the godless conduct described by Peter in the second chapter of this epistle could not be greater.

A "testament" such as we find here is not unusual in the ancient world. Peter's "testament" mirrors several of those found in the Old Testament, like those of Jacob (Genesis 49), Moses (Deuteronomy 33), Joshua (Joshua 24), and David (1 Kings 2). There are also a number of extra-biblical testaments which may have been known to Peter, or to those reading this short epistle. These "testaments" include the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, and the testaments of Job and Moses. There are also final testaments in the New Testament, for that matter. We think of Jesus' "farewell" discourse given in the upper room shortly before Jesus' arrest and trial (John 13-16), and even Paul's "farewell speech" to the Ephesians elders recounted in Acts 20:17-35.²

¹ Davids, The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude, Logos, "B. Purpose Statement (1:12-15)."

² Davids, The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude, Logos, "B. Purpose Statement (1:12-15)."

Such farewell speeches usually include the following elements: 1). A prediction of death, 2). A prediction of future crises for those the dying person leaves behind, 3). An exhortation to greater virtue, 4). The promise of God's blessing or the giving of a divine commission, and then finally, 5). A reference to the legacy the departing dying person leaves behind.³ The structure of this epistle and its obvious differences in style and speech from 1 Peter, can be easily explained if 2 Peter is the Apostle's "testament" (final words) to the churches. To fulfill his apostolic office, Peter is compelled to warn the churches of the dangers of false doctrine.

In verse 12, Peter reminds his hearers about the virtues he has just mentioned (i.e., in verses 3-11), which presumably, the recipients of this epistle already know, and in which they are already well-established. Peter writes, "*therefore I intend always to remind you of these qualities, though you know them and are established in the truth that you have.*" All those given eternal life and faith in Jesus Christ, possess an equal standing before God, and are, therefore, to strive to manifest those qualities (virtues) enumerated in verses 5-7. Knowing that he is about to die, Peter hopes that this reminder (this epistle) will "always" (i.e., it will continue after his death) remind his hearers of the things in which they are already established—the truth. This idea expressed by Peter is quite similar to Jude 3, where we read, "*beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.*"

A poignant sense of urgency is reflected throughout what follows. Peter is likely in his sixties when this letter was composed. Some thirty years have passed since Jesus first called him as a disciple in Galilee. Now Peter is in Rome, probably under arrest, at a time after the great fire decimated much of the city, and which Nero subsequently blamed upon Christians even though he had probably ordered the fire to be started as a city reclamation project. This unleashed several years of violent persecution of Christians in Rome, and resulted in the arrest and death of both Peter and Paul. In verses 13-14, Peter writes with the sense of a man who knows he is about to die, saying "*I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up by way of reminder since I know that the putting off of my body will be soon, as our Lord Jesus Christ made clear to me.*"⁴

We do not know how Jesus revealed to Peter that his death was near, but it is likely that Peter recalled the prophetic words of Jesus spoken to him in John 21:18–19a, "*truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.*" (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this [Jesus] said to [Peter], 'Follow me.'" Jesus had predicted Peter's death at the hands of others, and since Peter knows that the time has come for him to die, he can do nothing more than seek to glorify God—this epistle one way he can do so.

As an Apostle of Jesus, Peter knows that his role is to preach the gospel and remind the people of God of those things which Jesus taught, and which the Lord has revealed to his apostles through the Holy Spirit—a topic to which Peter will turn in some detail shortly. As long as Peter remains alive (in the body) he will devote himself to recounting those things which Jesus taught, as well as encouraging the people

³ Davids, The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude, Logos, "B. Purpose Statement (1:12–15)"

⁴ If this epistle as written by someone writing in the name of Peter, it is hard to read these verses (and their poignant tone) and not think that the forger was overtly lying about the circumstances of Peter depicted here, of which he himself knows nothing and is therefore openly fabricating.

of God to live in a manner consistent with their profession of faith. Such godly conduct illustrates the tremendous gap between those who have been established in the truth, and those who have rejected the truth to follow error.

When Peter speaks of being in the body, he uses a word (*skēnōma*) which could properly be translated as “dwelling,” “habitation,” or even as “tent.” The image of a temporary dwelling (such as a tent) reminds us of the fleeting nature of this life. Even a long life in human terms (seventy years or even eighty) pales in comparison with eternity. Perhaps the words of Psalm 90:10–12 echo in the background here, “*the years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away. Who considers the power of your anger, and your wrath according to the fear of you? So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.*” Realizing that his own death is near, Peter numbers his days and then reaffirms his apostolic mission, which is to proclaim the gospel, encourage and exhort the people of God, as long as Jesus gives him life. One final thing Peter can do, is offer this “reminder” or his “testament” to the churches, in the hope that God’s people will realize both the danger and destructiveness of false doctrine.

Peter’s words clearly echo those of Paul. In 2 Corinthians 5:1, 4, Paul had written, “*for we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. . . . For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.*” Peter sets out the biblical teaching that at death, the body (the tent) dies, while the soul lives on eternally in the presence of God, until the general resurrection at the end of the age, when all dead are raised and then all will appear before God in judgment.

Peter does not speak as though the separation of the body from the soul is a good thing, serving as our liberation from things material—as was the case with the ancient Greeks. Rather, as believers, our great hope is that even in the face of death (the curse and penalty for sin), we know that our souls live on after this “tent” dies, and we immediately enter into the presence of the Lord. We also live in anticipation of receiving a glorified body in the resurrection on the last day, in which we truly become partakers of the divine nature (v. 4) in which the power of God is fully manifest.⁵ This is why Christians have buried their dead in light of the resurrection of the body, and why we resist all notions in which death is understood or described as something good because we are finally rid of our bodies (because they are material). Christians bury our dead in anticipation of the resurrection of the body.

With this in mind, Peter affirms in verse 15, “*and I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things.*” Again, Peter speaks openly of his impending death—when he speaks of his “departure” he’s referring not to a trip he’s about to take, but to the “departure” of his soul/spirit from the “tent” of human flesh. Peter reiterates his point from verse 12, using the future tense in anticipation that his reminder will be of benefit to churches long into the future.⁶ As one commentator points out, Peter is not being self-aggrandizing, as though he were saying, “my words will live on forever,” but rather that “this letter is to serve as his testament, not in the sense that it would stand as a monument to Peter and his thought, but in the sense that it would enable the churches to whom the letter is addressed to remain true to the position that [Peter] takes on the issues of concern. It would keep on

⁵ Moo, 2 Peter, Jude, Logos on 1:15.

⁶ Bauckham, Jude, 2 Peter, 201.

working after Peter was gone.”⁷ That we are preaching on 2 Peter this Lord’s Day is confirmation of Peter’s desire. Through this epistle of 2 Peter, Peter’s testimony lives on, bringing God glory.

In verse 16, Peter begins to address the serious doctrinal errors of those false teachers to be addressed in the next two chapters. To do so, first Peter must ground his rebuke of the false teachers and their false doctrine in the truth of the Gospel. Peter speaks with an authority the false teachers do not have. Peter appeals to the fact that he was an eyewitness to the transfiguration of Jesus Christ, along with James and John, while the three were together with Jesus upon the holy mountain (as Peter calls that place where Jesus revealed his divine glory to the three apostles). It may help to consider the account of our Lord’s Transfiguration in the gospels to which Peter refers before we take up Peter’s comments about it in verses 16-19. In Mark 9:2-10, we read the following:

And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus. And Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.” For he did not know what to say, for they were terrified. And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, “This is my beloved Son; listen to him.” And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only. And as they were coming down the mountain, he charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead might mean.

There can be no doubt that the author of Second Peter claims to be an eyewitness to, and a participant in the transfiguration as described by Mark. In verse 16, Peter states emphatically, “*for we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.*” The reason why Peter can speak authoritatively to the errors of the false teachers in what follows, is because Peter was with Jesus in person throughout his entire messianic mission, including Jesus’ transfiguration. As an eyewitness to these events (one of the requirements to be an apostle), there was no need for Peter to follow clever myths (*mythos*) which originate in the sinful human imagination. Peter was present for the event which Mark and the other synoptic gospels describe. He saw Jesus’ glory revealed. He was there. The false teachers were present for none of this. This is why all they can offer are cleverly devised myths.

The Christian faith is grounded in the historical events presented in the New Testament. If these things actually happened, then Christianity is true. If these events did not occur, then Christianity is false. We should have little sympathy for those (I’m thinking of liberal Protestants) who argue that it does not matter whether or not Peter saw the transfiguration, only that we strive to produce the virtues which the person writing in Peter’s name has been describing, and then exhorting believers to produce. We cannot reduce these events to myths or fables, which supposedly teach us how to behave, because if we do, we are basing our conduct upon events purported to have occurred, but which did not.

If the critical scholars are right—that Peter did not write this, and that an anonymous author did—then the person writing in Peter’s name, who is exhorting us to produce the virtues in vv. 5-7, is himself lying—lying of course being a significant vice and hardly a virtue. Since Peter *is* an eyewitness to our

⁷ Davids, The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude, Logos on 1:15.

Lord's transfiguration, then Peter has been commissioned by Jesus, and his words come with a divine authority. As Peter will tell us in the next chapter, it is the false teachers who exploit the people of God with lies ("false words"—2 Peter 2:3). Peter is not following myths. He is an eyewitness.

There is much speculation about why Peter chose to mention the transfiguration of Jesus as the critical event to establish his apostolic authority, and not, say, the death of Jesus on the cross or his resurrection from the dead—to which Peter was also an eyewitness. The emphasis in Peter's sentence (v. 16), falls upon the verb "*we made known*." The disciples (including Peter) have proclaimed those things which God has revealed to them through the person of Jesus. In their preaching, the apostles made known Jesus' *power and coming*, the latter being a reference to Jesus' second coming (his *parousia*) at the end of the age. This is an important point because the specific doctrinal error which Peter will address in chapter 3 is the denial that Jesus will return again a second time.

The logic of Peter's argument (and the reason why he refers to the transfiguration) is that he, James, and John were eyewitnesses to Jesus' first *parousia* in power and glory when it was revealed to them upon the Mount of Transfiguration. Having seen that glory with their own eyes, the apostles are in the position to argue against the false teachers, because Jesus specifically told them an even greater glory will be manifest when Jesus returns at the end of the age, as in Matthew 24:29–31. "*Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.*"

Jesus' transfiguration is a remarkable foretaste of the greater *parousia* of which Jesus spoke at the end of the age. Jesus has already revealed his glory—Peter saw it on the Holy Mountain—so he is confident that Jesus will reveal even greater glory when he returns at the end of the age.⁸ Peter can ever bear witness in verses 17-18 to the fact that he not only saw the glory of Jesus, but he heard the voice from heaven, with his own ears. "*For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,' we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain.*" Hearing the words from the Father while with Jesus up on the holy mountain—confirming the words spoken by the Father to Jesus as his baptism (in Matthew 3:13-17)—Peter confirms that Jesus was given a status by the Father in confirmation of the words of Psalm 2:7—"I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, 'You are my Son; today I have begotten you.'" Jesus is God's Son, possessing a glory and honor equal to the Father's. It is this glory which will be revealed in its fullness when Jesus returns at the end of the age.

In verse 19, Peter concludes (building upon his point in verses 16-18), "*and we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed.*" Very likely, this is a reference to the whole of the Old Testament, since no individual passage is mentioned, and which is confirmed by the coming of Jesus Christ and the revelation of his glory.⁹ Because the prophetic word [*prophētikon logon*] reveals the person and work of Jesus Christ (as well as his glory), Peter can say to his hearers "*you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.*"

⁸ Bauckham, Jude, 2 Peter, 215.

⁹ Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, Logos on 1:19.

God's word functions as a light does in a dark place—enabling us to see danger until the sun rises and things are completely illumined (i.e., at Jesus' second advent). It is worth noting, that in this verse Peter speaks of the “morning star” which is very likely an echo taken from Numbers 24:17, part of our Old Testament lesson. The Jews understood the coming of a star to be a messianic sign, while Peter's reference to the oracle in Numbers 24:15–19, recalls Balaam announcing what Israel will do to Balak's people “in the latter days.”¹⁰ Peter will appeal to this account again in chapter 2 (vv. 15-16), when he refers to Balaam's talking donkey. When Jesus came, the light dawned in the darkness of human sin. When Jesus comes again that light will dawn in our hearts—a metaphorical reference to the fullness of the consummation, when there is no more darkness, only light, when we are finally in the presence of Jesus.

In verses 20-21, Peter speaks of the divine origin of those prophecies given by God—the prophetic word which was confirmed by the coming of Jesus. The Apostle writes, “*knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*” Along with 2 Timothy 3:16, this passage speaks directly to the inspiration (as God-breathed) and the authority (because given by God) of the Old Testament—and likely, the soon to be written books of the New Testament. This is one of the clearest passages in the all Bible dealing with the subject of the inspiration of Scripture.

Unlike 2 Timothy 3:16, where Paul speaks of the fact of Scripture's inspiration, here, Peter describes the process of the inspiration, or God's breathing forth of the Scriptures. Peter tells us that “*no prophecy of Scripture*” [*pasa prophetia graphais*] came about by the prophet's own interpretation. The very essence of true prophecy and its defining characteristic is that prophecy (Scripture) does not have its origin in the will of man, but as men spoke from God as they were carried [*φερόμενοι - pharomenoi*] along by the Holy Spirit (v. 20-21).

According to B. B. Warfield—whose essay “The Biblical Idea of Inspiration” has become the definitive Reformed statement on this matter—“what Peter has to say of this ‘every prophecy of Scripture’ - the exact equivalent, it will be observed, in this case of Paul's ‘every Scripture’ (2 Tim. iii.16) - applies to the whole of Scripture in all its parts.”¹¹ Since Peter likely considered all of Scripture to be “prophecy” (certainly, the Old Testament), and since no such prophecy came about by the prophet's own private interpretation, this means that the Scriptures are “not the result of human investigation into the nature of things, the product of its writer's own thinking. This is as much to say it is of Divine gift...There is, first of all, the emphatic denial that prophecy . . . [Scripture] owes its origin to human initiative.”¹²

The source of all true prophecy, then, is located in the will of God. Says Warfield,

There is the equally emphatic assertion [from Peter] that [prophecy's] source lies in God; it was spoken by men, indeed, but the men who spoke it ‘spake from God.’ And a remarkable clause is here inserted, and thrown forward in the sentence that stress may fall on it, which tells us how it could be that men, in speaking, should speak not from themselves, but from God: it was “as

¹⁰ Beale and Carson, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament, 1048.

¹¹ B. B. Warfield, The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1948), 136.

¹² Warfield, The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible , 136.

borne” - it is the same word which was rendered “was brought down” above, and might possibly rendered “brought” here - ‘by the Holy Spirit’ that they spoke. Speaking thus under the determining influence of the Holy Spirit, the things they spoke were not from themselves, but from God. Here is as direct an assertion of the Divine origin of Scriptures as that of 2 Tim iii.16. We are advanced somewhat in our understanding of how God has produced the Scriptures.¹³

Finally, Peter gives us a glimpse of the process of “God-breathing forth his word.” Says Warfield,

It was through the instrumentality of men who “spake from Him.” More specifically, it was through an operation of the Holy Ghost on these men which is described as “bearing” them....What is “borne” is taken up by the “bearer” and conveyed by the “bearer's” goal, not its own. The men who spoke from God are here declared, therefore, to have been taken up by the Holy Spirit and brought by His power to the goal of His choosing. The things which they spoke under this operation of the Spirit were therefore His things, not theirs. And that is the reason which is assigned why “the prophetic word” is so sure.¹⁴

The message of the prophet is certain, because God gives the prophet his message—prophecy originates in the will of God. Yet, this does not mean that human agency (instrumentality) is eliminated by this process. The prophet is said to be “carried along,” and not removed from the process. We speak of the process of inspiration as “confluent” (an old geographical term for the confluence of two or more streams). God gives his words through a human agent, in such a way as to ensure that what the prophets who are “carried along” produce, is the “word of God” (the prophecy of Scripture). When we speak of the process of inspiration we do not mean that the prophet goes into a trance and auto-writes what God wants him to write. Rather we mean that God superintends the process, so that what is produced (the prophetic word) reflects the personality, skill, and circumstances of the human writer, yet is not the human writer’s musings about God, but is instead God’s infallible word to us through the agency of a particular human author.

All true prophecy—the Old Testament (the word of the prophets) at a minimum, according to Peter—is given by God to his covenant people. As Peter tells us here, the distinguishing characteristic of true prophecy is that Scripture does not have its origin in the “will of man” but comes from God. This is why the false teachers and their false doctrine are to be rejected—their teaching originates in the will of man, and is not therefore, from God. This is why we affirm that because all true prophecy is given by the Holy Spirit, prophecy [Scripture] is authoritative, infallible, and inerrant regarding all matters upon which it speaks. True prophecy is without error. Holy Scripture is the *norma absoluta* (the absolute norm) to which all church teaching, including our creeds and confessions, must conform. This is what we mean, in part, when we affirm *Sola Scriptura*.

Peter was an eyewitness to virtually all of Jesus’ messianic ministry. Peter personally witnessed the revelation of Jesus’ glory on the Mount of Transfiguration. Jesus told Peter that what the glory he had witnessed was but a faint glimpse of that glory to be revealed on the last day, when Jesus returns. Furthermore, Jesus’ entire ministry was foretold throughout the prophetic word (the Old Testament) which originates in the will of God and given through men carried along by the Holy Spirit. So, when

¹³ Warfield, The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible, 136-37.

¹⁴ Warfield, The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible, 137.

certain people profess faith in Christ for time, but then depart from the faith and begin denying that Jesus will return again, who are we going to believe? Peter or the false teachers? Especially when false teaching leads to a life of debauchery. Where do we find salvation from sin and the hope of eternal life? In the false words of the false teachers, or in the prophetic word wherein God reveals his will, and in which we read of a bloody cross and an empty tomb which secure for us eternal life, and through which we now manifest the virtues Peter has been describing.