

## **APPEARING GODLY WON'T SAVE US**

II Peter 2:1-22, especially verses 19-22 – Pastor Richard P. Carlson

Only a true shepherd for Jesus would dare to write what Peter wrote in II Peter 2:1-22. Remember Jesus told Peter in His call after His resurrection in John 21:15-17, “Feed My lambs, tend My sheep, and feed My sheep.” What we are seeing today in the teaching of false teachers worldwide, and what is being believed about the Gospel world-wide, by so many followers, not only compelled Peter to write these words, but it also compels me to preach this message today. I cannot shepherd the lambs and the sheep among us without sounding Peter’s warning that millions today are denying the Master who bought them, (II Peter 2:1) and millions who have escaped or appeared to have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, have become entangled in falsehood, (II Peter 2:20). Peter says, “It would be better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than to hold to it for a short time and then turn back.”

Joni Eareckson Tada wrote a precious book about God’s presence in life’s chaos, called “Glorious Intruder.” She wrote about growing up a sister in the state of Maryland. In the summer, her family would visit her Uncle Ted’s ranch in Tie Siding, Wyoming, just south of Laramie. Joni got the privilege, with her sisters, of helping to brand calves. Her uncle Ted put her on a big workhorse. It was to corral cows at one end of the arena while at the other end, the cowboys used their cutting horses to single out calves for branding. Even though Joni’s job was just to sit there on her horse, most of the time, watching the branding at the other end of the arena, she played a part in branding the calves. Yet, a strange thing happened. People stopped in, driving in from Highway 287. They watched the calf brandings from a distance and took pictures of the brandings. Joni was so glad to be a worker on her uncle Ted’s ranch, not a tourist. It makes me think of our text.

Peter is telling us about people familiar with Christianity. They watch calves being branded and take pictures, but they are not cowboys or cowgirls privileged for a few weeks to work on the Tie Siding ranch. Salvation isn’t something you take pictures of and look back on as a place to visit or as a treasured memory. No, no, no! Salvation engages our entire heart, mind, soul, spirit, and body. Salvation is at the heart of living. Salvation requires a personal faith relationship with God through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Nothing is more important than being saved, since salvation or not being saved determines our eternal destiny, either heaven or hell. Part of this salvation is knowing with assurance that we are saved, assurance that we have passed from death unto life. Millions of Americans think they are ranchers because they have taken pictures at branding time spiritually. They think they are redeemed because they have been to an altar, or said a prayer, but they have never truly given their lives to the Lord. Vows to God not meant. like vows at a marriage altar, not meant, are idle words that will come back to haunt any of us who speak too easily, without counting the

cost. Those who live by God's truth enter into more and more freedom from sin, but those living by lies and the appearance of righteousness, experience more and more bondage, until their latter end is worse than how they were in the beginning before hearing the Gospel. Temporary reformation without true repentance, rebirth, and regeneration lead to greater sin and judgment.

Peter is telling us there is a possibility of having a false experience with Christ. That is what Peter is trying to tell us about when he refers to false teachers, false prophets, and apostates under the pronouns "their," and "they," both in verses 2-3 and 20. The primary warning is about whom we follow and there are many false teachers. These false teachers are not truly born-again people. They have taken pictures of the real thing, but they have not known what it means to pass from death unto life. Their experiences with Christ, as well as their promises to new converts, though they appear to be authentic, are all false. But don't miss the fact that the followers or converts these false teachers garner, if they swallow the same false teaching, will become the "many" whom Jesus spoke of in Matthew 7:21-23.

These false teachers have knowledge of salvation, and they speak the language of the church. Yet they lack a true salvation experience and a knowledge of the Lord in being re-born. At one time, they may even have received the knowledge of the truth in the Word of the God, but they turned away from it. They never fully trusted Christ and they never became His sheep. False teachers never announce, "I am a false teacher, nor do they tell their followers they are secretly bringing in false teaching and destructive heresies. The word heresies in II Peter 2: 1 is hairesis, meaning a choice of being in a sect, and having a self-willed party spirit. Warren Wiersbe speaks of those promoting a party spirit-saying, "Are you on my side or their side?" They are promoting division which is a work of the flesh in Galatians 5:20." What lessons are we to learn from Peter about false teachers? In our text are three distinct images that stand out. These images should warn us from ever being spectators of Christianity, tourists taking salvation pictures when we have no real abiding relationship with the Lord. What are these three images of false teachers, and sadly their converts and followers who follow them?

**FALSE TEACHERS AND THEIR FOLLOWERS ARE OVERCOME, NOT BY CHRIST, BUT BY CORRUPTION.** (I.) Notice verses 19,20.

"They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption." For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first." Beloved, by what are we overcome? These false teachers and their followers may once have turned over a new leaf, without ever receiving new life in Christ. They got into church, they learned how to testify, and they evidenced an outward change, but inwardly, they were unchanged, still lost. Such false converts are believers in a nominal way, recognizing and believing the claims of Christ, but never being changed by Christ's transforming power.

Their brand of Christianity is religion without redemption. They have taken pictures of true branding, and some have even walked an aisle to pray or shake a preacher's hand. But in the end, their true colors show by what they are overcome. These false teachers cannot forever maintain the illusion that they are saved. Eventually it comes out who they are. They are entangled in sin. Their patterns of life are crocheted, woven into the fabric and character of who they are. The sinful desires of a false teacher are never conquered by reformation. Sinful desires only hibernate within us, and they wake up stronger on down the line in life. Only the born-again transformation of true salvation by repentance, faith and receiving Jesus, defeats the old nature and gives us new life. By what we are overcome, by that we are enslaved.

By learning of Jesus, by taking pictures, if you will, as a tourist, many professing Christians make a kind of trial start at the Christian life. By all outward appearances, many professing Christians appear to have escaped from the defilements of the world. But when they have not truly repented and entrusted their lives to Christ, when the tests come, when the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches rush in, as Jesus spoke about, in Luke 8:14, those Christians in name only, once seeming to grow, then wither and bear no fruit and their false conversion is evident. 2ndly,

**FALSE TEACHERS AND THEIR FOLLOWERS HAVE A WORSE FUTURE BY THEIR KNOWLEDGE OF THE TRUTH.** (II.) Notice verse 21. "For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness, than after knowing it, to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them." This truth shows up all over in the Word, the more we know of Christ and His way, the more severe will be our judgment, if we refuse to trust and obey Christ. Better to have never been born as Jesus said about his false disciple Judas. Jesus spoke of people who saw His miracles and took mental pictures of all of them and yet did not repent. Turn with me to Matthew 11:20-24. Apostates and false teachers are in a worse state after being entangled in sin's bondage than before their feigned conversion. Jesus said in Luke 12: 47, 48, "And that slave who knew His master's will, and did not get ready or act in accord with his will, shall receive many lashes, but the one who did not know it, and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few. And from everyone who has been given much, shall much be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they shall ask the more."

The judgment of false teachers overcome by their corruption will be worse than the judgment of pagans who never knew the way of righteousness. Peter is warning the false teachers here saying in essence, "If you forsake the way of truth now, after all you have learned and experienced, your doom and judgment in hell will be more miserable than the pagan's doom. If you have been confronted with the truth of the Gospel, and had your heart gripped with Holy Ghost conviction, if you have truly been enlightened to faith in Jesus, that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, and then you walk away

from Jesus, look out. People who have been to the altar or to the threshold of salvation and have looked in on the things of God, and have seen they are true, and that they need what they have seen, but turn away to follow after sin, may never be brought back to that place again. The picture here is not about losing salvation, but of rejecting salvation. If we reflect back in II Peter 2:4-6, God proved He judged, wicked, sinning angels, proving no one is too high or mighty, to be beyond being judged. As the whole world except for Noah and his family in the ark, did not escape the world-wide flood, God proves He doesn't grade on the curve—only sending the flood on the most ungodly. As God condemned Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes, though the Word tells us, these great sinners, were living in homosexual sin, lived in a fertile valley that Genesis 13:10, was like the Garden of the Lord, so know, even the most prosperous sinners will one day be judged. These wicked angels, those dying in Noah's flood, and those in Sodom and Gomorrah are God's examples of what will happen to the ungodly, II Peter 2: 6.

Yet, let me remind us, for our great comfort, that though God knows how to deal with the wicked, and false teachers, and their followers, God also knows how to rescue the righteous. Notice II Peter 2:7-9. We read, "And if He rescued righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked, (for as that righteous man lived among them day after day, he was tormenting his righteous soul over their lawless deeds that he saw and heard); then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials." When most of us think of Lot, our first thought is not that he was righteous. Yet here in the Word, God calls Lot righteous twice. Beloved, hear me carefully. When we truly belong to the Lord, God doesn't ultimately define us by our worst moments. As you know, when Lot quit sojourning with Abram, and became a resident in Sodom, he lost his consecration and his testimony. Everything he lived for there went up in smoke! Lot's own sons in law laughed at Lot when Lot told them their cities would be destroyed. Yet, though Lot was not living a true-blue life for God, and he lost even his wife who looked back disobediently, Genesis 19:22 tells us that angels pulled him out of the city with his daughters, and said, "Escape to the little city of Zoar quickly, for I can do nothing, till you arrive there." Think of it with me. Lot was a tormented, carnal believer. In a word, he had too much of Jesus to be happy in the world, and too much of the world to be happy in Jesus.

Yet God rescued Lot. As our bulletin says it well, "A true Christian desires to be free from sin, not to sin freely." But listen. When you truly repent of sin, believe and receive Jesus, you can sing with Moses who smote the rock twice disobediently, with Rahab, once a harlot, with Mary Magdalene, who once had seven devils, with David who committed adultery and murdered, but truly repented, and with righteous Lot, Abram's nephew, who was tormented with sin around him, "Now I belong to Jesus, Jesus belongs to me, not for the years of time alone, but for eternity." Thirdly, look at this third image of false teachers, and their followers. This is the most graphic:

## **FALSE TEACHERS AND THEIR FOLLOWERS RETURN AS A DOG TO ITS VOMIT, LIKE A SOW TO WALLOW IN THE MIRE.**

(III.) Peter writes in verse 22, “What the true proverb says has happened to them. The dog returns to its own vomit,” and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire.” This imagery comes from the pen of Solomon first in Proverbs 26: 11 where we read, “Like a dog that returns to its vomit is a fool who repeats his folly.” God’s promise of hell is strong and irrevocable to these false teachers. The dog that has gotten rid of the corruption inside its upset stomach by vomiting, (it has escaped for a moment its inner corruption) but it cannot leave well enough alone. It goes sniffing around the vomit again and eats up what it has just regurgitated. The sow that was just scrubbed for the 4-H show out at the fair, smells like a million dollars until you take your eyes off it. Then it shows its true nature (after escaping the corruption that was on it) by heading straight for what it loves, a mud slop to wallow in.

Peter is telling us that a person’s true nature will always come out. A dog may be taught obedience and tricks, but a dog is always a dog, and it will have a dog’s nature when it has been sick and vomited. A pig or an old sow can be bathed, buffed, and shined up for show, but a sow is a sow, and it will always head straight for the wallow, if it is turned loose. We always go after our own nature. Only by receiving the Gospel and receiving a new nature in Christ can we be able to follow after Christ. So, this is why Peter says it would have been better for us never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it, to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to us. By coming to our Gospel preaching church, or any other Gospel preaching church, there is a great blessing, but there is also, a great danger. By hearing this message today, all of us are more accountable to be doers of the Word, and not hearers only, deceiving our own selves. (James 1:22) Peter here is painting false teachers and those who accept their lies as lost forever. Bible believers will continue their debate about whether these false teachers were once saved and then lost, or whether they were never saved.

Those debates get us nowhere. Listen. Many people have every appearance of being saved, but they are lost. (Matthew 7: 21-23) It is possible to have an appearance of being right with God, but never to be saved. If God can say, “righteous Lot,” He will also say righteous “you”—using your name. Why? It will never be because of any of our own righteousness, which is as filthy rags. (Isaiah 64:6) The only reason you or I can be called righteous, is because God has convicted us, converted us, regenerated us, and come to live in our hearts and lives by His Holy Spirit. Our only righteousness is in Jesus Christ. May God help us all pray, “Dear Lord, make me unsatisfied with ever living in the appearance of the Christian life.” May we never settle for looking like a Christian without repenting, and then trusting Jesus to do His deep miracle of salvation in our lives. My prayer for us all is Peter’s heart cry in II Peter 3:17-18 as he closes his epistle. In these last days, let’s be real Christians, born-again, washed in Jesus’ blood, and headed for glory.