
The Sure Decline

2 Peter 2:1-22

Russ Kennedy

Cultural decline?

...into liberalism and progressivism.

...or into conservatism?

...into carnality and immorality

...or into moralism?

Religious decline?

...into liberalism and progressivism.

...or into conservatism?

...into carnality and immorality

...or into moralism?

Personal decline?

...don't care about truth?

...don't care about others?

...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. But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you.... 2 Peter 1:20-2:1a (ESV)

Israel in the Old Testament was often led into false reliances and foolish relationships through the false prophets. What was needed was a total submission to the Word of God they had.

The fact that there were false prophets in the Old Testament age reminds us that there will be false teachers in the present age.

Their Clear Description**(v. 1-3a)**

In their description, Peter warns of what they will be like and how we can recognize them.

¹ But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. ² And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. ³ And in their greed they will exploit you with false words.

Teach Heresies**(v. 1)**

They will secretly teach heresies. The word secretly may also be translated, “cleverly”. The point is that they teach error in a deceitful way, either by teaching it secretly or by teaching it cleverly. Their errors may be so great as to deny the Lordship of the one who has redeemed them. The result is they themselves, bring upon themselves, sure and certain ruin.

In Galatians 2:4, Paul uses the same kind of language to point to the “false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery—to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.” The situation there even involved Peter who was drawn aside by them.

Now, the question is sometimes raised, “Are these false teacher’s lost? If so, how is it that they are redeemed?” The text is clear. Some of these false teachers are bought, have been redeemed. In fact, what is so egregious about their error is that they deny the sovereignty of their savior. Is it possible for people who are Christians to teach errors? Yes, it is. If nothing else, because this text says so. And we all know people who clearly are believers and yet teach what is not true.

Lead in Sensuality**(v. 2)**

These false teachers lead others down the path of sensuality. False beliefs expose them to controlling wants and enslaving lusts. Because teachers are often not only believed, but also followed in their living people go down the same paths of sensuality. This word first refers to sensual in the sense of being physically oriented – loving the fine, expensive, the silks. It also means sexual as well. One does not have to look around much in modern religious circles to find this. Down through history and no less in the last 50 years, we have seen false teachers, enslaved in sensuality leading people astray.

The sad effect is that the world is given opportunity to blaspheme. It holds up the faith to ridicule. It creates hurdles to overcome in evangelism. It leaves destroyed lives in its wake. It demeans true Christian leadership. It defaces instead of adorning the gospel. Sad.

Exploit Believers (v. 3a)

These false teachers use false words to take advantage of believers. They covet their wealth and their women, exploiting for their own use. Now remember, among these false teachers are some who actually are believers. They are sheep just acting like and living like wolves. Here are sheep in wolves clothing.⁵

This is an awful yet accurate picture we are familiar with today. May God grant us the grace to heed this warning and the discernment to see through people like this.

Their Certain Destruction (v. 3b-10)

In the midst of judging sinners God rescues His people.

Assertion of the Truth (v. 3b)

Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.

It sometimes takes a long time for God to judge the wicked. But that does not make His judgment less sure. From the early ages of the Bible, God has declared His judgment and condemnation of the false teachers who are unbelievers.

Examples to Consider (v. 4-8)

In proof, Peter offers a long series of “if’s” as examples to consider. What Peter wants you to do (and I don’t have time to do) is to send you back to every one of these Old Testament texts to study them out and understand them as he does.

⁴ For *if* God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment; ⁵ *if* he did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; ⁶ *if* by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes he condemned them to extinction, making them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly; ⁷ and *if* he rescued righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked ⁸ (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);

Rebellion - Fallen Angels (v. 4)

God has chained and restrained the fallen angels waiting until the final day of judgment. So, rebellion against God may wait a long time for its final judgment.

Unrighteousness - Pre-flood World (v. 5)

God waited almost 120 years after announcing that judgment would come. But the flood did come and destroy all breathing life on the earth except for Noah and his family. So, great wickedness and concourse with spirit beings will certainly be judged.

Perversion - Sodom and Gomorrah (v. 6)

God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, two cities known for their promotion and practice of homosexuality. So God will judge those who practice sexual perversions.

Preaching Righteousness – Noah

In the midst of great worldwide judgment, God saved Noah. While building the boat that preserved them through the flood, Noah preached righteousness. So, while awaiting judgment to come, we are to be faithful to what God has given us to do.

Distressing Situation – Lot

In what is a surprising text, we find that Lot was not so wicked as we tend to make him. He lived in Sodom. But he was righteous. His soul was disturbed at all the sensuality around him. So God rescued him and his daughters by the call and hand of two angels.

Now let us not forget our context:

We have what we need to live a life of godliness through the promises of God given in His Word.

We have godly virtues and qualities that we are to build into our lives because we have the promises through the Word.

We have the sure Word which was given by God by His origination and by His Spirit.

We will have false teachers who, like the false prophets of old, will bring heresy into the church, lead people astray in sin and sensuality and will take advantage of people.

Their condemnation is just as sure as these examples from the Old Testament from which we are to draw some important conclusions:

Lessons Learned**(v. 9-10)**

The conclusion is drawn in the form of lessons to be learned.

⁹ *then* the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment, ¹⁰ and especially those who indulge in the lust of defiling passion and despise authority.

How to presently rescue

God knows how to presently rescue his people. Noah and Lot show us that His people will be delivered from the judgment that will come upon the wicked.

How to patiently judge

God knows how to patiently to judge at the right time. While it may seem long and feels like it is unjust, there will come a day when the wrath of God will fall on this present evil world and ultimately upon all those who have rejected and rebelled against the Lord, living in sin.

Their Characteristic Depravity

(v. 11-16)

How deep and deadly is their depravity. Here are very strong words that make us uncomfortable in our day.

Bold and willful, they do not tremble as they blaspheme the glorious ones,¹¹ whereas angels, though greater in might and power, do not pronounce a blasphemous judgment against them before the Lord.¹² But these, like irrational animals, creatures of instinct, born to be caught and destroyed, blaspheming about matters of which they are ignorant, will also be destroyed in their destruction,¹³ suffering wrong as the wage for their wrongdoing. They count it pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are blots and blemishes, reveling in their deceptions, while they feast with you.¹⁴ They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed. Accursed children!¹⁵ Forsaking the right way, they have gone astray. They have followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved gain from wrongdoing,¹⁶ but was rebuked for his own transgression; a speechless donkey spoke with human voice and restrained the prophet's madness.

In Blasphemy

(v. 11-12)

These false teachers are bold and willful. They are “in your face”, stubborn and selfish. In a sort of arrogant irrationality, they will personally attack evil spirits rather than recognizing the terrible danger even good angels would be exposed to. The result is that they are judged by coming under their power and their punishment.

In Revelry

(v. 13b)

They act like this while behaving like animals. Yet they pretend to be believers and participate in the Lord's Table. They are so brazen that they take joy in their deceits while they act like they are fooling the church. As a result they are cancerous sores and bleeding bruises on the sweet fellowship of communion.

In Adultery

(v. 14)

What a graphic description of their lustful lives. Eyes filled with adultery, always on the lookout for a woman to have sex with. Never satisfied, they seduce others into the same sensual lifestyle. Their hearts are sloshing over with greed, covetousness – desiring women who are not their wives. Thus, they are an “accursed brood.” [Carson]

In Straying

(v. 15-16)

Balaam is a classic example of a false teacher, who was among the people of God, who for money, tried to destroy Israel through prophecy. When he was thwarted in that, he did so morally. As one commentator noted, “Balaam is the prototype of the false teacher who seeks rewards or popularity by persuading people that God's standards can be lowered.”⁶ God help us if we get to the point that God has to rebuke us through a dumb donkey.⁷

What is astonishing about this description is that it fits so much of what is going on today. And it goes further...

Their Carnal Defilement**(v. 17-22)**

In strong and graphic language, we are shown their defilement.

¹⁷ These are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm. For them the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved. ¹⁸ For, speaking loud boasts of folly, they entice by sensual passions of the flesh those who are barely escaping from those who live in error. ¹⁹ They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved. ²⁰ 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. 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. 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."

Empty Promises**leading to ever Enslaving Passions****(v. 17-19)**

These false teachers are rainless clouds, waterless springs, dry wells. They hold out empty promises. They are deliver something very different from what they promise. Boldly, confidently they hold out the promise of freedom to enjoy sensual pleasures while they themselves are enslaved to carnal passions. You can see this practically any time you turn on TBN. They have Christianized the good life. They are often enslaved to the sensual pleasures of the flesh. And this even more so with the cults and the apostate churches.

Entangling Practices**illustrated by an Enlightening Proverb****(v. 20-22)**

Here may be another indication that many of these false teachers are believers who have gone woefully astray. But it also may indicate the temporary deliverance that comes to awakened but unregenerate unbelievers. Their initial contact with the gospel delivers them from their sins. But then they go back to them and are often irreversible entangled in them. The result is a sad, sordid and sin sodden state. They are like cleaned up pigs who head for the mud.

Reflect and Respond

What should we do with such a graphic text?

USE THIS AS A MEANS OF IDENTIFYING FALSE TEACHERS. Not all false teachers are readily seen by what they teach. But they often may be spotted by their lifestyle. Here is a helpful diagnostic tool. Use it well.

USE THIS TO WARN CHRISTIAN FRIENDS ABOUT THE RELIGIOUS CLUBS AND CULTS THEY ARE INVOLVED IN. Sometimes, you just have to ask, “Are these paragraphs true of your “church” leaders?” Sometimes the kindest thing we can do is to be as plain and pointed as Peter is here. What if your friend or family member becomes enslaved to sin and ends up in hell because of their religious affiliations?

HAVE YOU BOUGHT INTO THE KIND OF FALSE TEACHING ILLUSTRATED HERE? Have you moved toward a sensual, pleasure oriented lifestyle thinking this is what Christian freedom means? Does the Emergent Church entice you? Maybe the new promises of the mystic experience of the Catholic religion attract you? Does prosperity teaching tempt you? Do you ever just wonder? Don’t their prominent leaders sound OK? What will they actually deliver?

So we are called through texts like this:

To live under clear, practical doctrine...

To live with real, Biblical discernment...

To live by vital, personal determination...

May God grant it to be so.

Notes

⁵ This is an alternative understanding of this verse and this whole section. Here are the exegetical and theological reasons I have adopted this interpretation.

1. The Bible gives us a category of people who are believers but are teaching error.
2. This text simply says that there are those who “are bought” by their Master/Lord who go so far as to deny His Lordship. The word “bought” here generally is used to refer to being redeemed (Galatians 3:13; 1 Corinthians 6:20; et al.).
3. The text points back to Balaam as in illustration of the way they have gone (Numbers 22-24). Balaam appears to be a Gentile who knows and fears the Lord (Numbers 22:18). He refuses to speak except what “the Lord puts in his mouth.” (Numbers 22:38; 23:5, 12, 26; 24:12-13). He is both constrained by the Lord and used by the Lord to speak blessing. But, he also teaches Barak how Israel can become corrupted and eventually destroyed: through introducing immorality into the camp.
4. The motif here is that the Lord knows how to rescue the righteous even in the midst of the wicked. Lot is brought forward as a righteous person who was rescued by God, almost against his will. Noah is brought into the text because his righteousness was easily seen. Lot comes into the text because his is not. Balaam is the other named person – a false prophet who nevertheless owns God as his Lord (Numbers 22:18).
5. Three other interpretations are put forward:
 - a. The state of these false teachers is undetermined until the judgment day. This is a text similar to those in the book of Hebrews (like chapter 6). The question of whether they are actually saved is not clear in the text since it also appears that there is great condemnation and destruction coming upon them.
 - b. These false teachers are lost. Lost people have been “bought”. So this text is often presented as a counter argument to particular redemption. Biblically, I cannot see how people who have been redeemed can be lost.
 - c. The word “bought” does not refer to “redeemed”. So the problem above is solved. However, on what basis is the word here not “redeemed” when in all other contexts where it is referring to salvation, it means redeemed?

The Bible has this large category of false teachers, most of whom are not redeemed by the Lord. Among the false teachers are some who have been redeemed. We can illustrate this by the Judaizers. They taught a false doctrine. Yet, among them were church leaders in Jerusalem who had formed a sect there. We can also illustrate this with a modern day theologian like Charles Ryrie who denies the need for bowing to the Lordship of Christ at salvation or frankly, many reformed theologians who teach the false doctrine of the baptism of infants.

⁶ Carson, D. A. *New Bible Commentary : 21st Century Edition*. 4th ed. Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994.

⁷ Balaam is also going to be important for the next text for his last prophecy points to the same period of time Peter will take up in chapter 3.