

- I. Be holy in all your behavior just as God is holy
 - A. II Peter 2:20-22 . . . [20] For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. [21] For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them. [22] It has happened to them according to the true proverb, "A dog returns to its own vomit," and, "A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire."
 - B. Pray
- II. A difficult passage, or is it?
 - A. II Peter 2:20-22 is one of those difficult portions of scripture that gets Christians talking, debating, occasionally arguing, and sometimes devising unique explanations. The reason for all this activity is that this portion seems to imply that born again Christians can lose their salvation – which leads theologians, commentaries and other religious books, pastors and teachers most often leaning in one of two directions when explaining WHO Peter is referring to in these three verses.
 1. One of the explanations is that Peter is talking about born again false teachers (*and possibly their born again followers*), who have returned to feeding their fleshly desires and practicing sin – with the result being that they have or will lose their salvation.
 2. The other explanation is that Peter is talking about just the false teachers (*though some add the followers to this explanation*) who have come to know the truths and implications of Christianity, who have been shown the way of salvation, who have made sufficient changes in their character and behavior to look like a Christian, but who have never really been born again.
 - a. In other words, these false teachers, and possibly their followers, have gotten so close to being born again that they are now being warned against slipping back into old fleshly habits and sinful practices.
 - b. However, since they were never born again to begin with, they cannot lose their salvation.

3. With these two popular explanations in mind, I am asking three things of you for our study today. First, set aside your theological views concerning eternal security, the sovereignty of God, and losing your salvation. Second, do your best to look at this scripture within its context. And finally, try not to add anything to or take anything away from Peter's words. In this way maybe we can gain a worthy understanding of what Peter's pen and the Holy Spirit's inspiration have written. With this in mind, let look at verse 20.
- B. (2:20) Peter begins this portion by making a defining statement about those he is talking about. He then adds two more defining statements in verse 21.
1. First Defining Statement (vs 20): The WHO of these verses had a knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ that enabled them to escape the defilements of the world.
 - a. The Greek word used here for escape appears three times in the NT, and all three are in II Peter (1:4, 2:18, and 2:20).
 - b. However, the II Peter 2:18 statement is unclear enough that it seems wise to only point out that it does not contradict the use of "escape" in verses 1:4 and 2:20.
 - c. II Peter 1:4 is clear, and it says: "For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust."
 - d. If we attempt to be consistent in interpreting 1:4's "escape *from the corruption that is in the world by means of lust,*" and 2:20's "escape *from the defilements of the world,*" it seems reasonable to conclude that in both verses the "escape" is the result of God's supernatural work and assistance in those who have repented and come to faith in Jesus Christ.
 2. Second Defining Statement (vs 21): According to this statement, the WHO of these verses have known the way of righteousness. Now we are wise to admit that Peter does not clearly state what "*knowing the way of righteousness*" includes.
 - a. However, when we examine this statement within its context and examine the use of the word "KNOW" (Gk: epignosis) in Peter's letters and in other NT writings, it becomes clear that their knowledge of the way of righteousness was not just head knowledge, but a combination of head knowledge and personal experience with that knowledge.

- b. In fact, when we look at the way Peter uses this word “KNOW” in other places (II Peter 1:3; 1:8; 2:20;3:18), it seems obvious that he is speaking of those who have been born again.
 - c. In other words, the WHO of these verses did not know the way of righteousness from a distance, as if looking over a fence at it. They had climbed the fence and gotten involved in it just like any other born again believer.
3. Third Defining Statement (vs 21): Finally, Peter says the WHO of these verses had turned away from the holy commandment which had been handed or delivered to them.
- a. Again, we are wise to acknowledge that there are parts of this statement which Peter leaves unclear.
 - (1) We do not know for certain what the holy commandment is.
 - (2) And we do not know when or how the holy commandment was handed or delivered to them.
 - b. Yet what we do know is that the NT was still being written, and it was some time after Peter wrote that it was organized into a single book as we have it today. Therefore, we can assume Peter was using Christ’s teachings and the OT as his references for what he is saying here. In addition, we know that Peter was at least aware of or had read some of Paul’s writings.
 - c. Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that his reference to the holy commandment includes something found in the OT Law and prophets, Jesus’ teachings, and the emphasis Jesus put on love – love for God and love for each other.
 - (1) In support of this, I encourage you to consider the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), Jesus’ affirmation of the two great commandments (Mark 12:29-31), and His final words and prayer at the Last Supper (John 14-17).
 - (2) In addition to that, consider these words of Paul to Timothy: “I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who testified the good confession before Pontius Pilate, [14] that you keep the commandment without stain or reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (I Timothy 6:13-14).
4. The point in these three defining statements is that the WHO whom Peter is talking about are spoken of as if they were Christians who had come to know Jesus Christ as Savior, who had experienced being set free from the power of sin by the power of God, and who had been taught the way of righteousness.

C. Peter then goes on to say that those he is talking about have not remained faithful to their new life in Christ. Instead, they have returned to old fleshly habits and sinful patterns of living. Now because they had previously repented, and had entered into God's saving grace, and had been freed from the enslaving power of sin, they are now worse off for having gone back to sin's enslaving power than they were before being converted.

1. To understand why they are worse off, let's look at two stories told by Jesus which deal with failing to live up to what we know.
 - a. First, Jesus said, "The slave who knows his master's will and does not get ready or act in accord with his will, will receive many lashes, [48] but the one who does not know it, and commits deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few – for from everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more" (Luke 12:47-48). The point here is that doing what we know is wrong brings harsher judgment than sinning from ignorance or sinning unintentionally.
 - b. Second, Jesus told the story about the person who had been cleansed from an unclean spirit, but then failed to fill the void with godliness. His failure resulted in the original demon returning with seven others more wicked than himself, so that the person was worse off than before being cleansed (Matthew 12:43-45; Luke 11:22-26). The point here is that being cleansed by the initial act of saving faith is good, but if we do not follow up by pursuing sanctification, the evil that will grow in us will be the result of knowingly willfully rebelling against God – which is worse than the evil we were originally freed from.
2. Peter supports his teaching of being worse off when returning to old sinful habits and ways by giving us two proverbs.
 - a. In II Peter 2:22, we read: "It has happened to them according to the true proverb, "A dog returns to its own vomit," and, "A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire."
 - b. The first proverb appears to come from Proverbs 26:11 . . . "Like a dog that returns to its vomit is a fool who repeats his folly." The second proverb has no known the origin. Yet both proverbs make the point that after being cleansed or healed, we make things worse by returning to what we were cleansed of or healed from.

3. Though Peter does not directly address the need for Christians to persevere in a life of righteousness to the end of their days, he certainly implies that this is a vital part of the Christian's life. Therefore, I thought it wise to consider some scriptures that speak to God's expectations about the life we are to live once we repent and come to saving faith in Jesus Christ.
 - a. II Corinthians 5:15 . . .and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.
 - b. Romans 6:4-7 . . . Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. [5] For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, [6] knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; [7] for he who has died is freed from sin.
 - c. John 5:14 . . . Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, "Behold, you have become well; do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you."
 - d. John 8:10-11 . . . Straightening up, Jesus said to her, "Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?" [11] She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more."
 - e. Ephesians 4:17-20 . . . So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, [18] being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart; [19] and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness. [20] But you did not learn Christ in this way.
 - f. 1 Peter 4:1-2 . . . Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, [2] so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.

4. It seems to me that the important point here is that our direction, our focus, our efforts, our pursuit is to be in one direction following our repentance and trusting in Jesus Christ for salvation – and that direction, as Peter said, is toward being holy in all our behavior just as God is holy (I Peter 1:15).
- D. Now you may be thinking my purpose today is to show you from God's word that you can lose your salvation. Well, in spite of what you may think, my purpose today is to encourage us to look at a difficult portion of scripture and think about it in the most practical way possible, for it is the practical speaking of scripture that has the most profound effect on how we love God and how we love those around us. And in relation to this, I can assure you of three things:
1. First, if your theology does not include the necessity and practical means of loving God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength; in fact, if your theology does not compel you to love God with all your being, then your theology is not of God or for God.
 2. Second, if your theology does not compel you to love your neighbor as yourself, then your theology is of no use to those around you. Believe me when I say that those nearest and dearest are not nearly as concerned about your theology as they are about how you treat them.
 3. And third, false teachers neither make love of God nor love of others a primary and compelling focus of their false teachings. But they do make love of self a compelling focus – which is why they lead Christians who have supposedly died to self into a worse form of self-centered evil than they practiced before being saved.
- E. To draw all this together and to bring today's teaching to a close, I want to acknowledge several truths and then leave you with a conclusion.
1. There are scriptures which clearly support the teaching that once we are saved, we are always saved. And I have no intention of treating these scriptures as if they don't exist or as if they don't matter, for it is God who spoke these scriptures into existence and preserved them for our edification.
 2. Yet, there are also scriptures which clearly support the teaching that we can lose our salvation – and our same God spoke them into existence, too.
 3. I acknowledge that we cannot perfectly reconcile what most Christians have separated into two competing theological camps –

eternal security and losing our salvation. In keeping them together, we are stuck with a partial mystery. However, we are wise to keep them together for God is the one who gave us these scriptures, which means God is the one who has presented us with the mystery.

III. Conclusion

- A. In conclusion, my hope is that we will use these three verses in II Peter 2, to see how destructive false teachers are, and how devastating to godly living false teaching is, and how dire the consequences are of being a false teacher or following false teaching.
- B. Finally, rather than getting bogged down in theological battles, let us zealously devote ourselves to pursuing a supreme love for God and a love for those around us that is at the very least, equal to our love of self. In this way, we will be pleasing to God, loving toward others, and free from any concern about losing our salvation.