

# “Grow in the Grace and Knowledge of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ”

## The Seventh in a Series of Sermons on 2 Peter

*Texts: 2 Peter 3:14-18; Leviticus 1:1-10*

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Knowing that his life was likely drawing to a close, the Apostle Peter arranged for the composition of the brief epistle we know as 2 Peter. Part sermon, part letter, there is a profound sense of urgency about Peter’s second letter. In it, the Apostle makes three key points. First, Peter urges that Christians, who are already recipients of God’s grace, manifest those moral virtues which reflect their faith in Christ. These virtues include knowledge, self control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection, and love. Second, Peter warns us that false teachers and false prophets will secretly introduce destructive heresies into the churches, and that Christians ought constantly to be on guard for such disruptive individuals. These men live to indulge the flesh. Although they attract large numbers of followers, God will punish them harshly while rescuing his people from their clutches, just as he did with Noah and Lot. Third, even though the false teachers deny that Jesus will return a second time, it is certain that our Lord will come again to purge the present heaven and earth, removing every trace of human sin, and then creating a new heaven and earth—the home of righteousness. While we long for that glorious day of Christ’s return, Peter exhorts us to wait patiently during this age of salvation, all the while growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

We conclude our series on 2 Peter before we turn to the short Epistle of Jude. Although too often overlooked, 2 Peter is a remarkable letter. It is packed with important apostolic teaching, and reflects Peter’s righteous anger toward those who speak false words and utter false prophecies so as to lead the people of God astray. Peter opens his letter by reminding us of God’s saving grace in Jesus Christ, which not only saves us from the guilt and power of sin, but at the same time empowers us to live Godly lives. As the false teachers and prophets seek to indulge the flesh, Christians should seek to produce those Godly virtues enumerated by Peter in the first chapter of this epistle, all the while waiting patiently for the very thing the false teachers say will not come to pass—the second coming of Jesus, the final judgment, and the creation of new heaven and earth, our eternal home.

As we take up our text, verses 14-18 of chapter 3, we will consider Peter’s concluding exhortations regarding how Christians are to live in anticipation of the age to come. In verse 13, Peter exhorts us to anticipate a new heaven and earth where righteousness dwells. In verse 14, Peter follows up by telling us “*therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace.*” Although there is a danger in being so heavenly-minded that we are no earthly good, those who live their lives in anticipation of the next life, do indeed long for the new heaven and earth, where every hint and trace of sin are gone, and where everlasting righteousness dwells. For the Christian, then, the final judgment is not something we are to fear—because we are clothed in the perfect righteousness of Jesus, who has also died for all of our sins. Rather, the final judgment is that day when every tear is wiped from our eyes, every injustice made right, and when we at long last enter the eternal state to dwell forever in the new heaven and earth described by the Apostle. It is well worth noting that some three times in this concluding section, Peter speaks of Christians “looking forward” (*prosdokaō*) to events associated with the end—especially the creation of a new heaven and earth.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, Logos on 3:14.

If we are to look forward to a new heaven and earth—which will come pass in God’s time—while we wait, we are to “be diligent” in seeking to be without spot or blemish. The language used here by Peter is virtually identical to his exhortation given in the first chapter (2 Peter 1:10), where the Apostle writes, “*therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall.*” The same language of “making an effort” is also found in 2 Peter 1:15 where we read, “*I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things.*” As we strive to make our calling and election sure, we also strive to live as people who act like what we are in Christ—without spot or blemish.

In verse 14 of the concluding section, Peter exhorts his readers/hearers to live as people who have been saved from God’s wrath through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—“*without spot or blemish, and at peace.*” The first two terms used by the Apostle (spot and blemish) echo the opening chapter of Leviticus (which we read as our Old Testament lesson), wherein those animals which are offered as sacrifices to YHWH, are to be pure and unblemished. Peter’s point is that those who have been redeemed by the shed blood of Jesus—which fulfilled the sacrificial system, and thereby put an end to all animal sacrifices—are to live sacrificial lives, which reflect our righteous (and pure) status in Christ. This is the proper response to being chosen by God and called to faith in Jesus Christ.

This stands in sharp contrast to the lives of the false prophets and teachers and those deceived by them, who instead seek to gratify the desires of the flesh. Indulging their animal instincts, Peter says, such people are characterized by the stain of sin (spots and blemishes)—disqualifying them from being that kind of “living sacrifice” which the Lord desires of his people. This also indicates that sacrifice of Jesus on Calvary does not avail for them, nor remove from them the guilt and stain of sin. Living without spot or blemish (i.e., striving to manifest the virtues Peter has mentioned, while seeking to restrain the lusts of the flesh) should characterize the people of God as they wait for the Lord’s return. On the other hand, it is blots and blemishes associated with sinful behavior which characterize those who deny the Lord’s return, and live contrary to the will of God.

It is easy to overlook the third word in Peter’s list—“peace.” Those for whom the guilt of sin has been removed by the shed blood of Jesus are also covered by his righteousness. Although we strive to live lives which reflect who and what we are in Christ, we are to consider ourselves at peace with God.<sup>2</sup> Such peace is both “objective” and “subjective.” In the objective sense, Christians who are united to Jesus Christ through faith, are therefore without spot and blameless before God. Christians need never fear facing the wrath of God on the day of judgment, even though we still struggle to obey Peter’s exhortation to live the kind of lives which reflect who we are in Jesus Christ. God’s wrath and anger have already been poured out upon Jesus when he suffered on the cross, for us and in our place. Having paid for our sin and turned aside the wrath of God, God is at peace with us, and we with him (cf. Rom. 5:9-11).

The subjective “peace” which Christians should feel, arises from a sense of God’s favor. Christians should not worry about whether they will face God’s wrath—Christ has already faced that for us. This sense of peace is more precious than fine gold. It quiets the noisy mind and comforts the guilty conscience. Awareness of this peace with God encourages believers in every age to long for the day of the Lord’s return, not dread it. “Peace” should be understood in the Semitic sense that God’s own word of “shalom” (“peace”) comes to his people even in the midst of the struggles like those in Peter’s original

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<sup>2</sup> Bauckham, Jude, 2 Peter, 327.

audience faced with false teachers and prophets.<sup>3</sup> Knowing that the doing and dying of Jesus renders us without spot and blemish before God (securing peace for us), provides us with the proper motivation (gratitude) to live lives which are spotless and blameless. Having such peace within then, we ought to long for the Lord's return no matter how distant that coming may seem to be.

Peter's exhortation to manifest spotless and blameless lives, which are lived in peace, continues to unfold in the opening clause of verse 15. Peter writes, "*and count the patience of our Lord as salvation,*" which indicates that this is also the age of salvation for those yet to believe. This is why Peter can exhort us to await the Lord's return with patience—the full harvest has not yet come in. Therefore, it is quite sad that one of the reasons so many scoffers have arisen in our own day and age is the impatience of Christians and the resulting eschatological speculation which gives people inclined to scoff at God's promises much ammunition with which to do so.

No doubt, there is something within all of us which wishes to know what the future holds. As we discussed earlier, in the final chapter of John's gospel, Peter himself wanted to know from Jesus what his own future held. In John 21:18–19, Jesus told Peter, "*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.)'"* As Peter's own death now draws near (v. 14), and the words of Jesus spoken to Peter are about to be fulfilled, Peter instructs Christians to long for the Lord's return, and wait patiently for that day, because God, in his wisdom, does not tell us *when* Jesus will return to usher in a new heaven and earth, only *that* Jesus will return to do so.

Because we tend to be curious about what the future may hold for us, there is a hook in each of us which gets our attention when someone claims to have figured out how current events predict the Lord's return, and then is able to tie that prediction to some current event (usually a war or political crisis in the Middle East) or some passing despot (Arafat, Sadat, Saddam Hussein). I am not implying that all Bible prophecy pundits are necessarily like the false prophets Peter had in mind—the false prophets of Peter's day claimed to be getting revelations directly from God and the Holy Spirit, but then used these supposed revelations to exploit people. But, by making such false and wildly speculative predictions about how specific current events are foretold in the Bible, like the false prophets of Peter's day, the prophecy pundits discredit the biblical teaching that Jesus will return like a thief in the night, when no one expects it. How many times can we tell people, "Jesus is coming back," then tie that prediction to a current event or some political figure, only to watch them come and go from the scene, without giving unbelievers more reasons to scoff at Jesus' promise?

Peter preaches eschatological patience, because he knows that we have peace with God, and that God has a purpose for the Lord's delay—namely, the salvation of each one of God's elect for whom Jesus has died. In a secular age such as ours, packed with scoffers looking for any excuse to mock Christ and his people, it behooves those of us interested in eschatology to avoid speculation about current events, and instead focus upon the reason Peter gives for the delay in Christ's return—found in verse 9 of the previous section. "*The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.*"

Also, in verses 15-16 Peter makes a very interesting comment about the Apostle Paul, writing, "*just as*

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<sup>3</sup> Davids, The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude, Logos, on 3:14

*our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.*” Paul taught extensively about the Lord’s return—his two letters to the churches in Thessalonica, as well as in the fifteenth chapter of his first Corinthian letter. Based upon Peter’s comments here, it is reasonable to assume that those receiving Peter’s letters were also familiar with Paul’s teaching that Jesus would return on the last day to judge the world and raise the dead.

Peter makes some very interesting points about the letters of Paul. For one thing, Peter places Paul’s letters on the same footing with the prophetic word given through the Holy Spirit, which Peter mentioned previously in the first chapter (vv. 16-21). Peter understands the letters of Paul to be Scripture, and therefore every bit as authoritative as the Old Testament, as well as the writings of the apostles (presumably the gospels). A second point Peter makes is that Paul’s letters can be difficult to understand, which leads to Peter’s third point, that Paul’s letters can be easily distorted by ignorant and unstable people—presumably a reference to the false teachers and prophets, whose deceptive ways Peter described throughout the second chapter of this epistle.

What was it, exactly, in Paul’s letters that was being distorted. Since Peter does not tell us specifically, we can only guess based upon what Peter says here about the false teachers and prophets. Paul was very clear that Jesus was going to return bodily at the end of the age. In 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17, he writes, *“for the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.”*

In 2 Thessalonians 1:5–10, Paul adds, *“this is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering—since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.”* It is hard to miss or distort Paul’s point that when Jesus returns he brings about the judgment and resurrection.

Some have speculated that Paul’s comments in Ephesians (2:5-6), Colossians (2:12; 3:10, and 1 Timothy (2:17-18), about believers *already* being seated and raised with Christ in the heavens, could easily be used by the false teachers to deny that Jesus Christ will return at the end of the age. If believers are already said to be raised and seated with Christ in heavenly places, why would Jesus need return for them? An example will help. In Ephesians 2:5–6, Paul writes, *“even when we were dead in our trespasses, [God] made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”* Such statements from Paul could be twisted and distorted to mean that Jesus was not going to return—an over-realized eschatology very similar to modern preterism.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, Logos on 3:15.

Given the false teacher's stress upon satisfying bodily urges, it is more likely that they were distorting Paul's statements about freedom from the law, and then using this distortion as the ground for indulging the lusts of the flesh.<sup>5</sup> For example, in Romans 5:20, Paul writes, "*now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.*" Since grace triumphs over sin, you can almost hear the false teachers whispering, "well let us sin with great vigor so as to gain more grace!" Or, even a text like Romans 4:15 could similarly be twisted. "*For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.*" If Jesus' coming does away with the law, then there is no more sin.

It is clear that Peter sees Paul's writings as authoritative as the Old Testament and the writings of the apostles, and that Paul was teaching the same thing Peter is teaching about the Christian life. The false teachers must distort Paul's words by teaching that we are permitted to indulge the lusts of the flesh, not put the deeds done in the flesh to death (Romans 8:13). The false teachers cannot therefore, enlist Paul as an ally. That Peter speaks of Paul as "our beloved brother" is remarkable in light of Galatians 2:11-14, where Paul rebuked Peter to his face. Nevertheless, this comment points us in the direction that Peter is personally responsible for the composition of this letter, since someone writing in the name of Peter many years after the fact, would be unlikely to speak in such a manner, nor refer to other Christians as recent recipients of Paul's letters.<sup>6</sup> Since Paul too was called to the apostolic office by the resurrected Christ, he also speaks with apostolic authority as does Peter—something Peter acknowledges.

In verse 17, Peter wraps up this letter by giving his readers two imperatives—one negative, and the other positive. The first of these is found in verse 17: "*You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability.*" Believers must not be carried away (*phylassesthe*) by the doctrinal errors of those who are lawless, and who seek to undermine the authority of those whom God has appointed to rule in the churches. So, knowing beforehand that the Lord will return, even if there is a long delay, believers must constantly be on guard for false teachers, who will plague the church until Jesus returns.

In our own day and age, there are two responses to this threat of which we should beware. The first of these are the "heresy hunters." By this, I am referring to those self-appointed individuals, often with little or no formal theological training and usually without any church affiliation, who scour the internet for any perceived departure from those doctrines they hold dear, even though they fail to sign or identify with any recognized system of doctrine or with any official confession of faith of any Protestant church. Whenever they find something objectionable to their personal theology, they pounce and label the teaching in question "heretical." Jack Van Impe, for example, labeled the amillennial eschatology held by all of the churches of the Reformation, as the greatest heresy in the history of the church. That is just plain silly. These folks establish their own so called "ministries," they are not accountable to any official church body, and they pass themselves off as champions of the truth. Once in a while they find serious error and warn of it, but far too often that which they consider a "heresy" is a doctrine grounded in Scripture, and held true by the vast majority of the Christian church. Christians should avoid these people and pay them no attention (which of course, is what they want most).

The other unfortunate tendency is indifference to doctrinal error. Many Christians naively assume that doctrine is not all that important, and so personal indifference becomes an excuse to pay no attention to

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<sup>5</sup> Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, Logos on 3:15.

<sup>6</sup> Moo, 2 Peter, Jude, Logos on 3:15; Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, Logos on 3:15.

doctrine—if they don't know about the controversies of their day, then they do not have to deal with them, a sort of invincible ignorance. These tend to be the folk who judge well-known Christian leaders (like Joel Osteen) by whether or not they seem to be nice, or by whether or not their ministries have produced any fruit, or done any good. Based upon the warnings from Peter, and as we will see from Jude, (not forgetting those from John and Paul) we are not given the option of being indifferent to doctrine, or just assuming that nice people are always orthodox in their theology. Nor can we assume that what appears to be genuine fruit is actually genuine or long-lasting. The fact is, Peter exhorts us to be on the lookout for lawless people who teach false doctrine. This is not a suggestion, but an apostolic exhortation.

It seems to me that one of the best ways to avoid these two unfortunate tendencies is to belong to a “confessional church” – by this I mean to be a member of a church which possesses authoritative doctrinal standards (such as the Three Forms of Unity or the Westminster Standards) and which has pastors and elders who are careful about doctrine, and who will diligently watch for error arising within the congregation. There is real safety in a church where pastors and teachers cannot make up personal and speculative doctrine on the fly, and where they are held accountable to widely recognized public doctrinal standards, along with rules and procedures for dealing with doctrinal matters (a church order).

The second imperative comes in the final verse. *“But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”* While we wait for the Lord's return, we are to grow in the grace and in our knowledge of the person and work of Jesus. Peter has defined what it means to grow in the grace of the Lord in verses 3-4 of the opening chapter. *“His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, 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.”* God gives us all that we need to live the Christian life—especially in light of the promises made to us in God's word—including that of the Lord's return. Jesus continually gives us the grace we need to partake of the divine nature, so as to share in the moral excellencies of our creator and redeemer.

Furthermore, we have everything that we need to grow in our personal knowledge of the person and work of Jesus Christ in the prophetic word made certain (Scripture).<sup>7</sup> As Peter told us in the second verse of this epistle, *“may grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.”* Knowing Jesus personally (through faith), is the only way we grow in grace, which is necessary if we are to manifest the virtues of which Peter speaks, as well as resist the lusts of the flesh. Knowledge of the person and work of Jesus is also a necessity if we are going to resist the schemes of the false teachers and false prophets who attempt to deceive the people of God while denying the master who bought them. It is hard to resist the false teachers or evaluate false prophecy if you do not know the truth.

We are not left in the dark, clinging to mere myths and fables. Rather we possess that sure and certain word of the apostles and prophets, men through whom the Holy Spirit has given us an infallible and inerrant account of the doing and dying of Jesus. We grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord in direct proportion to the time we devote to the means of grace. We grow when we spend time reading, studying, and reflecting upon God's word written. We also grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord by attending to the sacraments and the promises made to us through them, as well as devoting ourselves to the chief exercise of faith—prayer and thanksgiving.

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<sup>7</sup> Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, Logos on 3:18.

Peter directs us then, that while we await the Lord's return, we are not to be deceived by lawless men or false doctrine, and we are to devote ourselves to growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus. These two things will keep us from straying from the truth, and will strengthen us to face the inevitable trials to come. This also enables us to keep before our eyes the hope of a new heaven and earth where righteousness dwells.

Having given these exhortations to those hearing or reading this letter, Peter's closing words remind us of both the glory of Jesus Christ and the certainty of his return. *"To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen."*