

James Philip Bible Readings

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THE BOOK of 2 Peter

The fact that this epistle was written shortly before Peter's martyrdom (1:14) lends a particular solemnity to its contents. The Angus Bible Handbook comments, 'We treasure up the last words of great men. In the immediate prospect of martyrdom holiness appears to Peter of the first importance and steadfastness the greatest blessing'. In the first epistle he exhorts to patience under persecution and in this he exhorts to perseverance in truth amidst prevailing error and practical infidelity. The great need, he indicates, is a true and deepening knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and this is the keynote of the whole epistle, as also the Apostle's final word (3:18) to the Church of God.

1) 1:1

The atmosphere and tone of 2 Peter is so different from that of 1 Peter that the epistle has often been doubted as not being a genuine product of the Apostle's pen. This is scarcely a subject to spend much time discussing in Bible Readings of this nature, and reference should be made to the various Bible Handbooks and Dictionaries which argue this matter. We may say this in passing, that the difference between the two epistles can be accounted for quite simply by the difference in subject matter and purpose. One can easily see how on two different occasions the style and even the way of putting things could differ from one another. One thing is clear: 2 Peter belongs to the particular section of New Testament writings which lay emphasis upon the dangers of heresy and the need to guard against it. These writings - the Pastoral Epistles and the General Epistles, like James, John and Jude - share common ground with 2 Peter here. Indeed, Jude and 2 Peter are so similar that many scholars have thought that there is a link between them, with Peter borrowing from Jude, or vice versa. In 1 Peter the emphasis is on patience under persecution. In 2 Peter it is on perseverance in truth amidst prevailing error and practical infidelity. False teachers were by false doctrine and evil example troubling the early Church, and the apostle writes to warn them. The keynotes of the epistle, as we shall see, are holiness of life, knowledge of the truth, and the expected coming of the Lord.

2) 1:1

The Pastoral Epistles provide a useful background to this study. The reading on Titus 3:10, 11 is particularly relevant: 'The meaning of the word 'heretic' is primarily 'one who causes divisions', and the root idea is of 'choosing on one's own' to depart from the truth and propagate different teaching. Thus heresy comes to mean false teaching. But the important thing to realise is that heresy begins with a moral problem, self-will, self-assertion, self-display, and it is this that leads to the division. We should note particularly that Paul speaks of admonition for such people. We must not argue with them. It is warning they need, for they are in the grip of something very terrible. It is well for us to recognise the true nature of false teaching and of divisions, and to have the courage to call a very ugly thing by its proper name. The reference to first and second admonitions takes us back to our Lord's words in Matthew 18:15-17. The word 'reject' means 'shun' or 'avoid'. Since our Lord Himself advocates such treatment, we can scarcely consider this to be harsh or unjust; it is simply realistic, in that it recognises that nothing can be done with such a person while in such a spirit. His self-condemnation does not mean that he consciously confesses his evil and sin, but rather that his attitude of self-will and perversion shows him to all who have any discernment to be utterly in the wrong, and therefore meriting the divine censure to which by his intractable impenitence he exposes himself.'

3) 1:1-4

As in the first epistle, Peter says so much in the brief compass of a few verses that we are obliged to tarry here for a little time lest we miss their import. Notice 'a servant and an apostle' (1). It is in keeping with the moral challenge contained in the epistle as a whole that Peter should emphasise first that he is a servant of Christ, then an apostle. Obedience comes before commission in the Christian life and must remain its continuing inspiration and driving force. 'Through' in 1 should read 'in'. Peter means that the gift of faith is bestowed in the righteousness of God. When studying Romans 3:21 we suggested that the 'righteousness of God' should be thought of as 'God's way of justifying the ungodly', and it is when our hearts are arrested and captured by that dynamic that faith is born in us. In the truest and deepest sense - as Paul is careful to point out - faith is the gift of God, it is given to us to believe, and that gift comes to us in the righteousness of God.

Similarly, 'through' in 2 should read 'in'. The meaning is that grace and peace are multiplied to us in the experience of knowing the Lord. The more intimately we know Him, the more His grace and peace will be ours. Indeed, grace and peace should not be thought of as things, apart from Him. Knowing Him - that is grace; He is our peace. To know Him is everything in the Christian life. As Jesus Himself puts it, 'This is life eternal, that they might know Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ Whom Thou hast sent (John 17:3). 'Lord, make Thyself known to us, that we may come to know Thee as we ought'.

4) 1:1-4

Peter continues and amplifies the previous Note's thought in 3 and 4, and again emphasises the centrality of knowledge of the Lord in the life of the believer. Knowledge of Him provides all that is necessary for the attainment of true godliness of life. One can sense the urgency of Peter's insistence upon this, and in view of the prevailing infidelity of his time and the growing temptations to fall away that faced the saints, we can well understand it. We may also hear an echo from his own earlier experience in this. After his denial of Christ and consequent restoration, Christ went to the heart of the matter in his thrice repeated question to him, 'Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou Me?' It was lack of the intimate knowledge of and love for Christ of which he speaks here that was the cause of his downfall.

The 'exceeding great and precious promises' are given with a view to securing the life of godliness (3), and in what follows in 4 we see the way of godliness as being something supernatural, namely, deliverance and emancipation from the corruption and pollution of sin (J.B. Phillips translates it, 'the inevitable disintegration that lust produces in the world'), and the reception, the becoming partakers of, the divine nature. Godliness of life is something God imparts, and it is through the promises that He does so, promises which find their fulfilment in Jesus Christ. It is therefore a question of laying hold of the promises in living faith, and appropriating their bountiful provision for all our needs. What is more, as Isaiah indicates, God wants us to remind Him of them. 'Put me in remembrance' He cries (Isaiah 43:26). We may thus safely assume that what He has promised, He will not fail to perform. (See Luke 1:45)

5) 1:5

'Beside this' is better translated 'For this very reason' and points back to what has been said about the promises of God. Peter's meaning: Because God has given these promises concerning godliness you must exercise your faith to the utmost (giving all diligence) to appropriate the graces of virtue, knowledge, etc., for these constitute godliness. It is not that the Apostle is suggesting that since God has done His part, we must now do ours, or that we can add anything to faith as if faith as a divine gift were deficient and had to be supplemented by human effort. His words would be better translated 'Supply to your faith virtue' in the sense that 'our faith must be of the kind that shows or expresses itself in the following qualities.'

It will be useful to pause here to point out the relationship between the divine work of grace and human effort. The Bible does not teach that in salvation God does His part, and we do our part. Salvation is all of God, and we are not to interpret faith as being our 'share' in the work, but rather we should think of it in this way: When the gospel of grace 'comes home' to our hearts, and we are gripped and mastered by it, we hear it, that is faith. And it is the gospel itself that imparts it. What we do, the response we make, is simply God Himself working in us. Thus Paul can say, 'work out your own salvation with fear and trembling' - as if it were all a question of what we do - but adds significantly, 'for it is God that worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure', indicating that behind all we do, God is at work. We are not saved by believing, we are saved by Christ in believing, and this principle holds good throughout the whole of Christian life and experience.

6) 1:5

We turn then to these practical excellencies of Christian character, and examine them in detail. There is a sense in which, being in Christ we must require these qualities to appear in our lives. That is the exercise of faith to which Peter is calling us here. Virtue is a quality of wide and extensive meaning. Its basic idea is moral worth, and includes the thought of firmness and integrity of purpose and dependability. It is the word we would use if we were translating the phrase: 'He's a quality man'. When virtue is evident in a life, it is moral stature that we are conscious of, more than anything else.

Knowledge may refer to that personal knowledge of Christ already mentioned in the opening verses of the epistle, but it may also be taken to mean discernment, and this is certainly a quality much to be desired in Christian life: There are so many perplexities and pitfalls for the unwary and the unwise that without it there is every possibility of being seriously beguiled. It is this quality that Paul also asks us to cultivate, in Ephesians 5:15-17, when he says, 'See that ye walk circumspectly'. There are many situations in our experience - the sudden emergency, the unforeseen complication, the urgent appeal for advice and counsel - in which level-headed wisdom and true perception are called for. How often we look back and say, 'How I wish I had not done that, ' see how foolish and ill-advised it was'. It is easy to be wise after the event, but God wants us to be wisely discerning before, not after. Not only so: we are warned that in the latter days there will be a danger of even the elect being deceived (cf 1 Timothy 4:1), both in doctrine and in practice, and it is sadly and disturbingly true in our time that much that is regarded by the undiscerning as spiritual should rightly be called by a much less worthy name. Not for nothing does the Apostle desire to see this kind of knowledge deepening in our lives: nor does it grow except it proceed from the sheer moral worth that a deep work of grace produces in us. The order of the words, as always in Scripture, is very significant!

7) 1:6

Temperance, in scriptural usage has a much wider meaning than we give it today, and applies to the whole of life. It is self-command, self-control that Peter has in view, and we might fairly paraphrase the meaning of the word as 'getting the mastery or dominion inside oneself'. It is a spiritual and moral training and discipline, touching every department of our being. Self-control in this sense is possible only within the life of faith. It is only when a man comes under new management and is governed by a power outside himself that the lawless instincts and passions within him are really subdued. This is indeed the great goal of salvation. Man was made in the image of God, a unity and harmony of body, soul and spirit. But sin disrupted that harmony, and war within ensued, civil war, and the lower orders in man usurped authority over the higher. This is our common lot today, with the physical desirous of dominating the mental, and both physical and mental contriving to dominate the spiritual: A man at the mercy of his bodily appetites and passions is a sorry sight indeed. Now self-control means that the original order and purpose of God for man is restored, the mutinous and rebellious parts are put down and kept in their proper place, and those that were from the beginning meant to rule given new authority, namely, spirit, conscience, will. This, says Peter, is what a true faith will produce in us, and we can readily see how the preceding qualities assist in this, for virtue, which is manly energy and resoluteness of purpose, will give us the necessary impetus: We shall never be in control of ourselves unless we have a holy determination to be so! And knowledge which is discernment will make us clear-sighted enough to realise that God has a purpose for us that is higher and nobler than the mere self-indulgent gratification of our instincts. Surely such knowledge will be a sufficient incentive to subdue everything in us that might hinder the realisation of the divine plan and intention for our lives.

8) 1:6

These worths are too important to pass over lightly. Each of them could be the starting point for a whole Bible study in itself! Alexander Maclaren, a prince of expositors in a former day, writes, of the first three, 'The world is full of difficulties, therefore we need manly vigour. It is full of illusions, therefore we need to be wise to discern between good and evil. It is full of temptations, therefore we need self-command:' And now, patience, which means rather more in biblical thought than we mean nowadays by the word. The Greek would be better translated endurance, and it is the virtue shown by martyrs as they stand firm and steadfast in face of all manner of opposition. Hebrews 11:32-40 illustrates well this 'patience' of the saints. Someone has said it is that virtue which teaches us to head the ship right into the teeth of the gale, and battle towards port: This needs to be remembered: It is always a temptation to lose heart when we are 'up against it', and unless we have a fighting spirit in face of tribulation we shall certainly lose out spiritually. A great part of our problem is often that we are too easily discouraged, and here is the antidote. We must endure: Furthermore - and this is one of the paradoxes of Christian experience - it is in these very adverse circumstances that endurance is developed: The very conditions into which God thrusts us and expects us to show endurance are the factors which produce it in us, more and more: It is tribulation that worketh patience (Romans 5:3). You put temper into the steel by thrusting it into the fire; the fire takes away its brittleness, and makes it difficult to break. That is what we as Christians need. You see the pattern? God is forging character, and the lineaments of character are not stuck on, but burned into our lives.

9) 1:6

Next, godliness: this word (sometimes the noun, and sometimes the adjective) appears twenty-nine times in Scripture. Of these references all but four appear in the New Testament, and by far the greater number in the last books written - 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, 2 Peter, 3 John. It is as if the apostles were all alike saying, 'In view of all our teaching, and all the dangers that you face, godliness of life is the only safeguard, the only bulwark, the only testimony in a godless world.'

Notice the position Peter gives to it in his 'catalogue' of Christian graces - it stands, so to speak, at the summit to which the previous qualities lead up, and from which the subsequent ones flow. It would be difficult to find anything better, or as good, by way of commentary, than the following by Alexander Maclaren, in a book entitled 'Seven Christian Graces': 'It is as in some Alpine range, where the side that faces the north presents rugged cliffs and sparse vegetation and close-knit strength to breast the tempest and live among the snows; while the southern side has gentler slopes and a more fertile soil, a richer vegetation and a summer sky. Here on the one side you have these severe and self-regarding graces, fronting a world full of antagonism and evil; and on the other side you have gentler graces, fronting a world full of men that need care and help; whilst above them all towers the great summit that points to the stars and gleams up amidst the blue; from which flow down on the one side the streams of love and pity, and on the other run down the cliffs that front the stormy north. In the beginning, faith; at the end, love; in the centre, godliness: even as the type and example of both are found in the Christ of Whom long ago it was said: 'The Lord God will come with strong hand: He shall carry the lambs in His bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young' (Isaiah 40:10-11).

10) 1:7

Both brotherly-kindness and love refer to the same sentiment. The difference is one of direction - brotherly-kindness is especially towards those that are of the household of faith, whereas love is towards all, including those that are outwith the family of God. With regard to the first, Matthew Henry says, 'We are children of the same Father, servants of the same Master, members of the same family, travellers to the same country, heirs of the same inheritance - in view of this, should we not love our brothers?'

Notice that both follow godliness. Godliness is never a solitary or selfish thing. When God fills the heart with Himself, He makes more room for others than ever before. An essential ingredient of godliness is sympathy with men. And it is significant, in this connection, to see that before godliness in Peter's list come qualities that refer to a man's attitude to himself, while after, those referring to his attitude to others - a heart of steel towards himself, and a heart of love towards others. This is a combination that appears frequently in Scripture. Christ is both the Lion of the tribe of Judah, and the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. The strength of the lion is seen in the cleansing of the temple, His tenderness and compassion in dealing with sinners and broken lives. It is important not only to see that these two qualities must combine in Christian life, but also that the tenderness flows from the strength. Tenderness is not a weak or unmanly thing, and we may not confuse it with soft sentimentality. Only the strong can be truly tender and loving, and we may gauge the 'strength' of our godliness by the measure of tenderness of spirit which our lives show forth.

11) 1:8-9

Peter makes it plain that the cultivation of these graces is not optional for the Christian. They are not only to be in us, they are to abound, and nothing less than this will ensure fruitfulness in Christian life. They are, so to speak, fruit-bearing graces, and we may recall solemnly the words of our Lord Himself in John 15 when He warns us that the branches of the vine that do not bear fruit will be taken away. Is this, we wonder, behind Peter's words in 9? At all events, to have 'no eye' for these essential lineaments of Christian character is to have misunderstood the real meaning of salvation and the true design of the gospel. According to Peter, and if we understand aright here, being purged from our old sins ought to involve the birth and growth of such graces in our lives. And in this he concurs with our Lord's own words in the Sermon on the Mount, 'By their fruits ye shall know them': If the fruit is not to be seen, it may well be questioned whether any real work of grace has taken place, and to this Peter next turns, in 10, to which we come in the next reading.

12) 1:10-11

The solemn challenge in 10 is couched in the same terms as 5 and it is clear that, for Peter, the way to make sure is by 'doing' these things, that is, seeing that our faith is of the sort that expresses itself in these qualities. This does not mean that we are saved by our own efforts or good works, but it does insist that real faith always produces them, and that when they are absent, faith is absent too. This is the explanation of the disturbing emphasis Jesus lays on works in the parable of judgment in Matthew 25:31-46 - it is not that Jesus is teaching that we may be saved through doing works of goodness and mercy, for that would be to contradict His own teaching and the teaching of the Spirit through the apostles throughout the New Testament, but that the test of works will be applied to prove whether faith has been real. The words 'I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat....' and 'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren....' reveal quite simply and clearly that their faith was of the sort that expressed itself in brotherly-kindness and love, and consequently they made their calling and election sure, and thus, as Matthew 25:34 indicates, an abundant entrance into the everlasting kingdom of Christ was ministered unto them: 'Come ye blessed of My Father.' How wonderful, and how solemn!

13) 1:12-15

Peter feels it incumbent on himself to emphasise these things because they are of eternal import, the more so because he realised that he himself was approaching the eternal world (14). This should give his words a particularly solemn authority and weight. A man standing on the borders of eternity is apt to be very clear in his mind as to what is of final importance in life. It is as if Peter, about to pass into the realms of eternal day, and already, as it were, beginning to see 'face to face', and no longer 'through a glass darkly' were throwing back a cry of solemn exhortation to us who are following on, 'Concentrate on character, concentrate on character, it is the only thing that will stand when you get as far as this'. 15 refers surely to his epistle, which permanently records this urgent counsel of his, and by it, 'he being dead yet speaketh'. This verse introduces a passage containing important statements about the inspiration of Holy Scripture in general, and it is significant that Peter attaches such significance to the reading of his own epistle in this connection. It is certainly true that only when our hearts are preoccupied and saturated with the Word of life will the qualities of practical godliness gain the ascendance in our lives. And that is Peter's concern.

14) 1:16-21

The reality of the eternal world is underlined by the apostles' preaching of the coming again of our Lord in power and glory, and Peter emphasises that the certainty of that glorious prospect is proved, first, by the Transfiguration, which was an anticipation, a foretaste, of His coming glory, and, second, by the utterances of the prophets who predicted it. We did not preach, says the Apostle, as those that had concocted some fantastic tale about the return of Christ in glory; we saw His glory, we had a foretaste, a blessed and glorious glimpse, of what it will be like on that great Day. How could we doubt His return in glory, we who have already been eye-witnesses of His majesty? This is one of the passages of Scripture which give an unerring indication of how a great biblical theme should be interpreted and understood. Whatever else we may take out of the story of the Transfiguration we may take it as authoritative that it was an earnest of His second Advent. On the mount, three men only viewed His kingly radiance, but when He comes to reign, every eye shall see Him, and amid the heavens bursting into light in the blaze of His glory a voice will be heard, like the sound of many waters, a voice that will be the delight or the terror of the universe, saying, 'This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased'. And we shall see His face. And we shall say, too this is our God, we have waited for Him: Glorious, blessed prospect! Even so, come Lord Jesus!

15) 1:16-21

The utterance of the prophets who predicted Christ's advent in glory are to be taken as even surer evidence of the truth of it than the fact of the Transfiguration, because men of old spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit, and the vision on the Mount was not as clear a promise of His coming as the plain statements of Scripture are. The beauty of Peter's description of the Scriptures is some indication of the reverence and love he had for them (19). Let us not miss his meaning the Scriptures will shed forth light and radiance in the darkness of the world and in our hearts 'until the sunrise of glory'. The old Book will never lose its power to guide, and bless, and comfort and inspire and heal, until the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads. We may safely trust its counsel, and will do well to take heed to its exhortations.

20 is difficult, but the meaning seems to be that what the prophets communicated was not of their own disclosure, that is, it was not revealed or originated by them. (The word translated 'interpretation' occurs only here in the New Testament, and literally means unloosing, unfolding, disclosing). This accords with the phrase in 21, 'not.... by the will of man'. The prophets were moved by the Holy Ghost, it was He Who spoke in them and through them. The picture given by the Greek word for 'moved' is that of a vessel borne along by the wind, and this accords well with Paul's statement in 2 Timothy 3:16 that all Scripture is 'God-breathed'. Just as God breathed into man the breath of life and man became a living soul, so God breathed into holy men of old and made their utterance the living word of God. If this be so, we may well pay heed to the Scriptures and rest upon their absolute authority. We dare not do otherwise.

16) 2:1-3

The warnings against false teachers follow naturally after what Peter has said about the true prophets of God. Wherever and whenever God has spoken, Satan has tried to counteract the living truth with his lies. This is a greater danger today than some seem to think. False sects abound in our time and their persistent door-to-door visitation makes it advisable for us to be on our guard against them. Many of them share common ground in denying the Deity and Godhead of Christ, thereby undermining and destroying the only true basis for atonement, and leading to views of salvation that are often the antithesis of the clear-cut and unambiguous testimony of the early Church that there is 'none other Name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved' save the Name of Jesus'.

Peter has already given us an indication of how to recognise, and deal with, false teachers. We may apply their teaching to the touchstone of scriptural teaching concerning Christ in His Person and Work. But more. He asserts here (2) that there is a connection between false doctrine and wrong living ('pernicious' should read 'lascivious'). When a man strays from the truth of God, it is very often not an intellectual or doctrinal problem, but a moral one, that lies behind his declension. The word 'heretic' primarily means one who causes divisions, and the root idea is that he 'chooses on his own' to depart from the truth and propagate different teaching. Hence heresy comes to mean false teaching. The important thing to remember is that heresy begins with a moral problem, self-will, self-assertion, self-display, and it is this that Peter has in mind here.

17) 2:4-9

This is a difficult passage in its construction, and a glance at it as a whole will be necessary before dealing in detail with its various parts, so as to see the gist of Peter's argument. The starting point is the last phrase of 3 - 'whose judgment...' It is the certainty of coming judgment on the false prophets and teachers that is in the Apostle's mind, and he takes three instances from the past to prove it. The 'if' in 4 applies to each of the three illustrations and the statement in 9 completes the sentence. It is really a continuing principle that is being stated. 'This is how it has happened in the past, and this is how it will be now'. If God spared not the wicked but delivered the righteous in the past, then (9) He will deliver the godly out of temptation and reserve the unjust unto judgment today also. The thought of judgment may be grim and frightening to our minds, but it should be clear to us from this passage that if right is to be vindicated at all and wrong put down, then judgment is a necessity.

18) 2:4-9

It is not certain what the phrase 'the angels that sinned' refers to (4). Two interpretations are possible: first, that it refers to a revolt of angelic beings prior to the history of man, headed by Lucifer, son of the morning (see Isaiah 14:12ff) thus constituting the world of evil spirits now arrayed against the purposes of God. The second suggestion is that it refers to the passage in Genesis 6:1, 2 which has been interpreted as indicating an unhallowed and illicit union between angelic beings and the daughters of men.

'Noah the eighth person' (5) is a literal translation of the idiomatic phrase which means 'Noah and seven others' (see 1 Peter 3:20). Peter calls him a preacher of righteousness and if we take this along with the reference in the first epistle (3:20) to the longsuffering of God we have a remarkable picture of evangelistic activity in that ancient time.

Lot (7, 8) makes a poor showing in the Old Testament record, living on a far lower level than the saintly Abraham, but he was within the Covenant and as such was preserved. We should learn from this that there is an infinite qualitative distinction between even bad believers and the best of unbelievers. This is not to excuse careless living in believers, nor does the Bible ever do so. Such, as Paul makes clear in 1 Corinthians 3:15, shall suffer loss, and be saved, yet so as by fire. But they shall be saved, whereas unbelievers will be lost, eternally.

19) 2:10-15a

If we are tempted to gasp at the vehemence of Peter's denunciations of these evil men, we should remember that he has in mind the deadly danger they were proving to the very life and existence of the early Church. Christ Himself taught that it was better for a man to have a millstone hung round his neck and be cast into the midst of the sea than that he should harm any of His 'little ones', and it is just this sentiment that the Apostle is giving expression to here. We note once more the combination of false doctrine and wrong living. In relation to 10b and 11, one thinks of Paul's description in Romans 3 of the ungodly, which he sums up in the significant phrase, 'there is no fear of God before their eyes'. Peter uses the phrase 'gone astray' in 15a and the whole passage indicates the terrifying possibilities that are involved. What we need to realise is that in going astray, in deliberately stepping out of the divine will, we set in train a chain of events which presently we are quite powerless to control and which gather momentum as time goes on. It is this that explains the extremes of sin to which these evil teachers had gone in Peter's day. It is the essence of sin that it gets out of hand, and this is why we must learn to dread it, and shun it, especially in its subtly attractive guises.

20) 2:15-16

The story of Balaam (recorded in Numbers 22, 25) is one given unusual prominence in the later writings of the New Testament (see Jude 11 and Revelation 2:14). Balaam was undoubtedly a real prophet, but he succumbed to the temptation that filthy lucre presented, and greed of gain was his undoing. He deliberately turned from what he knew to be right from unworthy motives, and brought himself to a dishonoured end. Peter could scarcely have found a more apt illustration for his purpose of showing the ultimate doom of false teachers. Notice that he speaks of the 'madness' of the prophet in 16. It is a well-chosen word, for it is a satanic frenzy that grips men who 'sell themselves' to sin. They are no longer 'themselves', but possessed by an evil spirit that drives them mercilessly on their disastrous course: Indeed, this unholy 'drive' is a characteristic of false teachers; there is an evil fanaticism about them that is entirely alien to the good Spirit of God, and this should help us to identify them and discern between the true and the false. We are to try the spirits whether they be of God, and this is one way that we may do so.

21) 2:17-19

The need for true discernment is all the more evident from these verses. There is a certain fascination about these false teachers, says Peter (19), for what they say sounds impressive and spiritual at first. It is only at a later stage (and often by then people are ensnared) that they are seen to be what they are, empty and vain. 'Wells without water' is a particularly graphic description. They have no power, in spite of their great swelling words, to give the water of life to thirsty souls. They promise liberty, but being in bondage themselves to Satan they can only serve to ensnare their victim also.

This raises a general question for us also. Are we able to distinguish between what sounds impressive and spiritual, but is in fact carnal and fleshly, and true spiritual ministry? We must certainly beware of the hypercritical spirit and resist the temptation to sit in judgment on a man's ministry, but it is very necessary, amid the welter of differing emphases that are made today, to discern that all is not gold that glitters, and to distinguish between a ministry that breaks the true bread of life to men and one that is merely a thing of straw. Nor is this merely a question of using the 'right language' and the accepted phraseology: Anyone can speak 'the language of Canaan' - even Satan mouths it at times - but this does not guarantee the unction of the Holy Spirit, and without this holy unction men may speak with the tongues of angels but their ministry will not be blessed to others. It is this that we must learn to recognise and long for, be we preachers or hearers of the Word. It is the indispensable hallmark of reality in spiritual life.

22) 3:20-22

This is a very difficult passage from several points of view. It is not certain whether the reference is to the false teachers themselves or to those whom they deceive and lead astray, and it is even less certain whether we are to take from this that true Christians can really fall away from grace or whether this final falling away indicates that they were not ever in a state of grace. One suggestion is that we find a key to the meaning in Christ's words in Matthew 12:45. Our Lord's parable there about the unclean spirit going out of a man and returning subsequently with seven others more wicked than himself contains almost the same words that we have here - 'their last state is worse than the first'. If this be so, then Peter's reference is to those who have not truly received newness of life through Christ, for in Christ's parable although the evil spirit goes out there is no mention of the good Spirit coming in, and where He is not, there can be no real spiritual life. It is sadly true in experience that those who seem to be truly converted but prove to have been only stirred emotionally by the Word do relapse into a state worse than before and become almost impervious to any further spiritual influence. This is very frightening, and seems accentuated by the grim words in Hebrews 6:4-8 and we should be all the more concerned to make our calling and election sure in face of such warnings. This we may do by attending to Peter's earlier exhortations (see 1:5-8). As Jesus said 'he that endureth to the end shall be saved'.

23) 3:1-4a

The theme of the final chapter is the doctrine of Christ's Second Coming. This, it would seem, was one of the main objects of the false teachers' contempt, and Peter is particularly anxious to remind his readers of the centrality of their blessed hope. This he does by bringing before them the fact that Christ's Coming in power and glory is witnessed to by both the prophets of the Old Testament and the apostles of the New. It is important to realise this. The doctrine of the Return of Christ is not something that has been 'stuck on' to the gospel story as a kind of 'happy ending', it belongs to the very essence of the divine revelation, so much so, in fact, that apart from it, the gospel does not make sense. According to New Testament teaching, full salvation is not yet; we are saved in hope. But if Christ is not to come again, salvation will be not ever! It is as categorical as that! Even a cursory reading of a passage such as Romans 8:18-25 makes it plain that for the Christian everything depends on the prospect of Christ's coming again. It is the ground of his hope and confidence, and also of his optimism and peace: To challenge this doctrine is to call in question the entire gospel. This is the reason for Peter's concern.

24) 3:4

It is the scoffers walking after their own lusts that say, 'Where is the promise of His coming?' We have already noted how Peter links false teaching and wrong living together, and nowhere is this seen more decisively than in relation to the Coming of Christ. It is a matter of history that in the early centuries of the Christian Church the extremely high moral tone was a product of its vital and vibrant belief in the return of the Lord, and that when that hope faded, the moral integrity and the spiritual vitality were significantly lowered. It is certainly true that everywhere in the New Testament the blessed hope of Christ's coming is held out as an incentive and encouragement to holy living, and references to it are generally either prefaced or followed by exhortations to stand fast in the Lord (see 1 Corinthians 15:51-58; Colossians 3:4, 5; Philippians 3:20-4:1; 1 John 3:3). When therefore scoffers call in question the return of Christ they are not merely assailing the doctrinal purity of the Church, they are cutting at its moral fibre. We should be grateful to Peter for exposing the vital connection between the two, thereby reminding us of the urgent duty laid upon us to preserve at all cost the integrity of the faith once delivered unto the saints.

25) 3:5-7

Peter answers here the contention of the scoffers that 'all things continue as they were'. It is not true that things have always gone on as they were from the beginning, without any intervention from God. Look at the judgment of the Flood. The life of the antediluvian world was brought to an end by that disaster; chaos for a time supervened, and, so to speak, a new world emerged from the crisis. Now, says Peter, just as formerly water was God's instrument of destruction, so fire will be used in the judgment of this present age, and from the crisis God's new order will emerge, the new heaven and new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness (see 13).

But, he indicates, this is something that they are 'willingly ignorant of': The proverb says that 'there are none so blind as those that will not see', and this is as true here as elsewhere: It is a striking fact that men - even Christian men - are often blind to God's plain dealings in judgment with them, and they will place almost any interpretation on a situation rather than face the obvious one that the hand of God is heavy upon them for their sins. O for the grace of discernment to enable us to understand the events that surround us and the things that happen to us!

26) 3:8-9

But, continues Peter, even if things were seeming to go on just as they have always done, it still would not mean that the promise of His coming was a vain hope. There is another interpretation of the long continuation of the 'status quo', and it is that a) distinctions of long and short time are nothing in the sight of the Lord; a thousand years are as a day to Him, and delay is therefore purely a human conception and b) in any case, the 'delay' is due to the mercy and longsuffering of a God Who is not willing that any should perish. He is 'delaying' the inevitable judgment upon sin long beyond its due and proper fulfilment because in spite of everything He willeth not the death of the sinner. How different is this 'real' picture of the God of judgment from the evil caricature so often in the minds of men of a harsh, loveless Tyrant. God does not delight in judgment; judgment is His 'strange' work, and when it has to be, His eyes are filled with tears (see Luke 19:41-44): If only men could see that the heart of God is yearning over them with an infinite longing for their salvation! That is what God is like, and He Who has such a concern for our eternal welfare shows the same pity and compassion for our temporal needs. He is a God we may safely trust and love.

27) 3:10-13

But the Day of the Lord will come. His longsuffering grace will not stay the reckoning time for ever. The metaphor of 'the thief in the night' does not suggest that it will come silently (as the following words make clear), but suddenly and without warning. As Christ Himself said it will be 'in such an hour as ye think not'. Peter's words here are awe-inspiring and speak of the tremendous trial by fire which shall overtake our world at the end: What we ought to pay particular heed to is the phrase 'the works that are therein'. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3 'the fire shall try every man's work' and although he is referring particularly to believers' works, it is clear that Peter's thought is wider and includes those of unbelievers also. In the light of this, Peter might well say, 'What manner of persons ought ye to be..?', for 'holy conversation and godliness' are the only things that will withstand the fire of God's judgment and emerge as constituent parts of the new heavens and new earth. It is all a question of having an eye to the future, the eternal future. If we really believed that such a visitation as this will come upon the world we would be supremely occupied in seeing that that day should not overtake us unawares but find us living holy and spotless lives. In this, as in other matters, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom!

28) 3:14-16

We note once again that for the Apostles the return of Christ was never a matter for fruitless speculation (as unfortunately it has so often become in our time) but an incentive to the greatest moral and spiritual endeavour (14). To be found 'in peace' means to be unashamed before Him at His coming (1 John 2:28). This will mean everything to us then, though we may set little store by it now. Again the need is for living in the light of eternity: In the meantime we are to reckon that each succeeding day of delay shown by the longsuffering of God is further opportunity given us to reach them that are lost with the offer of salvation: Paul also, says Peter, has reminded you of these things, and we may recall a similar thought in Romans 2:4. 'The goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance'; although probably the reference to Paul includes his teaching on the Second Coming of Christ and the Day of Judgment. It is interesting to notice Peter's reference to some aspects of Paul's teaching as being hard to understand and we may remember what is said in Hebrews 5:11 about being dull of hearing. True understanding of the Scriptures is a matter not of intellect but of the heart. An old Scottish saint once said, 'The best commentary on Holy Scripture is a heavenly state of mind', and it still remains true that the Bible yields its treasures only to patient and reverent study and to those who sit in lowly obedience at the feet of Jesus. Spiritual truth is discerned only by the spiritual.

29) 3:17

As Peter draws the epistle to its close he gives a word of warning to his readers against being led away by the false teachers. Once again he insists that doctrinal leads to moral declension. It is strange, is it not, that when such a consistent emphasis is made to this in the Scriptures, so little heed seems to have been paid to it in modern times. The prevailing attitude nowadays seems to be, 'it does not matter so much what you believe, as long as your life is right': Surely Peter has exposed the dangerous fallacy underlying this! Wrong doctrine can never produce right living, and when experience sometimes seems to teach otherwise (as, for example, in the 'good' living of those with no religious convictions) we need to recognise that such people are living on borrowed spiritual capital far more than they realize. It is only when the spiritual capital of a former heritage is exhausted that such lives will come to be seen in their proper colours. We are beginning to see now in our society the real effects of generations of wrong belief and loss of faith. The truth of the scriptural position and of its warnings in this area is becoming only too clear, and the loss of steadfastness of life and real integrity can now be traced to its proper source.

30) 3:18

The final exhortation sums up in itself all the Apostle's positive teaching in the Epistle, and indeed all the deepest things in the Christian Life: To be established in grace and then to enter more deeply and intimately into fellowship with Him - that is how to remain steadfast and unmovable, the great, the only safeguard amid the gathering darkness of the end of the age. We should not, however, miss the significance of Peter's emphasis in the words 'grow in grace'. By its very nature this phrase obliges us to think of Christian advancement as a gradual process. A child does not grow to manhood by fits and starts, but imperceptibly, and in the Christian life progress and development are necessarily gradual. The fact that there are those who bear testimony to what is called a 'crisis' experience transforming their lives does not in any way call in question this fundamental biblical emphasis. Crisis, of course, can take place whether through some sudden illumination that brings an entirely new understanding to mind and heart, or through some radical therapeutic impact of the Word upon the soul ('if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off'). But we need to understand that such crises are merely preparatory, in the sense that they simply clear away obstacles to growth; they do not themselves constitute growth, indeed they make growth possible, perhaps for the first time, just as a serious surgical operation removes a diseased organ that has hindered health and growth and creates the prospect of normal healthy living for the hitherto ailing patient. This is what Peter has in view in these words. Happy is the Christian who understands them and responds to them by allowing his roots to go down into the subsoil of the Word of life and drawing nurture from these limitless depths!

31) 3:18

As a postscript to our study we add the following two Readings from the Congregational Record of Gilcomston South Church, Aberdeen, by the Rev. William Still: 'Some would take 'knowledge' to mean understanding of His Word, the things of Christ, whereas others would say it is personal knowledge of the Lord Himself. We could be too analytical here - not that these two are not to be distinguished, but because they belong together in any true life of faith. Although it is, alas, more than possible to have a theoretic knowledge of the things of the Lord, our personal knowledge of the living, ever-present Jesus by the Spirit must always be filled out and made more accurate by an increasing study of and knowledge of the Lord's Word, and vice versa, our knowledge of His Word must at every point and constantly be embodied in living relationship and vital communication with Him by the Spirit. Note the two words chosen by Peter in his conclusion to express this, grace and knowledge, and note also their order. Does Peter imply that the first is the larger, or that it is prior? There must be some significance (we are thinking of the Holy Spirit more than of Peter) in putting grace first. It is the whole world, the dominion, empire and eternal kingdom of the Almighty's essential quality and nature, and that was brought home to God's most significant creature, man, by Jesus Christ, and by who and what He is and all He has done - and is doing, as abiding Intercessor. In the largest sense we are to grow into that total realm and heavenly commonwealth, and as we do, our personal walk with the Lord will grow richer and sweeter as well as purer and more telling, and also our knowledge of Him through the Scriptures will grow because we will see everything in ever clearer light and better relation, rightly dividing (or straight-cutting, like a ploughed furrow) the word of Truth, learning to see subtle differences in particular truths and yet integrating every particle of knowledge with the one great monolith of saving truth.'

32) 3:18

'We are to grow in this: it is more than a life-time's task, but our earthly life-time's exercise is definitive and decisive, we believe, for our eternal state and status in the service of the King of kings. There are those who would say that God's grace is so gracious that no distinctions can possibly be envisaged in the eternal state, and, they say, there are teachings and parables to that end. Yes, but there are also teachings and parables to the other end that the quality of our life in Christ down here does count and tell unto all eternity. Doubtless the larger truth is that of a world of grace in which all but grace is swamped, but who said there could be no distinctions let alone significant distinctions in the world of grace? We believe there are, and so the command is given us to get on with the all-blessed activity whose present, personal benefits are benefits for ever. The glory to be given to our Lord now and for ever doubtless suggests the manifestations of the entire eternal kingdom, but in this context, that of avoiding false prophets and keeping to the true saving knowledge and its world of grace, we can think of particular manifestations of glory that have especial relevance - glory for that man, and that, and this woman, and that. Glory for the steadfastness which produces both the softest and yet most durable rocks of living stone.'