

# ***“A Special Place in Hell”***

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***The road to hell is just as much a journey as the way to heaven.***

**2 Peter 2:1-22**

**August 2, 2020**

(Available in print form at [corinthtoday.org/sermons](http://corinthtoday.org/sermons) or by audio at 828.328.6196.)

## ***Blackest darkness***

My son-in-law is a great guy to be around. I love that his background is different than mine, so he introduces insights and stories and sayings from a fresh perspective. One of Matt’s sayings is, “There’s a special place in hell for....”

It’s an expression not always to be taken literally. Sometimes it’s just a way of saying, “That ticks me off.” For example, “There’s a special place in hell for people who don’t tip those who serve them.” Matt worked for a while at a golf course, and experienced first-hand being treated lower than a servant by snobbish players.

Then there are times when the expression is more serious, like, “There’s a special place in hell for child abusers” or “...for a man who hits a woman.” In general, the theme of Matt’s use of this expression is that those who use their power and advantage to exploit others deserve God’s severest judgment.

There is historical precedent for this saying. John F. Kennedy, Madeline Albright, Martin Luther King, Jr., and others have quoted or adapted this phrase: “The darkest places in hell are reserved for those who maintain neutrality in times of moral crisis.” The quote is often attributed to Dante’s Inferno – but there’s some debate about that.

Today’s text, 2 Peter 2, offers a biblical basis for the idea that some behaviors merit a worse fate in the life to come. Peter says of the false teachers, “Blackest darkness is reserved for them.”

## ***Chapter 2 by paragraphs***

Chapter 2 is probably the main reason I've waited so long in my ministry to preach a series of sermons on 2 Peter. I am at heart a peacemaker who tries to find common ground, who preaches unity and humility. This chapter makes me uncomfortable. I don't like words that condemn and divide. However, I love the Scripture. It proved true again this week that when I dig into any particular Scripture passage I gain a much deeper appreciation for it than my first impression.

If you were a bit turned off by Peter's attitude as you read or heard the text for the first time today or previously, I understand. But I think I can show that this passage is completely consistent with good biblical theology. I also think I can show that this text is not designed to leave you with the attitude, "Some people are really terrible – and then there's me." The Holy Spirit inspired this chapter to dive deeply into the motives and actions of every one of us who is brave enough to approach it with humility.

Furthermore, this chapter does what I promised last week: it offers a case study on false prophecy. The Bible gives us God's opinion (his verdict, his view), but sometimes those who quote the Bible are just giving a human opinion. How do we know? 2 Peter 2 is written to help us answer that question.

There are too many verses to deal with the chapter verse-by-verse. Let me start with a quick overview paragraph-by-paragraph.

*First, inevitability* (vv. 1-3). False teachers are as certain as death and taxes. God's people always have and always will deal with false teachers. Wherever there is truth, there will be error. False teaching will always gain a following. Because the demands of the Gospel are high, some will inevitably create a version more palatable. Their intent will be that the Gospel is more about you and less about God.

*Second, destiny* (vv. 4-9). The examples Peter gives from the Old Testament in verses 4-8 (angels, Noah, Sodom and Gomorrah, and Lot) are not only about what happens to bad people but what happens to good people. There is both carrot and stick in Peter's words: "The Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials and to hold the unrighteous for punishment on the day of judgment" (9).

*Third, arrogance* (vv. 10-12). The central character flaw of false teachers is that they not only "follow the corrupt desire of the flesh," but they "despise authority" (10) – human authority, civil authority, God's authority, any authority. Peter continues, "Bold and arrogant, they are not afraid to heap abuse on celestial beings." The literal translation is "glories," and it may be a reference to the glory of Christ's second coming. We'll return to that theme in chapter 3.

*Fourth, retribution* (vv. 13-16). They will get what they deserve. They have destroyed; they will be destroyed. In Peter's words, "They will be paid back with harm for the harm they have done."

*Finally, darkness* (17-22). "Blackest darkness is reserved for them," Peter says. You may wonder why hell is described as "darkness" while in Revelation it's a "lake of fire." Like biblical descriptions of heaven, the words used to describe hell are analogies and metaphors – attempts to put into human language what no human has ever experienced. Don't take them literally; do take them seriously. The terror of hell is ultimately neither darkness nor fire. It is an existence without God.

The false teachers are on a highway to hell with no U-turns. They have heard truth, both the warnings and the wonders, and they have deliberately rejected it. They have chosen their slavery to sin over the freedom of grace. They would have been better off had they never heard the truth than to be guilty of turning away from it.

### ***Motives and methods***

This is arguably the harshest chapter in the Bible, although Matthew 23 (the words of Jesus) and Jude are remarkably parallel. What kind of people deserve this much apostolic venom? Peter is not mincing any words when he says there's a special place in hell for these false teachers. Why?

Let's review the chapter for the motives and methods of false teachers.

- *Secrecy (1)*. They start stealthily, operating in the darkness where they can't be confronted by godly leaders. If Peter's warning is about an early form of Gnosticism, secrecy is a main point. The message that somehow you're not in on the deepest secrets about God creates not only curiosity but worry that there's some hidden key to happiness that you're missing out on.
- *Toxic heresies (1)*. It's not only that what the false teachers are saying is wrong; it actually destroys lives. It's like a carefree party during a pandemic; it murders those who embrace it the most.
- *Greed (3)*. Instead of loving people and using things, these teachers love things and use people.
- *Fabricated stories (3)*. This is a bit of an aside, but stories in our day have become the new proof text. In previous eras, logic, reason and maybe statistics added up to truth. Now, almost everyone tries to prove a point with a story. It's called anecdotal evidence. In a political argument, both sides use it. In the current debate over unemployment benefits, one side will tell a story about someone who may lose her home and not be able to feed her children if she doesn't get unemployment benefits. The other side will tell a story about someone who's making more money on unemployment than he would be working. In most cases, the stories are true stories, but

they're shared as if that's the whole picture. Well, these false teachers are even worse – they're making up fake stories to “prove” their point.

- *Conceit (10)*. They are “bold and arrogant” as they “heap abuse on celestial beings.” Whether this word indicates “angels” or the “glories of Christ,” they don't know who or what they're trifling with.
- *Unbridled pleasure (13)*. It's one thing to gratify your greed or lust privately, but these false teachers “carouse in broad daylight.” There is no shame while they are “reveling in their pleasures.”
- *Insatiable lust (14)*. The phrase “eyes full of adultery” implies that these men (false teachers are not always male, in the Bible or beyond, but that's how Peter refers to them) view every woman they see as a potential conquest. They stalk vulnerable women (“the unstable”) preying on them seductively at their moments of weakness. They're like a pack of wild dogs chasing a herd of antelope. They'd love to have any one of them for supper, but they especially look for the young, the weak, the sick, so they can pounce and devour more quickly and successfully.
- *Slavery (19)*. They started out believing they were free to do whatever they wanted, but now their appetite for dopamine through sex, food, alcohol, or drugs has enslaved them. They need greater doses to satiate their addictions. Furthermore, they traffic in slavery, drawing others into their world of bondage to their own demise.

Those Peter describes are not run-of-the-mill false teachers. He's not talking about someone with whom you have an argument over doctrine or ethics. If you disagree about eschatology (last days) or predestination v. free will or the role of women in the church or the mode of baptism, don't apply 2 Peter to your “enemies.”

Peter is dealing with extremes here – extreme narcissism, extreme exploitation, extreme deception, extreme greed, extreme addiction, extreme arrogance. This is a chapter about the worst of the worst, those whom no decent person, Christian or non-Christian, would excuse. Think Ponzi schemer, human trafficker, child molester, and religious swindler all rolled into one. There's a special place in hell for them.

It would be wrong to use this chapter to attack your least favorite TV preacher or political figure, or an alcoholic or someone struggling with a porn addiction and declare, “Blackest darkness is reserved for you.” God is in charge of that final judgment.

Unless you're inclined to dismiss this chapter like you would the ravings of a backcountry snake-handling, fire-and-brimstone preacher, you might be tempted to respond one of two unhealthy ways. One is pride and the other is fear.

Pride might read this chapter and think, “I'm glad I'm not that bad.” As I said last week, the purpose of any biblical passage is to produce humility. If 2 Peter 2 makes you proud that you are not like other sinners, it has not done its work.

For others 2 Peter 2 might produce an unhealthy spiritual fear. That part about winding up “worse off at the end than they were at the beginning” tends to spark debate or anxiety about losing your salvation, much like Jesus’ words about committing the sin that can’t be forgiven. I think that also misses the point.

### ***The road to hell***

So what is the point? I found it intriguing that there are no commands in this chapter. Peter never tells you what to do about false teachers. Other places in the New Testament give explicit commands: watch out for them, confront them, avoid them. Peter gives you a whole chapter of information instead of instruction. Why? In part, it’s playing off chapter 1 and setting up for chapter 3, which are both full of commands.

Then what is he doing here in chapter 2?

We often say that following Jesus is a journey. The New Testament uses the term “the way.” Discipleship begins with a decision, but the decision is only the starting point on a journey toward deeper intimacy with God and greater love for others. The more you grow in the Christian way of thinking and doing, the less it’s inward and the more it’s upward and outward. 1 Peter taught us this so clearly. Jesus showed the way through his voluntary suffering to save the world. Those who follow him follow his way of the cross – self-denial, submission, suffering for others.

In the same way, the road to hell is a journey. It too starts with a decision, perhaps even subtle and subconscious at first. It’s a decision to make life about you – not about God or about others. It’s a life dedicated to accumulate as much money and stuff as possible, to experience as much sensual pleasure as you can find, to seek fame and power. The contrast of the way to heaven and the road to hell is made clear in John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* and in C. S. Lewis’ *The Screwtape Letters*.

Peter is using extreme language about the behavior and destiny of false teaching to warn us against even starting down that road, even toying with the idea that following our lusts or exploiting our power or making allowances for our greed or using others as objects is ultimately harmless. We should never be surprised that there are those who will point us in that direction.

They will sound reasonable. They will invite you deeper in without telling you into what. They will tell you that self-fulfillment and not self-denial is the way to maximize life. They will even entice you with the short-term benefits of exploitation the way they have experienced them. The message will be about immediate gratification and a shortcut to a life that is trouble-free, where not only you will be all about you but so will everyone else. A shortcut to happiness is a roadmap to hell.

Peter is saying what Moses said, “I have set before you life and death,” what Joshua said: “Choose you this day whom you will serve,” what Jesus said, “No one can

serve two masters.” It’s decision time, reality time, commitment time. Someone reminded me this week that I don’t often enough call people to definite commitment. He’s right, and this is the perfect passage to do so. You may not yet be to the extreme of the false teachers in 2 Peter 2, but you’re on that road. You need a definite break, a U-turn, a reversal. The Bible calls it repentance. Why not today?

But is there no grace in this chapter? Absolutely there is! The grace is in the identity of the writer. It’s in the story of the writer. It harkens back to that morning after he fished all night with zero success only to have Jesus say, “Throw your nets on the other side,” resulting in an unforgettable and life-changing haul.”

Peter responded, “Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.” And he was. That sinful man answered Jesus’ call to leave that hell-bound life and follow the Master. It wouldn’t be the end of his sinning or his failure. Remember, he’s the one who denied Jesus three times. But he would set himself irreversibly on the course to follow Jesus of Nazareth on the Way. And he would find God’s grace sufficient to keep him there.

This morning as we take communion – at home or here in the sanctuary – we remember the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. We remember that he is the way, the truth, and the life, and he has done everything necessary on the cross to release us from the slavery of sin and set us on a course of righteousness. We embrace again the freedom from sin’s penalty and power and renew our resolve not to return to the mire of the road to hell. Like Peter, we choose to follow him fully. Amen.