

LIVING ON EARTH WITH A DIVINE NATURE - Part ten

Studies in 2 Peter - Sunday, April 7th, 2019 - Teaching #2120

Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket

BEHOLD THE SEVERITY AND THE MERCY OF GOD

2 Peter 2:4-9 - “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); [9] *then* the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment....”

This is such a relevant text for our particular time. Peter writes to people who were confident of God’s love and acceptance but downplayed His wrath and judgment. Those attributes were felt to be beneath God. This is the common theology of many in the current anti-wrath movement, where God’s wrath is seen as the natural outcome of sin rather than something springing from the character of God. Wrath is just what happens when sin unfolds. It’s not something God **does** or **possesses**.

Our text launches with those two connecting words, “*For if...*” In fact there are **4 “ifs”** followed by a concluding “*then*” in **verse 9**. In other words, this is an **argument** passage. It’s designed to make a point in an unescapable manner for those who might not want to come to that conclusion.

Verses 4 through 9 are really an expansion of the last phrase in **verse 3** - “....**Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.**” Peter is telling these churches not to question the future judgement of those who embrace false teaching. They don’t **see** the judgement of God on them right now. Indeed, that’s why he says they mustn’t think of God’s judgement as being **idle** or **asleep**. God’s judgement **looks like it is idle**. It **looks like it is asleep**. Peter admits that. We don’t **see** these people being judged at all - at least not immediately or visibly.

But there’s another important issue behind Peter’s words. It has to do with **how the church comes to think about false teaching in general**. Peter is doing everything in his power to prevent these Christians from adopting a **mild view** of something that God sees as **eternally damning**.

We don’t usually think that **false beliefs** are as punishable as **wicked actions**. We understand that God judges **bad deeds**. But we don’t usually think of God as judging **the false thinking that leads to those bad deeds**. To our minds, bad deeds are bad deeds, but beliefs are just the way people view things. And, after all, aren’t we all entitled to our own opinions? And how can God hold people accountable for wrong ideas? It just doesn’t fit in very well in our relativistic age.

But Peter has already addressed this subject in chapter one, **verse 4** - “....**by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.**”

Just as holding on to the promises of the Word brings **freedom from corruption**, listening to false teaching brings **bondage to the lusts of our hearts**. So there’s a particular **kind** of false teaching highlighted here. There is a kind of false teaching that replaces **knowable** revealed doctrine with a tolerance of **relativistic outlook** that makes divinely revealed moral absolutes appear offensive.

So I ask again, **is God allowed to be morally offended by things that no longer offend us?**

We finally start to see the whole picture. We see why God holds us accountable for our rejection of revealed truth. Bad teaching and bad deeds go together. And Peter says God will passionately judge **both**.

The whole concept of **God as Judge** rings archaic and foreign to our ears. That’s why, rather than speculate about how God will judge one day in the **future**, Peter goes back into **actual history** - back into the dealings with God we already know with certainty. He picks out **three specific cases of God’s judgement** and **brings application from them to the church**.

Again, he reminds these Christians not to think of God’s judgement as **idle**. They must never come to think of God as being **asleep** when it comes to judging the sins of the people.

Of course Peter is saying we must keep the concept of God as Judge active and dominant and alive in the front of our thinking. Let these actual case situations I'm reminding you of change the way you think about God. **Never view God as being tolerant of sin.** That's usually the direction of false teaching. It always leans either to **legalism** harshly denying grace or tolerance, marginalizing holiness in the name of acceptance..

In Peter's case these false teachers were turning the grace of God into license. They projected an abused concept of grace that is nothing more than a free ticket to continue to live following our own set of values. And Peter - under the direction of the Holy Spirit, says when you're tempted to do that - when you're tempted to follow them - remember the judgment of God.

1) **GOD JUDGED THE ANGELS EVEN THOUGH THEY WERE THE HIGHEST CREATURES IN HIS WHOLE CREATION**

2 Peter 2:4 - "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...."

There is just no missing the powerful, confronting edge in Peter's words. He's arguing from the greater to the lesser. We all know that the Bible says mankind was made a "***little lower than the heavenly beings***" or "***angels***" (Psalm 8:5).

The angels were the crown, the shining glory of God's creation. But they sinned. And the ***way*** they sinned is significant to Peter's case. ***As far as we know they sinned by listening to someone else - Lucifer.*** And, for that, Peter says, God "***cast them into hell!***"

Peter is carefully crafting his words to strike home with a very sharp point. We live in a day when almost nobody - Christians included - really thinks God would ***cast anyone into hell*** for anything. That whole picture has been wiped from our minds by a world that only subscribes to a God who is sweetly tolerant of all creatures, no matter what they happen to do.

You know how the mocking arguments go. "Certainly you're not saying God will send a person to hell for..." And then they put some single bad deed - "You're not saying God would send a person to hell for visiting one pornographic web site....or telling one lie....or cheating on one exam?"

And, of course, we don't say that. We don't say God sends a person to hell for just one bad word or deed. You can craft those words, like a lawyer, ***building the question in such a way that it has to get the answer you want to find.*** You will still have to come to terms with some hard Scriptural statements. A lot of people ***are*** going to hell. It seems more people are going to hell than heaven. Jesus seemed to imply this:

Matthew 7:13-14 - "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it ***are many.*** [14] For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it ***are few.***"

Few are heading toward life. Many are heading toward destruction. Here's the question: How are they getting there? We talk a lot about ***how people get to heaven.*** ***How do they get to hell?***

"Well, they do bad things, Pastor Don."

Really? ***How many*** bad things? If, as in those cleverly phrased questions I mentioned earlier, the answer isn't ***one*** bad thing, then, ***how many bad things is it?*** And how do we know when or where the line gets drawn? And is it really smart to be dabbling with those things when you're betting with eternity? ***How many bad things did Eve and Adam do?***

Of course, the truth of the matter is, in an ***ultimate sense***, people don't go to hell for doing bad things. At least, that's not the ***cause*** of their lostness. God has made provision for the bad things people do - one bad thing, or many. The truth is, God has made sure provision for all the bad things - the sins in our lives. People are cast into hell for ***rejecting God's true message of His coming judgement on sin, and then rejecting redemption and hope through the atoning death of Jesus Christ.***

And the main point in our text today is people will never come to Jesus, they will never humbly respond to the truth unless they first believe they are in ***serious peril as they are.*** You will only come to Jesus if you see yourself in danger of judgement and in need of being redeemed. ***And it was that very message of judgement that was***

being downplayed. And it's sorely lacking in today's church as well.

That is why here, with one verse, Peter speaks of the highest creatures ever created. They inhabited a realm of glory hidden from our eyes. But they listened to Lucifer. They believed a lie and departed from the truth. They listened to false words. They had instincts that led them away from the moral base of the One who created and owned them. And Peter clearly says, God **cast them into hell.**

Now, here's the question. **Does your mind have room for that picture of God.** Do you worship and serve a God who would ever **cast people into hell?** Because if you don't (and many people don't), you are worshipping a **God of your own imagination.** You're dealing with **illusions of your own making, not the God of divine revelation.**

So we read those words of Peter at the end of **verse three** about the damnation that comes through false teaching - **"....Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep."**

How serious is God about His absolute right to His creative rule over His creation? How broad minded is He? Will God actually judge people? Will they be eternally lost for embracing error rather than truth? Peter says, "Look at the angels. They had a glory you've never yet dreamed of, but they listened to Lucifer. And God cast them into hell. Don't ever forget that."

"Well, pastor Don, you're talking about a world I know nothing about. You're talking about angels and demons and beings from another realm altogether. I'm talking about ordinary people. I'm talking about the world I live in. Would God judge a world like that?"

Peter says He already has:

2) **GOD JUDGED THE WORLD FOR NOT LISTENING TO THE MESSAGE OF NOAH**

2 Peter 2:5 - **"...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...."**

Again, notice the **active nature** of divine wrath. Peter doesn't hesitate to say God **"brought"** that flood on the ungodly. It didn't just happen as a natural event. These words would have served Peter's purpose very well indeed. Peter has already said that when false teachers arose, their message would be so tailored to the desires of the masses that **"many would follow"** them (**2 Peter 2:2**). It would be difficult to stay faithful to the truth when so many were turning away from it.

Such is always the case. Nothing makes error feel more acceptable than the endorsement of others. Ideas no longer accepted by most of the surrounding culture lose their credible weight. Social acceptance becomes the new moral baseline.

That's why Peter specifically mentions the account of Noah. He's very careful to remind us that out of all the people on the earth, **only eight were faithful to revealed moral truth - a tiny percentage.** And remember, Noah had to wait for the fulfillment of God's message for 120 years. Everyone else laughed. Nobody seemed to listen when Noah warned that God was going to pour out furious judgement.

But the people weren't safe just because they were in the majority. The crowd was wrong. And the whole world was judged, except for eight people who listened and believed and persisted with courage.

The story of Noah must be an important reminder for us today. Both Peter and Jesus retold it a number of times. It's one of those very old accounts that slaps current values in the face. The gospel message tells us that mankind will only find safety from the wrath of God in Jesus Christ. There is no other way for escape. **Most people don't believe that.** At times, even voices from within the church seem to question it.

And then the New Testament says we are to **remember Noah.** God had Noah build the ark. Out of all the inhabitants of the earth, **only eight took refuge in that ark.** And God judged the rest, as He had warned He would.

When you're tempted to think the surrounding culture may be right, Peter says, remember Noah. God will judge the earth again.

3) **THERE ARE SPECIFIC ACTS OF JUDGEMENT THAT ARE LEFT AS WARNINGS TO THE UNGODLY, AND SO MUST BE PREACHED BY THE CHURCH**

2 Peter 2:6 - “...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...”

There must be some people here today who are wondering why we have to give all this attention to these dark passages of judgement. Why do we have to rehearse and proclaim the sternness of God from ages past?

Peter gives a specific answer to that question. We must teach these things because **God left them as warnings to careless, godless people of our day**. God doesn't want these lessons forgotten. There's a message in these events for the ungodly.

It would be easier not to speak of Sodom and Gomorrah. It would be more comfortable not to think of them at all. But God says we must. People are far more prone to forget about God's **wrath** than His **mercy**. **Yet it's His wrath that makes His grace and mercy precious**.

People will never cling to Jesus until they sense they are lost and heading to hell. They may come to Jesus to help them with a few of their problems. They may come for assistance from time to time. But when the problem goes away, or the need isn't pressing, they will forget about Him.

People need reminding God's moral standards aren't measured by my acceptance of them. They need to be reminded of God's judgement on sin. They need to be reminded about what comes **after** this life. They need to see the seriousness of coming judgement even when everything seems fine in this earthly life.

For all these reasons God has left important road signs. He gives us these examples to keep the ungodly from repeating the mistakes of history. The people of Sodom and Gomorrah (just like the people in Noah's day) **didn't believe judgement would come**. They didn't believe God would ever act like that toward sinners. Now God says, “Learn from their mistakes. These warnings are rooted in my mercy and love for you.”

We need these reminders because **we don't always see God's judgement enacted immediately upon the commission of the transgression**. That's why Peter says that the church should remember that God's judgement isn't **sleeping or idle** (2:3). Don't become bold in copying the sins of others just because they **appear** to be getting away with it.

There. That's a number one lesson to learn deeply while you're still young - while so much of your walk with Jesus is still being shaped and formed. That's why, when he talks about the angels and their sin in **verse 4**, Peter says they are, even now, “**kept**” for judgement. They still haven't received full payment for their sins.

4) **AS SURELY AS GOD KNOWS HOW TO PUNISH THE WICKED, HE KNOWS HOW TO PRESERVE THE RIGHTEOUS**

2 Peter 2:7-9 - “... 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); [9] then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment...”

There are **two pictures of Divine rescue** in this chapter. God saved Noah and his family **out** of the flood, and then, God preserved Lot **in the middle** of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

In these examples, Peter outlines **two traits of character** that bring the blessing and protection of God in the middle of sin, darkness and judgement:

- a) **Noah was a “herald of righteousness” (5)**. For 120 years he never abandoned or altered the message God gave him to proclaim. Even though nobody else **shared** that message, and certainly nobody else **responded** to that message, Noah refused to budge.
- b) **Lot kept his soul sensitive to the ugliness of sin**. Peter says Lot “...**was tormenting his righteous soul over their lawless deeds that he saw and heard...**”(8). Whatever weaknesses there may have been in Lot's character, the text says he was **tormented in his soul** at the wickedness of the people around him. Not just the **suffering** of those around him - but their **wickedness** tortured his soul.

This is always an indicator of the state of the heart. How do you feel about the wickedness of this world? Peter says Godly people **bleed inside**. People frequently talk of **“bleeding hearts.”** In the truest sense righteous people bleed because they are compassionate enough to want people to know the truth. They are deeply moved by suffering - physical suffering - economic suffering - environmental suffering - the suffering from violence and indifference - but especially righteous people bleed inwardly for the **eternal suffering** of those who reject divine truth.

There is a tragic downward spiral revealed in the Scriptures. Wicked people don't just **do bad things**. Paul says they actually begin to **take a delight** in those who do them: **Romans 1:32** - **“Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.”**

When people turn from the truth to practice sin, they always **apply pressure** to those who won't agree with them, or won't follow them. In today's world that happens primarily through the media in a mass sense. Sin is made humorous and trendy. That's how sin grows. But Lot would have none of this.

So Peter says **Noah** stayed true to calling. He never abandoned the voice of God, even when no one else was listening. **Lot** never lost his inward torture with sinful deeds. His compassion for the lost was inflamed by his belief in divine judgment on the wicked. **Compassion** is always so much deeper than **sympathy**. So for the deepest compassion of the lost don't let the crowd, even, at times the religious crowd, blunt the voice of shame and pain when God's glory is smudged.

But, let me close with a final word, not of **judgement**, but **encouragement** from this text. **God knows how to keep you from falling - 2 Peter 2:9a** - **“.... then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials....**

So, **don't let the sins of others discourage your heart or weaken your confidence in the truth.** “What makes me think I'm right when everyone else seems to be changing his or her mind? What makes me think I can stand when so many others are falling?”

Remember the promise of Peter, **“...then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment...”**I'm so glad He can do both of those things at the very same time.