

THE SECOND LETTER OF PETER - PART III

DENUNCIATION OF FALSE TEACHERS

I. The second chapter begins with a transition from a defense of St. Peter's ministry to a prediction of false teachers.

A. The first three verses of chapter 2, which together are one sentence in the original Greek, point out that there were false teachers before and will be again.

1. On the one hand, the passage is a reflection upon the history of Israel during which, as Moses had warned of long ago, there were numerous false prophets. See, e.g., Duet. 13:1-6; 1 Kings 18; Jer. 5:31, 14:13-16; 23:1-50, 28:1-17; Ez. 13:1-21; Zech. 10:2, 13:3-6.

2. Combined with that reflection, the passage indicates that false prophesy would not stop, but would rather take the form of heresies. The notion is that the people should not be surprised that falsehood is spread even from within the faithful, for thus it has ever been, and thus God has warned it will be. See, e.g., Matt. 24; 13-14; Mark 13:22.

3. Of old, the indication of the false prophet would be that: (1) he would contradict what God has already revealed; and (2) he would say what is popular or easy. See Duet. 13:1-6, Jer. 28:8-9; Ez. 13:10-12, 22:27-28. In addition, the true prophet would act in a godly way, as compared to the decadence and greed of the false prophets. Matt. 7:15-20; compare Num. 12:3, 1 Sam. 12:1-6; Sir. 45:4 with Is. 28:7-9; see also Didache ch, 11.

B. The passage warns that, as the false prophets were headed toward destruction and lead Israel there, so too the current false prophets are doing the same.

C. He points out as proof of their falseness: (1) that they deny the Master; and (2) that they lead people into licentiousness; and (3) that they act out of greed. Thus, as the people could tell false prophets by their contradiction of known truth, their approval of evil, and their greed, so the false teachers now can be known by the same things.

- A similar passage in Jude makes it clear that the Master is Jesus Christ. See Jude 4. They probably did not deny that Jesus is a Master, but denied His absolute authority and His teachings, which amounts to rejecting Him. See Ps. 10:13, 14:1-3, 73:3-12; Titus 1:16

D. This opening passage itself refers only to the past and to the future. But it is setting up the condemnation of current false teachers.

II. The letter then reflects upon history to draw lessons about God's judgment.

A. The letter first speaks of the condemnation of the angels who sinned against God. See Gen. 3:13; Matt. 8:29.

- The passage literally says that the angels were cast "into Tartarus," which is a term from classical mythology. Possibly because the Bible does not directly describe the punishment of the angels at their fall, except for Luke 10:18, the letter instead uses the more vivid imagery from mythology. There is a similarity in the situations, for the gods in Tartarus were there because they warred against the gods in heaven. Unlike the Book of Revelation, the letter does not emphasize the heavenly angels warring against the fallen ones, possibly to avoid too much of an association with pagan myths. See Rev. 12:7-12.

- But, in contrast to pagan myths, which presented a war between gods (and in fact, in the older versions, a war between children and parents) the letter presents the one God as punishing sinful angels by casting them into a prison for final judgment. See Matt. 8:29. One level of the final judgment occurred at the death and Resurrection of Christ, but the final level will occur at the end of this world and the final judgement.

- The Letter of Jude specifically says that the sin of the angels was not keeping to their own domain and dwelling. See Jude 6. The implication is that the fallen angels sought more power than they were meant to have. Possibly because the emphasis here is on false teaching and decadent behavior, this letter does not focus on that point. Both letters say that the angels are in realms of gloom, in contrast with the false happiness they promise.

B. The passage then reflects upon the Great Flood and the rescue of Noah.

- It emphasizes that Noah is a "herald of righteousness," for he was not only righteous in himself, but is an example of

righteousness to all ages.

- The image here is of being rescued from the destruction of this world and sailing into a purified creation. See Catechism 845, 1219. There is also the image of the preparations for the flood, during which Noah and his family no doubt looked foolish to a world that did not understand what would happen soon.

C. The letter spends the greatest time of the rescue of Lot from Sodom and Gomorrah.

1. Lot, the nephew of Abraham, lived in Sodom a time in which the area around it, now the utterly desolate area to the west of the Dead Sea, was fertile and prosperous. But the people other than Lot's family were perverse and violent. As a test, God sent angels to Sodom, but the people tried to commit violence against them. God then sent fire and brimstone to destroy the cities, and the whole land became desolate. See Gen. 18:16-19; 25.

2. The image is that the world now may be prosperous, but to the degree that people remain in their vices, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (and three other cities) will be but an image of the destruction of the sinful generally. See Is. 1:9-10; Jer. 23:14, 49:18, Wis. 10:6-8; Matt. 10:15, 11:23-24.

D. The message is not only that the wicked would be destroyed, but that the just will be delivered into a better creation, purified of sin and in company with the true angels.

E. This warning concludes with emphasis especially against the sins of lust and despising authority.

III. The next section picks up on the theme of the immorality of the false prophets, with emphasis on reviling great things, impurity and greed.

A. It begins by saying that the false teachers revile the "glories," which probably means the angels.

- This passage could mean that the false teachers do not appreciate the angels' power and holiness, see Matt. 13:41-42, 24:31, or that they do not respect the word of God, which is handed on by the ministry of angels, see Heb. 2:2. Some argue that the angels referred to here are fallen angels, and the false teachers do not understand their power to tempt, but the letter would not likely refer the fallen angels as "glories." Rather the condemnation of refusing to respect true angels

continues the theme from the previous passage of despising authority. "The glories" could also mean the heavenly realm in general, which the false teachers downplay.

- The letter points out that the heavenly angels themselves "do not pronounce a reviling judgment on them before the Lord." This passage could mean that the heavenly angels do not judge other angels, but rather leave that judgment to God. That interpretation is consistent with the next passage, which speaks of the false teachers and others sharing the same punishment.

B. The letter goes on to describe the false teachers as acting like animals, for they are controlled by their instincts.

- The implication is that, in throwing off faith, they have not become more human, but rather have rejected what allows them to control their desires and thus truly be human. See Wis. 13:10-14:23; Rom. 1:18-32.

- The image is that, if one gives into instinct, one is like a wild animal that is hunted down and killed, lest it damage others. See Ez. 15:6-8; Matt. 7:19; Luke 3:9; John 15:6

C. The letter says that they show their folly by reviling matters about which they are ignorant. The idea is that they speak ill of such things as the angels, the heavenly realm, or holiness in general because, due to their decadence, they have no experience of them.

D. The letter then describes them as blemishes or stains on the Christian community.

- The immorality and material craftiness of which they are proud are in fact ugly stains in the sight of God, which must be cleansed away. See Jer. 3:2-3; Ez. 20; Zech. 3:3-4; 1 Cor. 5:6-13. The accusations are of lustful eyes, ungoverned passions, inconstancy, and greed.

E. The letter draws upon the image of Balaam, a prophet among the pagans who had real power and contact with God but was willing to sell his abilities for profit.

1. At first, the Moabite king asked Balaam to place a curse upon the Israelites, but he refused because it was not God's will. Then, they paid him to place the curse, and God told him to take the money and do as He commanded. Balaam did

so and began to proceed to the Israelites, but apparently not fully faithful to God. But Balaam's donkey saw an angel ready to slay him, and warned him. Balaam repented and the Lord led him to bless Israel instead. See Num. 22-24. However, later Balaam hatched a plot to have the Moabite women marry Israelite men, and thus corrupt them. After a victory over the Midianites, the allies of the Moabites, the Israelites killed Balaam as punishment. See Num. 31:8, 16.

2. The implication here is that the false teachers may have truly received gifts and abilities from God, but are now perverted them for gain, and leading others into error.

F. The letter then uses three negative images to describe the false teachers.

1. The letter compares them to waterless springs. The implication is that they promise things, such as happiness and freedom, that they cannot deliver. Because the truth and grace of God no longer reside in them, they cannot provide anything of value to another. See Jer. 2:13, 17:13. Compare with Ps. 36:9-10; Is. 55:1-5; John 4:4-42.

2. It then compares the false teachers to mists driven by a storm.

- The idea is that they seem substantial, but their teachings have no more substance than mist and are blown every which way according to fashion or desire. See Eph. 4:11-15; Heb. 13:9, James 1:6.

3. The letter also says that they are destined for the gloom of darkness. There is a contrast here again between the realms of light to which the just are invited and the darkness toward which the perverse travel, both because vision is darkened by sin and because they wish to hide their deeds. See John 3:19-20, 8:12, 12:35-36.

- Sin promises happiness, but there is a depression that comes after it.

G. To emphasize the point of the vanity of the false teachers, the letter speaks of their "empty bombast." The idea is that their words seem clever, but really have little or no substance or thought.

IV. The letter then contrasts the true freedom of Christians to the false freedom of the worldly teachers.

A. The letter warns that the false teachers are seducing the new Christians. It is picking up on the image of the lady of folly in

wisdom literature who promises understanding and pleasure, but delivers death. See Prov. 9:13-18.

B. It speaks of Christians as having escaped from the defilements of the world through Christ.

- The idea is that the realm of sin is a prison of slavery to desire and thus defilement of the glory meant for us, and that Christ grants freedom from it. See John 8:31-38; Rom. 6, 8:1-17; Gal. 5:1.
- Freedom is the ability to participate in God's creative goodness. See James 1:25; Catechism 1741-42. What the false teachers are promoting is simply doing as one desires, making one a slave of desires, which, as St. Paul notes are themselves subject to death. See Rom. 6:16.

C. To emphasize the degraded state of those who return to sin, having previously left it for Christ, St. Peter deliberately uses a revolting image of a dog returning to vomit or a pig to filth. He is picking up on an image from the Book of Proverbs and elsewhere regarding various signs of folly, including committing the same blunders over and again. See Prov. 26:11