

Last week we dove into the tangled plate of spaghetti noodles that is the 2nd chapter of 2 Peter. It’s a highly intertwined, interconnected chapter that doesn’t break up into easily digestible sections. Instead, it has themes and ideas that are laced throughout it, all kind of jumbled together. It’s all wrapped around the topic of false prophets and false teachers in the church.

So, let’s dive into today’s passage, as we continue 2 Peter 2, looking at **verses 13-22** this morning. This is God’s word to you and me today as Peter continues his warnings about the presence of false teachers in the church....

Title Slide. You know, don’t you just want to go back in time, talk to Peter face-to-face and ask him, “So, could you tell us how you *really* feel about these false teachers?” 😊 This passage starts right off with one thing we looked at last week, that the judgment of false teachers is in God’s hands. He writes, **“They will be paid back with harm for the harm they have done” (2 Peter 2:13).** We’ll come back to this theme in a couple minutes. Also last week we saw that the false motive these teachers have, is one of finances...money. Their teaching is motivated by greed and financial reward. (Faith leaders in Scripture and since have always been compensated for their efforts...that’s healthy and not what Peter is concerned about.) Besides key words in last week’s passage, we also looked at a couple words and phrases from today’s passage, because things are all tangled together in this chapter. So we saw how these false teachers are “experts in greed” (verse 14) and love the “wages of wickedness” (verse 15).

Then in today’s passage, Peter mentions Balaam and his donkey in verses 15 and 16. It’s a story from the Old Testament book of Numbers. Why does Peter mention Balaam and say these false teachers in their day are like Balaam? Because Balaam was a prophet (“soothsayer” actually) who prophesied for greed in this story. **Balaam prophesies what others want him to say, because they’re willing to pay him.** In other words, he’s being bribed. And Peter says these false teachers in the 1st century church are like him; Jude mentions Balaam as well, for the same negative reason. So, you

put it all together, and we see that financial greed is at the root of the false teaching.

Now, last Sunday, after the service, someone commented to me about Jesus' parable in the gospel of Luke about a rich man who walked by a beggar every day who was not only poor financially but poor in health. Jesus' teaching ties in closely to this passage. In this parable, both men die. The beggar – who Jesus names “Lazarus” though there is no connection to the real-life Lazarus who was Jesus' friend – this fictional Lazarus dies and goes to heaven – Jesus doesn't use that word, but it's probably how we would describe it. The rich man also dies and he goes to Hades. That's the Greek word in the parable. **“Hades” is the name of the Greek god of the underworld. Over time, it also was used as the name of for the grave, death in general, or hell. It is one of a few words in Scripture to talk about “hell.”**

And so in the parable, the rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus back to earth, to his family, to warn them so they will not go to the place where he is, but instead will go to where Lazarus is. And the response of Abraham as Jesus tells the story, is that the rich man's family has prophets and teachers to guide them and instruct them, and they should listen to them. The rich man responds, “But if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.” And Abraham's response is, “If they won't listen to Moses and the Prophets, then even if someone rises from the dead they won't be convinced.”

It's a parable (Luke 16:19-31) about the dangers of the trappings of this world – wealth in particular – and putting our trust in those things, rather than in Jesus. It begs the question: Is Jesus' resurrection, attested to by scores and scores of people who witnessed him, as recorded for us in these historical documents we know as the Gospels and the book of Acts, plus the letters of Paul and Peter and others...is all of that enough evidence to convince us that Jesus is the answer to our deep-seated desire for meaning and identity in life, and to our deepest longings to beat death? You were created to be in relationship with God your Heavenly Father and Creator – that's what we see in Genesis 1 and 2; but the sin that enters the world and our lives breaks that relationship and causes us to continually seek to fill God's place with other stuff – money, addictions, pride, materialism,

entertainment...the list goes on. It's all false, and when these things are merged with the gospel, it's particularly tricky to pick out. Jesus' parable warns us about this stuff, as does Peter's warning here in chapter 2. They go hand-in-hand.

Peter says in the last few verses that the core of their message is a false freedom. A pseudo-freedom. Because really, they are slaves to money. It could be something else they are slaves to – any of the stuff I mentioned a moment ago such as entertainment, pride, nationalism, sexuality, materialism, addictions, and more. We can be slaves to all kinds of stuff that we add on to Jesus, or replace Jesus with, or even Biblical stuff that we raise up to the point it's a gateway to coming to Jesus, and we end up with a false teaching in our lives.

And Peter writes quite bluntly in these verses that these false teachers are “blots and blemishes” which is *not* very flattering language...they “never stop sinning...” they are “an accursed brood”... **“They are springs without water and mists driven by a storm and blackest darkness is reserved for them” (verse 17).** I don't believe that a good long-term motivator for following Jesus is fear or simply to avoid that kind of eternal destiny, but it sure ought to get our attention. More importantly, our doctrine of eternity oftentimes becomes a gate by which we unintentionally make people pass through on the way to faith in Jesus. And unfortunately, it is often an obstacle to faith. So, let's talk about heaven and hell for a few minutes.

Let's start with a light-hearted story about hell that I told like 8 years ago, but most of you weren't here and the rest of you won't remember it, and it's really funny and worth hearing again anyway. 😊 There was a couple from Minnesota who were having some marital struggles, and decided a change of scenery would be good. They planned a vacation to Florida. But due to a work commitment, the wife couldn't arrive there until a couple days after her husband. (Perhaps indicative of their marital issues.) When he arrived, he sent her an email, but he accidentally typed in the wrong email address, and it went to an elderly lady, whose husband, a pastor of many years, had just died the day before. When she read the email, she screamed and fell to the floor. It said:

To: My Loving Wife
Subject: I've Arrived

“I know you probably weren’t expecting an email from me, especially considering the current state of our relationship. But I thought I’d let you know that I’ve arrived just fine. I’m looking forward to your arrival tomorrow and our time together. I hope your journey is less eventful than mine was.....P.S. It sure is hot down here!”

Look, we make jokes about hell, but it’s a serious matter. Let’s start by acknowledging that the eternity – heaven and hell – is a topic of debate within the Christian faith, and that: **The Bible presents a couple different pictures each, for both heaven and hell.** If you’ve always thought of heaven as floating in the clouds and hell has a lake of fire, it may surprise you that the Bible paints different pictures for each. Let’s start with hell. Two main pictures are given. The first is well-known, with the story I just told reinforcing it. In that Lazarus and rich man parable that Jesus tells, the rich man goes to a place where “he was in torment.” In Matthew 25, Jesus teaches that those who don’t follow his teaching will “go away into the eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matthew 25:46). Other teachings describe hell as a kind of eternal fire, and a lake of fire. In all of these, it’s a place of conscious punishment and torment and separation from God. So, that’s one picture of hell Scripture paints.

But there’s another. For instance, here in 2 Peter we just read, “blackest darkness is reserved for them.” It’s just black; darkness. In 2 Thessalonians 1:9 Paul writes that those who do not follow the gospel of Jesus Christ will “suffer the punishment of eternal *destruction*, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.” That sounds like a kind of permanent soul destruction...like an eternal death...destroyed forever. In Matthew 10 Jesus teaches, “...fear him who can *destroy* both the soul and body in hell.” Again, it sounds less like eternal torment and torture and more like a kind of final death and destruction. In Matthew 7:14 Jesus says to beware of the wide gate and wide road that lead to...destruction. Not torment, but destruction.

The great John 3:16 even leans this way, **“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him *shall not perish but have everlasting life*” (John 3:16).** Notice it doesn’t say, “shall parish but then receive everlasting life” as if it’s physical death but spiritual life. Instead, it contrasts “perishing” and “everlasting life.” So those who believe and follow Jesus will have everlasting life *instead* of perishing. This perishing that does not happen when we believe in Jesus is apparently something besides our earthly death...Christians died before John wrote his gospel so it’s not like earthly death was a surprise or unforeseen thing for believers...so perhaps this is a “soul death” like an everlasting perishing, especially since it is contrasted with “everlasting life.” They’re given here as opposites. Following Jesus leads to everlasting life, instead of this perishing. So, is “hell” a permanent place of conscious torture, or is it a permanent, everlasting death and destruction of the soul? Really, both are taught in Scripture.

I remind you: we are an Evangelical-leaning church, with historical-orthodox theology, and we want to read Scripture authentically. Many of the “pillars of the evangelical faith” have differing views on hell – John Stott, for instance, kept his views to himself for many years, out of fear of how other evangelicals would respond because his beliefs about hell, which were not the fire and torture beliefs.

Now: **The passage here in 2 Peter only mentions the “hell” aspect of eternity (“blackest darkness”), but briefly: “Heaven” is described in different ways as well in the Bible.** Certainly, some are metaphorical – for instance, Jesus says “in my father’s house are many rooms” and that he’s going there to prepare a place for us, and will lead his followers to this place. It’s speaking of eternity, but I don’t know anyone who thinks eternity is just a really, really, big house with lots of rooms for those who follow Jesus. Look...I love admiring big houses – on the shores of Lake Washington, penthouses at the top of towers in New York City towers, or wherever they may be...but if that’s what heaven is, just a really big house, I’ll admit, that sounds a bit underwhelming (though to me sure, heaven is really about our relationship with God more than the place that happens). But much of Scripture speaks of a new heaven and a new earth, where the first of each

have passed away and a whole new Jerusalem comes down out of heaven, to the new earth so that God's dwelling place is now with people in this eternal new earth. So, it's as if heaven is here, or something just like here, without the stain of sin, because it's new. There's a fair amount of mystery, even in Scripture, about heaven.

I know some Christians get very hung up on the theology of heaven and hell – especially hell – to the point that if you don't believe the same way they do, then it's a sign that you're *going* to hell, even if you are otherwise the most faithful disciple of Jesus whoever lived. This absolute certainty about a place they've never been is stunning, given the different things Scripture says about it. So, here's what I think really matters on the topic: **Hell, in some way, shape, or form, is eternal separation from God. Heaven, in some way, shape, or form, is eternal presence with God.** In one place, through faith in Jesus, you are in the eternal, loving presence of your heavenly father; in the other you are eternally separated. That's the point Scripture makes.

So, let's say you're in a conversation with someone where you live, work, or play, who says or believes, "I have a hard time with Christianity. Why would a loving God torment someone for eternity in hell?" How might you respond to lead them toward Jesus? Too often, Christians don't know what to do with that, and so we don't help lead people toward Jesus because we think the person needs to have a "right doctrine" of hell before they come to faith (which is getting the cart before the horse), or we just don't know what to say. Instead, remove the obstacle, because even Scripture is mixed in its presentation. Both depictions are Biblical, both demonstrate divine judgment, both demonstrate separation from our Creator. Neither is good, neither is very comforting. Both are eternal separation from God.

So, suggest this other Biblical view if that helps lead them to Jesus. If you think the depictions of hell as a place of torment are more true – and that has been the usual teaching evangelical and theologically orthodox churches as ours tends to be – and if you believe the other depictions of permanent death are more metaphorical or something: **Let's have the humility to hold lightly our doctrine of hell for the sake of another person's potential faith in Jesus.** Christian arrogance over doctrine is one of the leading causes of

people turning their backs on Jesus. Let's debate and argue about doctrine *in the Church*, like Peter does with this letter to the church warning them of false prophets, rather than debating doctrine with non-believers.

Instead, with our non-believing friends, we want to love them and lead them to Jesus and let God work on their theology and understanding in the context of faith and discipleship. And I'm not saying to avoid difficult topics with non-believers; I'm just saying to do so with humility and understanding their questions. My guess is, actually, many of us have similar questions ourselves anyway. That actually makes you a fantastic evangelist, because you can come alongside people more easily and persuade them to a place of faith, and avoid digging heels in and trying to win an argument. Too often we're afraid to talk about faith because we fear we won't have the answers to people's questions. Having all the answers isn't always needed. Resonating with their questions is even better. It's ok to be unsure about some things, to have some ambiguity and mystery in the faith. Even where we are certain, some humility goes a long way, rather than getting into arguments with non-believers about doctrine. People aren't argued into the kingdom; they're persuaded. Persuasion and argument winning are two different things. One leads people to Jesus and the other usually doesn't.

And leading people toward Jesus (whether someone who's far from Jesus as I've emphasized some this morning, or whether someone's been a believer for 40 years or more – we all have room for growth)...leading people toward Jesus is what we want to do, because Jesus is what matters. The apostle Paul's writes, **“For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2)**. When he was with those people, that was the message. That's who our lives point people to. That's what matters. If someone is going to turn their backs on Christianity, let it be because of Jesus Christ crucified for our sins and resurrected for the hope of eternal life. That's the gospel, and that's where real freedom is found, and that's what we want to live in and lead others into. So, let's stay centered on Jesus, finding our true freedom in him – not in anything else merged, mixed in with the gospel message, or over-emphasized, because Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected is the true teaching, and in the end is all we need. Let's pray...Amen.