

BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: 2 Peter: Hope Filled Living in a Culture of Despair

By Pastor Bryan Clark

Message Title: Empty Promises Pt. 1

Release Date: Monday 10/21/19

Right out of high school, I moved to Chicago and lived there three years to go to school there. There were a lot of things about Chicago that I fell in love with. One of those would be the pizza. Chicago is known for its pizza, and for good reason! I graduated there, came back, went to the university; Patti and I got married, and we headed out to Southern California for me to go to grad school. While we were there, we became aware of a pizza restaurant down by the beach that was called Chicago Pizza. As a matter of fact, their big advertisement was Chicago-style pizza, so this sounded really appealing. I actually had a friend of mine that was in the dorm with me in Chicago, who had gotten married and lived in Southern California, so we decided to go together. So, we show up and order our Chicago pizza. They bring out what looks like a cracker—no tomato sauce, sliced up tomatoes, and a little parmesan cheese. (laughter) Exactly! I felt obligated to inform the waitress, “This is not Chicago pizza.” It’s like, “What is this? Is this the appetizer? Is this the teaser?” I’m sorry- only in California could they think that’s a Chicago pizza. (No offense to those of you from the great state of California.) (laughter)

You know, to be promised one thing and have something else delivered, when it’s a pizza, is just kind of annoying. But to be promised something with the most significant decisions of life, only to have those promises be lies and deception, that is something very different. That’s what we want to talk about. If you have a Bible, turn with us to 2 Peter, Chapter 2. Peter is concerned about the false teachers that have come into the churches and have the potential to lead the people astray. And so, I talked about a false teacher being like a life coach. These are all people that are applying for the opportunity to tell you how to live life. There are hundreds of such voices coming at us every day, and so Peter is encouraging us: Before you listen to the words of this life coach, it might be helpful to look at the life of the life coach and ask yourself, “Are they living the life that I want for myself?” If not, why would you listen to what they have to say? So, he talked about the attitudes and the characteristics of these false teachers, and we continue with that in Verse 17:

These are springs without water and mists driven by a storm... (*NASB, 2 Peter 2:17a)

So, if you think about the path of life as a road—Verse 16, we were reminded that even a dumb donkey knows that we should not forsake the path of life—so think of Highway 2 as the path of life. And then imagine all these off ramps, all these billboards, all these signs, all these appeals to get off the road—to take one of these ramps in order to experience “more,” in order to experience what you are “looking for”. The promise is: “...for that which will ultimately satisfy”.

So, what they are promising are springs full of clean, fresh water. Now these images were very powerful in a 1st Century Near East culture. They are not as powerful for us. We have water in America at our disposal everywhere you look but think about an ancient culture where it was dry; it was hot; it was barren, and water was about daily survival. Imagine traveling somewhere

with the understanding if you did not find springs along the way, there was a real chance you may not survive. So, imagine someone who is traveling, they're getting more and more thirsty and realizing, "This is getting desperate. If I cannot find water, we might not survive." Imagine a whole family and they encounter someone who says, "You know, if you go about five miles off the path, I promise there is a spring full of cool fresh water." So, you get off the path and you travel down that path, believing that you were told the truth. But you get there and you find out it is a spring with no water. It's now dried up, and you realize you and your family will perish. That is how Peter is describing these false teachers. They are springs without water. They are mists driven by a storm.

We in the Midwest might think of it more as being in the midst of severe drought – and the clouds kind of form, and there is a moment where you think, "Maybe...finally there is some relief from the drought," but the clouds quickly dissipate. No rain! and we are disappointed again. Now you contrast that with how many times Jesus in the Gospels identified Himself as the Water of Life. For those with dry and thirsty souls, Jesus identified Himself as the water that satisfies a thirsty soul. What these false teachers are doing is so cruel; it is so sinister that the verse ends:

...for whom the black darkness has been reserved. (Vs. 17b)

In other words, their judgment ultimately is in Hell because of the sinister lies and deception that have destroyed so many lives. Very strong language!

What did they do? Verse 18:

For speaking out arrogant [inflated, exaggerated] words of vanity [They are empty... worthless.] they entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality... (Vs. 18a)

This word entices, it's a Greek word that means to bait a hook or to bait a trap. So, they're trying to trap you. They are trying to lure you off the path of life with all kinds of empty promises, with all kinds of billboards and advertisements and promises that this will make you happy. "This will satisfy and give you what you are looking for!" So, what exactly do they use as bait on the trap? The text tells us. They tap into these fleshly desires. The best way to understand this is to realize we are people made in the image of God, and as such, we have legitimate longings and desires. We legitimately long to be loved, to be accepted, to belong. We long for safety, we long for security, we long for pleasure, we long for significance, and we long for hope. These are real and legitimate longings. The false teachers understand that, so that's what they tap into. They tap into something that, for you, is real, and it's powerful, and you are seeking, and struggling, and looking, but they're springs without water. They lie to you and convince you that there is something that will satisfy, when at the end of the story, it will only break your heart again.

They entice; they bait the trap with things that are real and meaningful and powerful to you.

...by sensuality those who barely escape from the ones who live in error, (Vs. 18b)

It's kind of a weird statement, but basically what it is saying is, at one time these were people who were neck deep in their pagan ways, but it was so hurtful, it was so empty, it was so lonely, it was so dissatisfying, that they're now seeking something different...for something more.

So, imagine three categories of people: There are those who have experienced life change in Jesus. They are traveling the path of life and they are absolutely determined, “This is the path I want to travel.” And then there are people that are neck-deep in their pagan ways. They could care less what God has to say. They could care less what the Bible has to say. They could care less what someone like me has to say. And then there are these people in the middle, who have been so hurt by the ways of the world. They’re searching, they’re seeking, they’re desperately wondering, if there is something that will finally satisfy. They could be new believers. They could be just seekers, but they are in that high-risk category!

You remember in Chapter One Peter told us there are these steps up the staircase that are necessary to grow and strengthen as a Christian. It started with moral excellence, which was this idea of ultimately deciding, “Yes, this is the path I want to travel. I’ve made up my mind.” Second was knowledge—the idea that we need to know the truth. We are extremely vulnerable to the false teachers until we have a strong sense of what is true. You’ll never really understand the lies until you know the truth. Once we know the truth, then it leads to a self-discipline, which leads to perseverance, which leads to godliness, and Peter kind of stepped us through the process. So, Peter is identifying this as the group that is at risk; this is the group that the false teachers are targeting. They don’t yet know the truth. They’re either new believers or they are seeking, and they are trying to find that which will ultimately satisfy.

Verse 19, what do they promise them?

...promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption; (Vs. 19a)

They’re slaves of their own choices. They’re slaves of their own lifestyle, but what they promise people is freedom. This roots all the way back to Genesis Chapter 3. This is what the serpent offered Adam and Eve—that ultimately life would be better if you were in charge, if you were God, if you were deciding what is right and wrong. That’s ultimate freedom, and it sounds so compelling. So, we are traveling down Highway 2, which is the path of life, but we notice, “You know this is really restrictive. I mean there is a speed limit. There are lines. You are supposed to go only one way. There are all these signs that are telling us what to do.” And then we look out beyond the highway and there are all these empty fields. “I don’t see any signs out there, I don’t see any lines out there, I don’t see any speed limits out there. That looks like freedom!” So, we decide that’s the way of freedom.

You know what’s going to happen. You are only going to get so far until you get stuck, and you are going to get so deep in the mud, it’s going to become very difficult to rescue you. It isn’t freedom! Even the false teachers themselves live in bondage.

The end of the verse says:

...for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved. (Vs. 19b)

That’s actually what was referred to as a military proverb. The literal idea was that when the enemy defeats you, overcomes you, then you become the enemy’s slave. Peter’s using it more metaphorically to say, “When you give in to the false teachers, you ultimately are overcome by those decisions, and you become enslaved to that which you thought would make you so happy.”

Starting then in Verse 20 to the end of the chapter is a very highly disputed portion of 2 Peter. There is a wide range of opinion. There are lots of variables. So, with that said, I'm going to tell you what I think it says, but just be aware there are others that think differently. Verse 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. 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. (Vs. 20-21)

So, the first part of the debate is: who are the they that's referred to in Verse 20? Almost all commentators think the they are the false teachers. Grammatically, that makes the most sense; it connects to Verse 19. Also, the false teachers are the subject of the discussion through the whole chapter, so most likely they are referring to the false teachers.

Much more of the debate and the discussion is around the idea of whether or not the false teachers were believers. Were they believers that lost their salvation? Were they believers that gave up their salvation willingly, or were they never believers at all? That's what most of the discussion revolves around. This is, to me, very similar to the text in Hebrews 6, if you are familiar with that. It has a lot of the same dynamics.

Basically, what he is saying is these people came out of those pagan ways and they learned the information related to the claim that Jesus was God in the flesh. He was the Lord Jesus Christ and He provided the way of righteousness. But at the end of the day they listened, they involved themselves with the people; they gave consideration to it but ultimately decided, "I don't want it!" They decided it was too restrictive. They decided they wanted to indulge their flesh. They decided they did not want to be told what to do—they despised authority—and ultimately, they decided, "I am not interested," and went back, entangled in their former ways. Peter says that's now worse than their previous situation. Why does he say that?

Peter taught us in 1 Peter that all of us, before we came to Christ, were ignorant and searching for that which would ultimately satisfy. We are trying to figure out, "Which is the road of life, and how do I know it, and where is it?" But once we encounter the resurrected Christ and our lives have been changed, Peter told us we are not ignorant anymore. At one time we lived that way because we didn't know any better. Now we know better, so it would be foolish to return to those former ways. That's what Peter taught us in his first letter. So, the reason in this text that these false teachers are now worse off than they were before is because now they have been exposed to the truth of the Gospel. They have been exposed to the truth of who Jesus is, what He did, and the way of salvation. They have actually been shown - this is the path of life, but after their analysis, after careful consideration—it may be weeks or months or years—they finally decided, "Not interested. I don't want it," and they go back to their pagan ways. At this point they understand the Gospel; they are not missing any information. They just don't want it, and that puts them in a worse situation than they were before.

Arnie: So, Bryan, this is mind boggling for me. You just spoke of people who are exposed to the truth of Jesus, then decide to reject it. Is that blasphemy? Is that why they're in a worse situation than before?

Bryan: So, the phrase blaspheming the Holy Spirit is, it's a question I get asked a lot, comes from the Gospels. A lot of people fear they've committed the unpardonable sin, but basically it was rejecting the truth that was clearly being revealed through Jesus. So that is what Peter's talking about. And that's why they're in a worse situation, is they now understand the claims of the Gospel. They've experienced some level of community. They get what it is, but they don't want it. So, it's very much like Hebrews Six and that is, there's nothing more to tell them. They know the truth. They just don't want the truth.

Arnie: So, in essence, it's logical. If you reject the truth, you die. I mean, is that what you're saying?

Bryan: I think anyone can be saved until the moment they die. So, you can't really commit the unpardonable sin until the moment you die. But if you choose to reject what Jesus did for you right up to the moment you die, then you have no home.

Arnie: That's the best explanation of blasphemy I've ever heard.

Cara: Yeah. That's the unpardonable sin.

Arnie: Because you're dead.

Cara: Yeah, you're done. [Yup.] All right. So, I have to admit that false teachers are pretty clever and they're very compelling. They're image makers that create this appealing message and they sell their take on life, and we're all just supposed to follow that. The sad thing is they're doing it for profit and also many people believe those lies.

Bryan: Yeah. So, for me as a pastor, it's very frustrating because I end up being part of picking up the pieces. So yes, they're very good at it. They're like a really good salesperson. They know how to sell their message. They prey on people's hurts and longings and desires and emptiness and disappointments. They do it for personal gain and it's very destructive.

Cara: There's a lot of hypocrisy in that though, because if you think about it, the same people who are promising so-called freedom are actually themselves enslaved in that money, power and all that evil.

Bryan: Yeah. They don't live in freedom. That's exactly right. So, I think again, like we've been talking about, you need to look at these people, how they live their lives. Most of them are pretty miserable. That's just not really what our soul's longing for.

Arnie: So many people get caught up with promises of looking better, living better, having more money, more power. But Bryan, doesn't it all have to do with the desire to be our own god?

Bryan: Yeah, so exactly right. That puts me in charge of my own significance and value. And so, then it does come back to how I look, how much money I have, what kind of house I live in, what my position is, what my title is. So now as god, I'm trying to find something that will satisfy. And ultimately that's an empty, disappointing journey.

Cara: Peter doesn't really mince words when it comes to God's judgment of false teachers. You never see one of these guys questioning their faith, I notice. And you also unfortunately never

see any of them denouncing what they're doing and coming to faith. So, their future looks pretty dim.

Bryan: Right. So, Peter loves us, [and] them so much, he tells the truth. And there is a reminder, like it or not, judgment is coming, and all this does get resolved in the end.