

False Teachers



SABBATH—JUNE 3

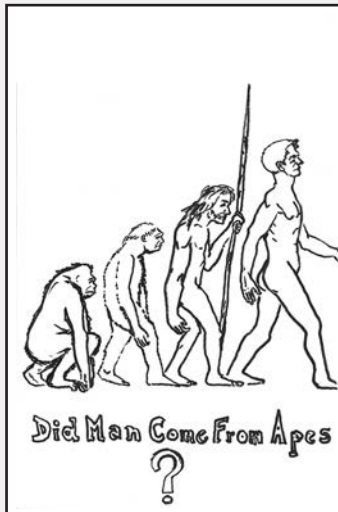
READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: 2 Peter 2:1–22; John 8:34–36; Matthew 12:43–45; Jude 4–19; Genesis 18:16–33.

MEMORY VERSE: “They [false teachers] promise to give freedom to these new believers. But they themselves are slaves to sinful living. [That is] because ‘people are slaves to anything that controls them’ ” (2 Peter 2:19, NIV).

IN HIS FIRST LETTER, PETER encourages readers who suffer persecution. We do not know what form of persecution they went through. But we know that the church faced terrible hardships. We know the Roman Empire tried to put an end to the growing movement of people called “Christians.”

Satan attacked the movement in two ways. He attacked the movement from inside the church and from outside. Outside, the persecution from Rome was a powerful tool against the church. But the church faced another threat perhaps even more dangerous. And that was the threat from inside. In the same way, the Jewish nation in the past had to deal with false prophets, or messengers. And now the followers of Jesus in Peter’s day had to deal with false teachers. Peter warns believers about these false teachers in 2 Peter 2:1. They would bring the false teachings into the church itself (2 Peter 2:2).

What were some of these teachings that Peter warns about? How does Peter respond to them? We also face threats from within the church. So what lessons can we take from Peter’s warnings for ourselves today?



We also face threats from inside and outside the church.

FALSE PROPHETS AND TEACHERS (2 Peter 2:1–3, 10–22)

Sometimes it is easy to think that the early church was perfect. We may think of it as a time of great peace and harmony among the first believers in Jesus.

But that kind of thinking would be a mistake. Even from the days of Jesus the church faced struggles. And often these struggles came from within. (Think of Judas.) For example, the New Testament letters show that many of the problems came from false teachings in their midst. Of course, the church in New Testament times struggled with persecution from the outside, as well.

In his second letter Peter deals with some of the challenges within the church. What are they, as written in 2 Peter 2:1–3?

These verses hardly seem to show a time of great peace and harmony among church members, do they?

Read 2 Peter 2:1–3, 10–22. What is Peter warning about in these verses? What are some of the false things that were being brought into the churches?

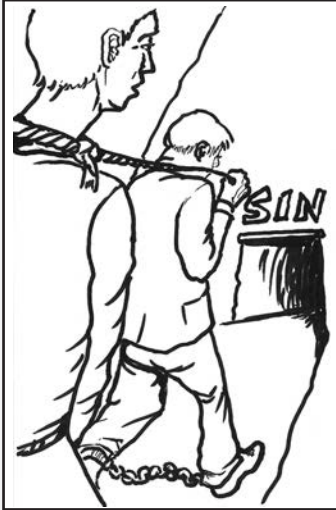
Second Peter 2:1 gives the reason Peter writes his letter. Peter reminds believers that there have been false prophets in the past. And he warns that there will be false teachers in the future. Peter lists the evil that these teachers are doing. Their crimes include bringing in “teachings that will destroy you” (2 Peter 2:1, NIV). They also lead into “sinful living” those who are easily fooled (2 Peter 2:19, NIV). These false prophets are guilty of other errors, too. From what Peter writes, we can see that these false teachings are very dangerous. So we can see why Peter responds with such force to these errors. Peter believes strongly that what we teach as truth matters.

Look at how strongly Peter responds to these false teachings. What should his response tell us about how important truth is? How can we protect ourselves against any and all false doctrine or teachings brought into the church?



False teachers lead those who are easily fooled into slavery to sin.

FREEDOM IN CHRIST? (2 Peter 2:18)



Anyone who promises freedom but leads people into sin is teaching error.

“They speak empty, bragging words. They make their appeal [try to lead others] to the evil desires that come from sin’s power. They tempt new believers who are just escaping from the company of sinful people” (2 Peter 2:18, NlrV).

What is Peter warning about in the verse above?

What does he say in 2 Peter 2:19 that helps explain his concern?

What is the importance of the word “freedom” (NlrV) in verse 19?

Peter uses the strongest possible words to give his readers a warning. He warns them against the dangers of false teachers. In 2 Peter 2:18–21, he warns that these false teachers will promise freedom. But if followed, they will actually lead people into slavery.

These false teachers completely twist the truth of the gospel. Freedom in Christ should mean freedom from the slavery of sin (Romans 6:4–6). Anyone who promises freedom but leads people into sin, then, is teaching error. Many Bible thinkers have argued over what kind of error Peter is dealing with here. Whatever that error is, it is clearly linked to the topic of sin and of being a slave to sin.

Read John 8:34–36. How do Christ’s words here help us to understand what Peter says in 2 Peter 2:18–21?

We do not know exactly what these false teachers are presenting to the church. But we do know they lead new believers back to their old, sinful ways of life. It is easy to imagine that these false teachers taught a gospel that downplayed (lessened) the need for a pure and holy life. No wonder Peter speaks so sharply and strongly against these false teachings. And he warns what the result of following them would be.

What do you understand freedom in Christ to be? What has Christ freed you from?

AS A DOG RETURNS TO ITS VOMIT (2 Peter 2:17–22)

Read 2 Peter 2:17–22 and Matthew 12:43–45. Suppose a new Christian returns to his or her old lifestyle. What dangers does he or she face?

Peter is very concerned about those whom the false teachers tempt back into the sins of their old way of life (2 Peter 2:18). The false teachers promise freedom. But Peter points out that the freedom that they promise is very different from the kind of freedom that Jesus promises to those who follow Him.

Look at the powerful warning Peter gives. It would have been better never to “know godliness [holiness]” (2 Peter 2:21, NIV) than to have known it and turned away from it.

Of course, this verse does not mean that there is no hope for those who fall back into sin. We all know stories of those who have turned away from the Lord and later have come back. And He is happy to take them back. (Read Luke 15:11–32.) But turning away is a very dangerous path to take. And it is not a pleasant one either. A dog returning to its own vomit (Proverbs 26:11) is a crude and harsh way to describe returning to one’s old sinful way of life. But Peter makes his point very well with that word picture.

In 2 Peter 2:20, Peter echoes the words of Jesus in Matthew 12:45 and Luke 11:26. There, Jesus tells the story of a man who has been freed from an unclean spirit. The spirit wanders without a place of its own. But then it turns to see “‘the house [the man freed from the unclean spirit] I [the spirit] left’ ” (Matthew 12:44, NIV). The spirit arrives and finds “the house” empty and put in order. He then moves back into the house. The house, of course, is a symbol or word picture for the man. But this time, the unclean spirit brings with it several other spirits. They are more wicked than the first spirit. As Jesus says, “‘That person [whom the spirit has moved back into] is worse off than before’ ” (Matthew 12:45, NIV).

The danger that Jesus and Peter describe is real. The new believer needs to make sure that the things of the Spirit replace the things that once had power over his or her life. This means that being involved in church and sharing the new faith must replace one’s old ways of life. If they do not, it is too easy to fall back into one’s old ways.

How can we as a church family better care for and teach all our members, and, most of all, our newer ones?



Peter says that someone who returns to the old sinful way of life is like a dog returning to its own vomit.

PETER AND JUDE (2 Peter 2:1–3:7)

Many people have observed that Jude 4–19 repeats the message of 2 Peter 2:1–3:7. In these two sets of verses, Peter and Jude tell us about an important truth: God is in control of the future of the wicked.

Read 2 Peter 2:1–3:7 and Jude 4–19. What examples of God’s earlier judgment do Peter and Jude give? How do these examples show that God takes His work of dealing with sin very seriously?

Peter and Jude record three examples of God’s judgment in the past. They include (1) the Flood, (2) the burning of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes, and (3) the “chaining” of the fallen angels for future judgment or destruction (2 Peter 2:4–6; 2 Peter 3:7; Jude 6, 7). All of these events are final. The Bible speaks a great deal about God’s mercy and forgiveness. But God’s justice also plays an important part in the final destruction of sin.

God punished the people who lived before the Flood and the people of Sodom and Gomorrah for their sins. What sins did they do that caused such harsh punishment? (1) They introduced destructive teachings. (2) They hated authority, and they had no respect for it. (3) They became slaves to sin. (4) They used God’s forgiveness as an excuse to do more sin. (5) They rejected Jesus Christ as Lord and the only Ruler of the soul. (6) They polluted their own bodies. (7) They spoke empty, proud words. (8) And they spoke evil about things they did not understand (2 Peter 2:1, 10, 19; Jude 4, 8; 2 Peter 2:12, 18; Jude 10).

Interestingly, these sins do not include violent acts and other wicked behaviors that often shock and anger us. Instead, Peter and Jude list sins that are sometimes excused in the community and even in the church itself. This fact should awaken us to the great need for true sorrow for sin and for change in the church.

Read 2 Peter 2:12 and Jude 10. In these verses, Peter and Jude describe those who are facing destruction. These people have become “like wild animals who [cannot] think for themselves” (Jude 10, NIV; read also 2 Peter 2:12). But how did God create us to be before sin back in the Garden of Eden? What can you do to make sure you do not end up like the people Peter and Jude describe?



God is in control of the future of the wicked.

MORE OLD TESTAMENT LESSONS (2 Peter 2:6–16)

Read 2 Peter 2:6–16. What other examples does Peter use to warn us about what wickedness will lead to?

In Genesis 13:12, 13, Lot and Abraham decide to part ways. They do so for “financial” reasons. Lot chooses the Jordan valley. He “sets up his tents near Sodom” (Genesis 13:12, NIV). The Bible then says, “The people of Sodom were evil. They were sinning greatly against the LORD” (Genesis 13:13, NIV). Later, God warns Abraham that He plans to destroy Sodom. Abraham asks God to enter into an agreement with him. Abraham asks God not to destroy Sodom if ten holy people are found there (Genesis 18:16–33). But not even ten holy people could be found in Sodom. We can see just how wicked the men of the city are by reading about what they tried to do to the angels sent to visit Lot. So the city was destroyed. Only Lot and his two daughters escaped (Genesis 19:12–25).

Peter points to two lessons that this story teaches. First, the destruction of the cities is an example of the punishment coming to the wicked (2 Peter 2:6). Second, the story shows that the Lord knows how to rescue the holy from terrible events and difficult situations (2 Peter 2:7–9). Peter then describes the sins of those who were destroyed at Sodom and Gomorrah. (1) They gave in to lust. (2) They had no respect for authority. (3) They did what they wanted to do instead of obeying God. (4) And they spoke evil against the angels who came to visit Lot (2 Peter 2:10, 11). And Peter says that the false teachers in the church and their followers behave in the same way.

The story of Balaam is found in Numbers 22:1–24:25. Balak, the King of Moab, hires Balaam to curse the Israelites. In the end, Balaam ends up blessing Israel (Numbers 23:4–24:24). Peter uses Balaam as an example of those led into the sins of greed and of being unfaithful to God (2 Peter 2:14, 15). His point is that such people have left the path that they should follow.

Think about all that we have been given to instruct us about the danger of sin. We have been given the Bible and the writings of Ellen G. White. So why can we as Seventh-day Adventists never say that we have not been warned?



The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah shows that God knows how to rescue the holy from terrible situations.



Freedom in Christ does not mean we have the right to sin and break the law.

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: So often we hear Christians talk about “freedom in Christ.” Christ has truly set us free. The story of Martin Luther is a great example of what this freedom can mean. He suffered deeply until he understood what God’s forgiveness and mercy meant.

“Here is a great truth. We must depend completely upon Christ for salvation. This great truth lies close to the error of false belief. Freedom in Christ does not mean we have the right to sin and break the law. Many people believe this way. Christ came to free us from the just punishment of the law. Many people say that this freedom means that the law itself is done away. They claim that those who keep it are fallen from grace [mercy and forgiveness]. And so, minds that are not guided by the Holy Spirit will be led to accept this error. In so doing, these people place themselves under the power of Satan’s lies. Satan leads people to receive error for truth. By doing this work, Satan causes the Protestant world to worship him.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Christ Triumphant [The Winner of the Battle]*, page 324.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① Think deeply about 2 Peter 2:19 and what Peter says about the results of false teaching. Why must we be sure to learn for ourselves the truths we believe? How important is it that we all agree exactly on what we should believe? When does it become “dangerous” to think ideas that are different from the rest of our fellow believers?
- ② Look at some of the strong words that Peter uses to discuss punishment and judgment. He says, “The Lord also knows how to keep ungodly [unholy] people under guard. He will do so until the day they will be judged and punished” (2 Peter 2:9, NIV; also read 2 Peter 2:3; 2 Peter 2:1, 12). What should these verses tell us about how real the judgment is? And what do they tell us about how strongly God feels about those who will lead His people into error?
- ③ There are those who say that “freedom in Christ” means that we no longer need to keep the Ten Commandments. They also say that we no longer need to keep the Sabbath holy. How does this argument help us to see another way that the idea of “freedom in Christ” can be twisted?