

“Keep Growing”

Robert M. Thompson, Pastor

Corinth Reformed Church
150 Sixteenth Avenue NW
Hickory, North Carolina 28601
828.328.6196 corinthtoday.org

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If you listen to the wrong voices, you'll lose your spiritual footing.

2 Peter 3:11-18

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Panoramic or zoom?

As most of you know, Linda and I have a son and daughter-in-law in Hawaii where they are raising the smartest 2 ½ year old in the history of the world. For obvious reasons we haven't been there recently, but for a while we made an annual trip. There are two ways to gain a deeper appreciation for Hawaii – panoramic or zoom in.

Panoramic might include one of several options. You can read books, watch documentaries, visit a museum, or climb to the top of a high peak and soak in the view. Another way to grasp Hawaii panoramically would be to study a category common to Hawaii – volcanoes, culture, flowers, waterfalls, military history, tropical plants, waves, coral, or churches. The potential list is long.

Our daughter-in-law, Carlie Wiener, just this week published her [doctoral dissertation](#) on Hawaii's spinner dolphins – specifically human interaction with these amazing creatures. She was particularly interested in the growing tourist industry and how gawking humans in the water might affect the lives of spinner dolphins. That's part of the panoramic experience, taking a broad look at a category in Hawaiian life.

Most of us who have experienced Hawaii know that the panoramic view is somewhat unsatisfactory. To love and appreciate Hawaii, you need proximity and patience – the zoom in approach. Look closely. Wait for the right moment. Soak it in. Hang loose. Jump off a lava rock on the north shore of Oahu, snorkel Hanauma Bay, catch a wave at Waikiki, open a fresh pineapple, catch the sun rising over Haleakala then

ride bikes down the volcano, eat an Acai bowl, visit Pearl Harbor, worship at a historic church, or pay attention to the sky and catch a double full rainbow.

Since it was her research field, Carlie even arranged for us to go out and swim with some of those spinner dolphins. We were especially charmed by the mother and baby swimming together. That was a zoom in approach.

In the same way, there are two ways to study the Bible. We call the panoramic view “systematic theology.” You see the Bible as a unified whole. You never study an event or letter in isolation. If you’re used to thumbing through your Bible for cross references and comparing a Bible verse in 2 Peter with what Paul or Moses said, that’s a version of systematic theology. Nothing’s read in isolation. I do not wish to demean systematic theology. It has an important and historic role to play in Christian thinking.

I have a personal preference in study and preaching for zooming in: what’s called “biblical theology.” Biblical theology walks through forests of the Bible and stops to gaze at one flower. It snorkels in the reef, captured by the beauty of one species of coral. Biblical theology seeks to know what the Holy Spirit is saying in one passage, for example, in Moses and the burning bush or the feeding of the 5000 or one letter, like 2 Peter, without having to compare everything in the Bible. It still takes into account context and background, and is aware of other Scriptures – in the same way that if I catch Haleakala at sunrise I know there are hundreds of other volcanoes in the islands.

Biblical theology also has its risks, but I love the zoom lens. I like to spend a week with one particular Scripture and plumb its depths. Systematic theology is not *unbiblical* theology. Both approaches have benefits. Let me illustrate with today’s text.

Peter’s summary

In 2 Peter 3:11-13, Peter speaks of the coming “day of God.” *Systematic theology*, the panoramic approach, loves the doctrine of eschatology, or end times. This passage is rich on that subject. The “day of God” will include the destruction of the world followed by “a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.” Systematic theology wants to know how that overlays Daniel or Revelation. It asks questions like, “How does this fit with the rapture of the church?” Or the millennium? Or the book of Daniel or Revelation? Systematic theology wrestles with how we can “speed its coming,” and compares Jesus’ teaching that he will come back when his gospel has been preached to the whole world (Matthew 24:14).

Biblical theology might be more interested in why Peter is the only New Testament writer who talked about “the destruction of the heavens (and earth) by fire, and what else Peter has said in *this* letter about what it means to live “holy and godly lives.” Peter has had a lot to say about that in 2 Peter. I’ll come back to that.

Systematic theology loves verses 14-16, where says he is agreeing with “our dear brother Paul.” Paul writes more about Peter than Peter does about Paul, and elsewhere in the New Testament there seems more distance than friendship between the two. Peter puts Paul’s writings and authority on the level with “other Scriptures.” He also says that some things Paul writes are “hard to understand,” and this gives occasion to “ignorant and unstable people” to distort Paul’s “hard to understand” passages.

This is one of the most important internal witnesses of the New Testament to its own authority. To place any part of what we call the New Testament on the same level as the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) – well, it’s hard to overstate the importance of that. *Systematic theology* uses this platform to dive into the doctrine of inspiration.

Biblical theology is more interested in why Peter would use this letter and this context to reflect on Paul’s writings. *Biblical theology* notices some phrases here that are repeated earlier in 2 Peter – “make every effort” and “our Lord’s patience means salvation.” Peter spent all of chapter 2 talking about “ignorant and unstable men.”

In the final paragraph, vv. 17-18, which also forms the conclusion to 2 Peter, *systematic theology* can hardly resist a debate about the doctrine of “eternal security” because Peter warns his readers against the possibility of falling “from your secure position.” Every Bible study group I led this week wanted to discuss whether Peter is saying you can lose your salvation. What about those other verses in the New Testament, like when Jesus says, “No one can snatch you out of my hand” (John 10 :28)?

Biblical theology is not as interested in resolving that issue, at least not right away. *Biblical theology* has noticed that 2 Peter balances God’s grace with a stern warning – mostly directed to false teachers but also to those who would follow them. Peter is addressing a precarious situation in the church – false teachers who are not only denying the Second Coming of Jesus but using that denial as an excuse to spread the lie that God doesn’t care how you live or what choices you make. They think there’s no accountability for their exploitation of people sexually, intellectually, or theologically.

It’s a message that easily gains a following and Peter warns severely against it. Don’t you dare say, “once saved always saved” and then exploit others for your gain or your pleasure. You’re in spiritual danger yourself and so is everyone who listens to you.

Biblical theology also notices that Peter’s verb tense is not just “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ,” but “keep growing in grace and knowledge.” This life of faith requires persistence, effort attention.

1 and 2 Peter

These distinctions are important as we finish up our studies in 1 and 2 Peter. For one thing, after today we’re going to leave not only Peter’s writings but the New Testament for a few months. Starting next week, we’re going to get some biblical

theology in the fourth book of the Bible, simply titled, “Numbers.” Numbers is all about the forty years of wilderness wandering between the Exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt and the conquest of the Promised Land, related in Joshua. Nobody likes the wilderness. It’s dry and hot and feels aimless and isolating.

You’re going to be longing for the “good old days” when we were in 1 and 2 Peter, soaking in the Gospel of Jesus. There will be some occasional “systematic theology” nods to the New Testament, but I’m most interested in the “biblical theology” of Numbers. I want to know how God meets people in their deserts even when they don’t know the end of the story. I hope you’ll bring your pandemic wilderness right into church so we can talk and pray about it.

Meanwhile, my preference for biblical theology craves a little review of 1 and 2 Peter as we wrap up our studies. I hope you’ve grown a fondness for the writings of Peter. I hope I’ve inspired you to read and study his writings again, and again, and again. I have compiled all the Corinth sermons on 1 and 2 Peter into a notebook.

We started our studies by saying that that when you think of Peter in the New Testament, you probably don’t think too highly of him. He frequently stuck his foot in his mouth. It was to Peter that Jesus said, “Get thee behind me Satan!” And it was Peter who denied Jesus three times.

These two letters are written by that same Peter, but by a much more mature version. Aren’t you glad there’s a more mature version of you, and there’s an even more Christ-like version of you in the making? Let me summarize for you what this more mature Peter has to say in 1 Peter. This is what biblical theology does.

1 Peter focuses on Jesus’ first coming. It’s a letter written to a specific group of Christians in what we now call Turkey who are or will soon be suffering for their faith. Peter tells them when Christians suffer, the number one thing they need to remember is that when Jesus Christ came into the world, he suffered.

He not only suffered, he chose suffering – for your sake. The Christian way of thinking and of life is to deny self. To choose self-denial for the sake of others. It’s why we Christians submit to authority – authority in government, authority in the home, authority in the church. We voluntarily give up our rights.

Why would Christians choose a life of self-sacrifice, of submission, of service, of suffering? Because that’s the great divide between Christians and non-Christians. Until Jesus takes over and changes your life, your attitude is, “What’s in it for me? How can I get the rest of the world to see things my way and serve me better? How can I look out for myself more? How can I get more money, more power, more pleasure, for me?” In that world view, suffering is terrible. It makes no sense. God must be on vacation. Doesn’t God love me enough to look out for me the way I look out for my children?

Fortunately, you're not in this alone. You have Jesus who's been there before you, leading the way through life, suffering, death, the intermediate state between this life and the life to come, resurrection, and ascension. He's sitting at God's right hand. You not only have him as your Rock, you are living stones joined to others who are his temple here on earth. That's who you are – a chip off the old Rock.

When you're suffering – no matter why – Peter says the wrong question to ask is “Why is this happening to me?” or “How can I regain control over other people or the things that are happening to me?” In a biblical theology of 1 Peter, the right questions sound more like this: How can I follow Jesus' example? What will win people to Jesus? What does God see and value? How can I not misuse my own advantage? How do I love others the way God does? What's hindering my relationship to Jesus?

Peter gives a series of commands in his first letter. His summary of what to do in 1 Peter is simply, “Do the next holy thing.” Do the next loving thing. Do the next surprising thing that makes people ask, “What gives you such hope?” Then be ready to give an answer that points those who malign you to Jesus Christ (4:12). Tell them it's because you know that Jesus came, suffered, and rose again.

When Peter writes the second letter, he frames it as a “reminder.” It's written to a broader group of Christians whose danger is not external attack (suffering) but internal division and dilution of the Gospel (false teaching). Christ will judge those who distort his message by what they do and say.

Specifically, 2 Peter reminds the readers that Jesus is coming back. The response needs to reflect urgency and zeal. While you're waiting for Jesus to come back, you need a reminder of who God is. He's a God who keeps his promises. What looks like delay to you or others – that the Second Coming hasn't happened yet – is a display of his patience. He wants more people to know him.

Knowing him is his primary goal for us, in fact. There are those out there who promote a false knowledge – a secret knowledge for a private club of those “in the know.” They use that false knowledge to promote false freedom – the freedom to do whatever you want, even exploiting people. There's a special place in hell for them.

By contrast, God has given you everything you need for life and godliness. If you think from 1 Peter that Jesus' first coming means everything's been done for you by Jesus and the result is you can be passive, you're mistaken.

2 Peter's message is that the Second Coming means you need to “make every effort” to grow from faith into love. Choreograph a life of goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, and *philadelphia* love – friendship and companionship. It takes work! Stay at it. This is serious business, people. Keep growing.

It especially requires effort with those scoffers about. And it requires special attention to the Bible, which is not human opinion (that can be wrong), but God's opinion. This is what God thinks, and he's never wrong. Peter speaks of prophets and apostles who faithfully represent God's thoughts in contrast to false teachers.

Peter writes all this to people he calls "dear friends." Friends don't let friends forget that the day of God is coming. They warn each other about those false teachers. They hear and respond to and share the call to repent, urgently, to make a U-turn from the self-life to the God-life. Don't let yourself be deceived by false teachers who twist that apparent delay into "Then it doesn't matter how you live." Remember, remember, remember: "A day is with the Lord as a thousand years." He's just waiting for more people to repent because he's so patient.

In 2 Peter, instead of telling you to "do the next holy thing," Peter's emphasis is "keep growing." When you're suffering, focus on what Jesus did and do one thing at a time. When you're not suffering, and you think Jesus is delaying, then "keep growing."

Peter's theology

That's what I mean by biblical theology. I didn't have to jump all over the Bible or compare passages – though I want to repeat I think that's also a perfectly legitimate way to study and teach the Bible. I stuck with Peter's approach and Peter's words. I love Peter's letters and I want you to love them as well.

I especially want you to return to 1 Peter when you're suffering – whether it's imposed on you or you choose suffering by denying yourself and submitting to others. When life goes from bad to worse, read 1 Peter. Reflect on the suffering of Jesus for you. You belong to him as part of his temple. It's who you are. In the midst of your pain, tell yourself, "It's going to be OK. It turned out OK for him." Then go and do the next holy thing. Do the next thing that will make you stand out as a follower of Jesus.

I want you to turn to 2 Peter when you get lazy about your Christian life. When you either want to give up because you think you can't do it or because you're hearing voices that twist the truth. They're saying there's a secret you haven't discovered yet or when you think God is so slow and Jesus probably isn't coming back – or at least not anytime soon. Go back to 2 Peter as a reminder for yourself and your own "dear friends." Jesus is coming again to judge the living and the dead. He's worth all you've got, and he's given you everything you need to live a life dedicated to him.

Don't listen to any voice – in your head or in the world or even inside the church that says your conduct doesn't matter. If you listen to voices like that you'll lose your spiritual footing. You'll "fall from your secure position."

Instead, keep growing in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. His glory is here now, is coming soon, and will last forever. Amen.