

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Steadfastness in the Faith Requires Knowledge of Error

Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness. (2 Peter 3:17, KJV 1900)

Perhaps the best known line from the epic *"Gone with the Wind"* movie is not a line about the drama and tragedy of the Civil War, but Scarlett O'Hara's self-consumed "After all, tomorrow is another day." Did you ever think about why such lines as this become so popular with people? Maybe we all have a tendency to put off the unpleasant till "Tomorrow," thinking that we'll find some creative way to avoid the unpleasantness. At times, humans are so self-consumed that we've even invented a fancy word to describe the inclination to self-worship, "Narcissism" the mirror opposite of Scripture's commanded self-denial. In our imaginary world, everything comes up roses, and everyone always goes home and lives happily ever after. In the real world where we actually live, things do not always come up roses. Good people often must endure thorns, not fragrant blossoms. God doesn't cause the misery of humanity's plight, but He also doesn't always neutralize its toxin. In Galatians 6:9, Paul affirms God's rule of sowing and reaping. We shall surely reap what we sow in kind. While our God is unbelievably merciful, He does not guarantee that He will always deliver us from our own selfishness and folly.

Agricultural analogies fill the New Testament with rich lessons drawn from the simple life of the farmer, vineyard owner, or shepherd. Having grown up on a small farm, I can appreciate the richness of these analogies from personal experience. My dad didn't read the *Farmer's Almanac* to decide when to plow or to plant his crops. As soon as the soil was dry enough in the spring to be plowed, Dad started plowing and preparing the soil for planting. And while our neighbors thought about farming, Dad was busy actually farming. He always insisted on adjusting the cultivator and doing all the fine plowing with it himself. He adjusted the plows to reach as close to the plant as possible without disturbing the root structure of the crop. He wanted to kill as many weeds as possible. And then I had the "Privilege" of following his cultivating with a sharp hoe, eliminating any weed that escaped his plow. Dad understood what many naïve Christians fail to grasp. A weed left in the field will steal nutrition from the soil that the crop plant needs to grow strong and fruitful. The more weeds you allow in your field the more your crop and your eventual harvest will suffer. Paul's sowing and reaping

analogy, and Jesus' many agricultural analogies build on similar farming realities. As believers in Christ, the more we allow the wild weed seeds of sin, unbelief, and error, or of self and ego to grow in our lives the less spiritual fruit we will grow to perfection.

It is this simple, but pertinent point that Peter makes in his closing lesson to this letter. Not only do we need to grow in grace and the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we also need to learn the difference between truth and error, and we need to understand the insidious character of error's ability to neutralize the fruitfulness of a godly faith. We must uproot and destroy sin, error, and unbelief in our lives, "...beware lest..." if we hope to maintain our steadfastness in the faith, much less lay the groundwork for growth in spiritual grace and godly knowledge. The popular "Let's all hold hands and sing 'Kumbaya'" of our day naively pleads, "Let's just love each other and avoid any criticism of error" fails the Biblical test, the farming analogy of Scripture, and that failure always eventual manifests itself in the life of those who avoid facing the reality of error's corrosive toxin to a fruitful, godly faith. In the farming analogy of sowing and reaping, if we ignore the weeds and pretend they are not growing in our lives, they grow unimpeded and sap the life out of our spiritual fruitfulness.

If we weigh the letters of the New Testament in terms of what we—in our broken humanity—might assess as either positive or negative teaching, Second Peter would likely take the crown as the most negative letter. While the first chapter is gloriously positive in its affirmation of God's goodness and grace to His children, the second chapter begins with a stern warning about the insidious working of false prophets. Peter devotes a rather lengthy chapter in terms of New Testament space to this topic. He continues that topic into the third chapter. While beginning the third chapter with an example of what false prophets taught in his day, Peter also gives us something of an insight into the mental gymnastics of false prophets in any time. Thank the Lord, in the end, he does turn from the dark error of the false prophet to the truth of God's Word regarding the Lord's faithful promise to return and fulfill His final promise of deliverance and glory to His covenant people. While deceitful false prophets succeed in deceiving and misleading many naïve or self-willed sheep, they never

frustrate God's eventual purpose to safely secure all whom the Father gave to Him. He shall preserve them to Himself and eternal glory in the end. Paul specifically addresses this point in 2 Timothy 2:16-19. Despite two false prophets whom Paul names who errantly claimed that the resurrection had already occurred, Paul affirms that God's foundation of grace stands sure. The Lord still knows His own, and He shall keep them from final loss. They shall appear with Him in glory at the Second Coming. It seems that first century false prophets intensely disliked the truth of the Second Coming and the Lord's final victory over all adversaries. Both Paul and Peter confront and refute denial of this doctrine in various forms.

In our study passage, Peter builds his closing thought on his readers' knowledge of the things that he has written. Given that he focused so much of his space on false prophets and their wicked ways, we cannot avoid that at least some of Peter's focus in this verse includes knowledge of the false prophet and his error. Yes, the obvious means of avoiding error and standing faithfully relies on the truth of the Lord's faithful promise, but faithfulness requires that the godly believer must know enough about error to recognize it and to avoid it.

Peter not only nudges us to the positive in terms of the steadfastness in the faith that he admonishes, but he also warns us to beware of our own vulnerability to those who promote error; "...beware lest ye also..." If false prophets didn't conceal their deceit and their error, they would always fail to gain a following of disciples to themselves and to their false teachings. We listen to the false prophet's words and to his pretense of humble sincerity, and we want to think that he is upright and sound in the faith. His success can be measured precisely by the degree of skill that he employs in covering his error and his motives. No false prophet announces, "Beware. I have departed from the faith, and what I now believe is wrong." His success requires him to deceive and to mislead vulnerable, naïve sheep into believing that he is sincere and correct.

Do we listen to our emotions, tickled by the false prophets of our time? Or do we listen to Peter's inspired warnings? Do not ignore the obvious point. The Holy Spirit who directed the writing of all the other books of the Bible also directed Peter to write this book. The Holy Spirit, not simply Peter, knew that we must be equipped to face just such false prophets and to distinguish them from faithful men who live and preach the truth.

I have known two men in my life whom I embraced as friends, close friends whom I loved and respected who eventually departed from the faith and sought to lead any who would listen and follow them into their error. I can speak from experience to the truth of Peter's warnings and exhortations. Like the first readers of Peter's second letter, I needed the warning to beware, lest I fall from my steadfastness by the influence these

men sought to impose. Their words were smooth and persuasive. However, when I began to weigh their words against the teachings of Scripture, I slowly realized the starkness of the difference between their words and faithful Scripture. Thank the Lord, the simple truth of Scripture delivered me, and I am therefore persuaded that the same Scriptures, faithfully read, believed, and practiced, steadfastly so, can deliver any child of grace caught in the snare of a false prophet.

Peter juxtaposes the error of the false prophet to "...your own steadfastness." What does Peter intend by this term? How do we distinguish the man who holds steadfastly to the faith of Scripture from the man who pretends to do so while actually departing unfaithfully from it? As I have written on Second Peter, in addition to studying other Scriptures, I have also reflected on personal experience, and on historical Christianity's difficult seasons. A sad, but enlightening pattern has surfaced. Paul categorically states that the Lord's church is *the "...pillar and ground of the truth."* (1 Timothy 3:15b) In the two personal experiences mentioned above, as well as in my reflection on major historical departures from the faith, an individual man claimed to have discovered or to have received a "Revelation" from the Lord regarding a truth that he claimed was long forgotten or neglected by the Lord's church. Of course, he claimed that God called him to restore this "Revelation" of his new beliefs to the church. Think of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young of the nineteenth century, along with Judge Russell, or others. They all used this guise to add an appearance of credibility to their claim. Instead of respecting the truth of Scripture regarding God's using His church as the pillar and ground of the truth, these men denied this truth and claimed that God had effectively used them as the pillar and ground of the truth. The same is true of almost all the false prophets whom I have either observed or studied on the pages of history. If we stand steadfastly on the truth of 1 Timothy 3:15b, as well as Ephesians 3:21 and Jude 1:3 (Jude exhorts us to earnestly contend for "...the faith which was **once delivered unto the saints**"), the arrogant claims of any false prophet who usurps the role of the Lord's church as "...pillar and ground of the truth" will appear clearly.

Is it then possible for churches to depart from the truth and from their own steadfastness? Of course it is, but, for the individual believer, it is a far safer course to stand by the teachings that his local church has historically believed than to ignore those teachings and follow the enticing words of any individual who teaches contrary to that faith, or of his own imaginations. In the first three chapters of Revelation, we have Scripture's clear model of both truth and of the Lord's church set forth. When a church strays, the Lord in some way sends His personal message and warning to them, along with His outline of the clear path to repentance and restoration; never a private "Revelation" to an

individual. The Lord's corrective message is to His church. We do not have Biblical records of how each of those seven churches reacted to the Lord's warnings. We do have a subtle witness in history. None of those churches exist today, so at some point, they refused His message, and He imposed His threatened judgment. Every church that the Lord views as one of His churches today faces this same reality. Constantly and collectively seek the Lord's will and guiding hand in your church, and avoid any influence that interferes or diminishes His warnings to the church. In the end, following the path of a church is far safer than following the path of an individual prophet who departs from that path. The final judgment shall not be rendered based on who has the best personality or who gains the largest numbers, but on the Lord's judgment alone. I am amused at the frequency with which false prophets claim, "We will win because we have the greater number of followers on our side." If numbers determine truth, we need to take a hard look at the Church of Rome today, at the powers of Salt Lake City, or even at the growing number of Mohamed's followers. Their numbers exceed all others. Scripture settles the question. God, not the effectiveness of a false prophet's deceit, determines truth. Scripture's firm command to us is simple. *"...be thou faithful." "...beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness."*

In light of these clear Biblical teachings, let us today join with Peter, not empathize with the false prophets whom he refutes, and *"...beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness."* Our greatest personal danger is our own vulnerability to a false prophet. Thus, we need to take Peter's warning to beware to ourselves daily.

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
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