

Looking Forward (Part 2)

Beware Lest You Fall

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The people in South Africa and Zambia are much like you: long time members, steadfast in the faith. There are second and third, and maybe even fourth generation Christians there. They have seen a lot, as you have here in the United States, with people coming and going in the church for any number of reasons. They have tried to remain steadfast, they are struggling, and they could use our prayers just as you can use their prayers. They asked me to pass on to you that they are praying for you and certainly ask for prayers for them so that they can maintain and continue to be steadfast in the truth.

The "reasons" (or, more accurately the "excuses") people use for allowing themselves to be enticed out of God's church never cease to amaze me. False teachers have used such flawed arguments as which calendar to use, difference in opinion over witnessing, misunderstandings over who is required to tithe. Then there is the ongoing, "I will never follow a man"—even though twice Paul tells the Corinthian congregation, "Imitate [or follow] me as I also imitate Christ."

Peter and Paul's reference to false teachers has a much broader implication than what appears on the surface. In the formal meaning of the term, a teacher is anyone who tries to instruct, educate, or convince another. In the biblical sense, a false teacher is anyone who tries to convince someone to believe what is not true. The method can be in the form of formal teaching, casual discussions, or even gossip—that is, negative information about another person, often in the form of half-truths. This is more accurately called lies or false witnessing.

With regard to the church, a false teacher, often a scoffer is anyone who tries to influence you to believe what is contrary to the inspired written word of God, which is not open to human interpretation. Peter diligently warns us about false teachers scheming within congregations of the church.

Let me ask you a question, "What button of yours does someone have to push to get you to become a scoffer, to become bitter, to become dissatisfied with other members, or the ministry, or the church as a whole?" Peter says, "Beware lest you fall." Everyone who has left the church over the years has denied (if not openly, at least to himself) that anyone could entice or deceive him into leaving, including some of the most steadfast people. So, what is your button?

The apostle Peter tells us repeatedly to look forward to God's Kingdom. He admonishes us to "beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

Obviously, Peter felt that there is a real threat of each and every one of us of being led away with the error of the wicked, even though we may be steadfast now.

II Peter 3:11-16 Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless; and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.

Peter mentions Paul as teaching the same things that he himself teaches. Peter defended God's apparent slowness as really demonstrating His patience. Now he defines the period of waiting as a time when God can work to complete those who are making their calling and election sure, in obedience and reverence to Him.

A righteous life is urgently necessary, especially in view of the approaching Second Coming of Christ. The fact that God withholds His hand is not indifference on God's part, but an opportunity for us to repent of, and overcome, our ongoing problems.

In Romans 2:4, Paul speaks of those who despise the riches of God's goodness, forbearance and patience, forgetting that His kindness is designed to lead us to repentance. In Romans 3:25 and 9:22, Paul emphasizes the forbearance and the patience of God.

Both, Peter and Paul, were agreed that the fact that God withholds His hand is never to be used as an excuse for sinning but always as a means of repentance and an

opportunity to overcome.

Not only does Peter say that there are things in Paul's writings that are hard to understand, but also that there are things that people twist to their own destruction. Right off the bat, three doctrines come to mind that have been twisted and perverted by ignorant and unwise mainstream "Christians."

(1) Paul's explanation of the doctrine of grace was twisted into an excuse and even a reason for sin. But, as we read what Paul actually said, we find him condemning the enslavement of sin and emphasizing that sin's penalty is death.

Romans 6:1-2, 14-18, 23 What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not! [He states that twice to be sure we understand.] Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness? [We are given a choice and free will agency to decide which route we will take.] But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine [grace] to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. [Obligated to obey God] For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Christ's death on the stake became the instrument, which enables God to give us grace. Grace comes with a cost to us as well. It is probably the most expensive gift we will ever receive. Not only did grace cost the life of Jesus Christ, but it also costs us our lives, in one sense, if we are to receive that grace. Upon giving us grace, God expects us to give the rest of our lives in obedience to Him.

(2) Paul's explanation of the doctrine of Christian liberty was twisted into an excuse for unchristian license. But, as we read what Paul actually said, we find that he emphasized that we must not abuse or pervert the liberty God has given to us.

Galatians 5:13 For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another

Christian liberty is not freedom from virtuous restraints, and from the laws of God. It is liberty from the servitude of sin, and religious rites and ceremonies, not freedom from the necessary restraints of virtue.

Paul found it necessary to give this caution because there was a strong tendency, in all converts from paganism, to relapse again into their previous habits. You, being long-term members in the church, have observed this time and time again. You have seen people called into the church and then as time goes on they end up relapsing back into their previous mainstream Christian beliefs. It is amazing, that when Worldwide started making the changes they did, how many people started wearing crosses. They did this without thinking that this was part of the paganism of the mainstream Christian religions that they had come out of. There are many other examples that you could come up with to demonstrate how easy it is for people to fall back into former beliefs. Paul found it necessary to give this caution because there was a strong tendency for people to slip back into those previous habits.

Licentiousness, that is, wastefulness, recklessness, and decadence flourished among people coming out of the Gentile world, where they had been addicted to it before their conversion, where they were surrounded by it in society, and where they were in constant danger of falling back into it again. An excellent example of that is when Garner Ted Armstrong started doing the "America Listen" campaign, back in the early 70's, where it brought in dozens and dozens of people in the local church areas. Instead of the church having its influence on them, they in their worldly ways had their influence, in a big way, on the church itself. So, the church became very liberal and Laodicean in many ways.

It is so easy for any of us, including those of us who are trying to be so steadfast, to slip back into ways that we came out of, or ways that maybe someone else tries to convince you are the truth when in reality it is error. One thing recently we have had to deal with, or come across, is the belief that Christ was created. It is amazing how many people became confused over that, even long-term members.

So, Paul declared frankly that they had been called to liberty, to freedom from the bondage of sin, and therefore from the penalty that results from sin, but some misinterpreted his words wrongly believing that Christians were free from all restraints.

Through experience, Paul saw the need to constantly guard the truth from abuse. Human nature has a strong tendency, as the history of the church has shown, to abuse the doctrine of grace. The doctrine that Christians are "free"; that there is liberty from the

bondage of Satan, the world and sin. Paul went through great pains to show that the doctrines that he had maintained did not lead to licentiousness, and did not allow the indulgence of sinful and perverted passions.

(3) Paul's explanation of the doctrine of faith was twisted into an argument that Christian action was unimportant. However, as we read what Paul actually said we find that he emphasized that we are created to perform righteous actions, which are good works.

Ephesians 2:10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

I Timothy 6:18-19 Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.

James leaves no doubt that "Faith without works is dead."

James 2:14-26 What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,' but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, 'You have faith, and I have works. Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.' You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.' And he was called the friend of God. You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only. Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way? For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

One of the greatest tragedies of life is when a man twists God's truth into an excuse and even a reason for doing what he wants to do, instead of taking them as commands and

guides for doing what God wants him to do. What saps the energy of the Christian who is eager to love in both words and actions is a diminished sense of urgency. Peter spends much time in his second epistle, as does Paul, trying to admonish, or encourage, urgency in all of us, even those of us who are steadfast in the truth.

In his second epistle, Peter underlines that the promise of Jesus' return is of vital importance in the church today. He wants us to be sure to understand that the whole Bible bears witness to the promise of Jesus' return.

II Peter 3:15-16 And consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures. [Paul says he is speaking to those in the church who are steadfast, so obviously we are all in some danger of being led away.]

Peter and Paul are not only inspiring and clear-minded Christian leaders; they are inspired and authoritative apostles. Peter puts Paul's letters in the same category as the other scriptures. In Peter's mind, Paul's letters are scripture. So, when Peter quotes Paul here, and talks about Paul, it is just as if he is quoting the Old Testament. In II Peter 1:20, Peter himself said, "no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation." So, he views Paul's writings as in the same category of inspired writing as the Old Testament.

Paul writes with God's authority. Peter said that the New Testament apostles, and the Old Testament prophets, bear equally inspired witness to the same promise of Jesus Christ's return. We see a consistency from Genesis all the way to Revelation, as the message of Christ's return and the gospel of the coming Kingdom of God.

II Peter 1:16-21 For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For He received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.' And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of

Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.

Peter admits that Paul's letters are not easy, because they contain some things that are hard to understand. Although they were written with the wisdom that God gave him, they seem to have been open to misunderstanding, simply because they require hard work in understanding.

II Peter 3:16 As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.

To misunderstand is one thing; to distort is quite another, and that is the problem that Peter deals with. He uses a word from twisting rope, or torturing on a rack, because people were pulling Paul's words out of shape in a deliberate desire to make it appear that he said something other than his clear intention.

Peter calls them untaught, or ignorant, which does not mean they do not know anything, but that they refuse instruction. He also calls them unstable which describes people who would intentionally lead us away from the way of truth, the way of righteousness, the way that is the same in both the Old and the New Testaments.

We have a tendency to say that is could never happen to us, but how many people have left Church of the Great God who we thought were strong, firm, steadfast members, or even ministers in the church. They went off on some tangent or some pet project.

Peter shows that the untaught and unstable people shoulder responsibility for their own fate, because they mishandle God's promise to their own destruction. We have a very strong, and very powerful, warning from Peter. He said that he is reminding us of these things. These are things that we already know.

There is a note of sober reality for us in all of this as we take up the responsibility to handle God's Word with integrity, honesty and a desire to seek out what it says. Parts of it may be difficult to understand, and that is a reason for hard work and analytical thinking. Serious Bible study requires a great amount of effort. Just how much is salvation and eternal life worth to you? Is it worth it to put forth daily effort to study God's Word, because if we are not doing that, what will happen is that very likely we will be led

away at some point? Satan knows exactly what buttons of ours to push, he knows exactly what can set us off or carry us away. Sometimes it starts with bitterness.

Nevertheless, there is all the difference in the world between finding the Bible difficult, and willfully twisting it to say what we want it to say.

Peter has given us advance information of something we already know: that the promise of Jesus' return is a doctrine that will come under constant attack. At the end of his message, here he refers to the future of the church after his going away, as being marked by false teachers, scoffers, and lawless men.

II Peter 3:17-18 You therefore, beloved, since you know this beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen.

Peter was concerned about the eating away at the morale of God's people. He is positive that the scoffers and false teachers would continue to have a permanent presence in the church. Peter's warning to us is that we must be permanently guarding against and constantly alert to the probability that attacks will be consistently mounted.

We have to be sufficiently knowledgeable about the truth and able to recognize error for what it is. Peter uses a wide variety of terms to describe the church's adversaries. Terms such as: "cunningly devised fables," they are "false teachers" who "secretly introduce destructive heresies." Obviously, the way that Satan works with these people is by stealth, without our even realizing it. It is something that has developed over time.

They may be bold, arrogant, and confident, but they blaspheme in matters they do not understand, and as a result do incalculable harm. These foolish scoffers speak conceited words in ignorance and instability. Many times, if not most of the time, we find that they are very insecure people in other areas.

A type of insanity results from believing and teaching falsely. Many of us find it hard to understand how people who seem so sociable can do so much harm. We must realize that if we are not willing to put forth the effort to work with God, to be well-taught Christians, who are walking in the light, then when push comes to shove we will not be aware enough or willing to call false teaching false teaching. Many times friendships come into play, and a person who is friendly with someone else begins feeding them false information and that friendship ends up overriding the false teachings that they are

being impregnated with.

That makes us extremely vulnerable and we are prime targets for those who want to seduce gullible and fickle members. Increasing our knowledge of the truth must be a high priority, so that when it is challenged, denied or quietly replaced, we can confidently and accurately defend the truth. What I am telling you now is just a repeat and reminder of what Peter and Paul tell us in their epistles.

We have to be sufficiently knowledgeable of God's moral expectations and able to recognize unrighteousness for what it is—lawless behavior. "Lawlessness" was one of the key words in the description of Sodom and Gomorrah. Nevertheless, it is also used synonymously with "unrighteousness," "ungodly" and "corrupt." The refusal of God's right to rule is rebellion, and the breaking of God's law is lawlessness.

II Peter 2:13 And will receive the wages of unrighteousness, as those who count it pleasure to carouse in the daytime. They are spots and blemishes, carousing in their own deceptions while they feast with you,

There again, Peter warns us that these people will come and go among us.

II Corinthians 6:14-15 Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever?

These are very familiar scriptures and they are used to remind us of what Peter, Paul and the rest of the writers of the New Testament warn us.

We have to be on guard that we are not enticed and carried away by the teaching of these self-professed intellectuals. False teachers are heading towards destruction and they do not want to go alone. They offer us a helping hand, and make us wobble and then fall, which is the dramatic word Luke used to describe a ship running aground and being dashed against the rocks. Luke saw it as a very destructive process.

In II Peter 1:11; 2:20; 3:18, the titles of Lord and Savior are paired together. These titles are not redundant. "Lord" has consistently highlighted Jesus Christ's power to judge the world; and "Savior" has consistently highlighted Jesus Christ's willingness to rescue us from condemnation and eternal death. All true Christians have a personal knowledge of

Christ, and we have a responsibility to increase our knowledge of Him, as Peter admonishes us in II Peter 1:5.

In II Peter 3:18, he tells us to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior.

II Peter 3:18 But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen.

Peter used a wide variety of word-pictures to describe the mental attitude of the false teachers. They are willfully forgetful, tale-spinners who are painfully deluded about their spiritual progress. In a phrase, they "deliberately forget." They deliberately forget that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior.

By contrast, Peter's role is as a steadfast teacher of the truth. It is impossible for a Christian to stand still spiritually, because we all have an in-built human tendency to push God the Father and Jesus Christ to the back of our minds. The only solution is to make deliberate, constant and frequent efforts to bring them to the front. Of course, the primary methods of doing that are prayer, study and fasting.

Two thousand years of Christianity have been marked by a struggle to recall what Jesus commanded us to do, without adding anything of our own, or subtracting the bits of His teaching, we find less acceptable. Without the help of God's Holy Spirit, it is an impossible task. We have seen churches that were associated with God's churches begin to fade into false teachings.

No matter how long we have been Christians, we cannot rest on years of sermonettes, sermons and Bible Studies. Every day represents a fresh challenge, when we will be tempted to forget everything we have learned over the years, and trade it in for a novelty item. An example of this is any one of the 140,000 people in the Worldwide Church of God who stopped keeping the seventh day Sabbath, or who changed over to believing the trinity doctrine or any of the other doctrines that were changed. How many sermonettes, sermons and Bible Studies did they sit through, year after year? So, time in the church and sitting through many of these things is not enough.

Peter's solution is to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. This means we need to know more about Him, but we also grow in that knowledge by obeying Him, by treating His promises as genuine promises of the Savior, and His commands as genuine commands of the Lord.

Peter opened His letter with a prayer for "grace and peace" in II Peter 1:2, and we can see how important those two little words are that connect that opening of these closing words in verse 18: "but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." We see how closely they are connected to how he opens that letter regarding grace and peace in verse 2 of chapter 1.

We are to make every effort to be found at peace with Him, and to grow in grace. In both cases, the overwhelming generosity of God is supreme, because peace and grace are ours in abundance, and we possess them not only through our work, but also through our knowledge of our God and of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

At the end of II Peter 3:18, Peter writes, "To Him be the glory both now and forever." The words "both now and forever" attempt to translate a difficult phrase, it is literally, "now and for the day of eternity." How can one day last forever?

In his second epistle, Peter urges us to hold on to the prophets' promises "until the day dawns," referring to "the day of the Lord" mentioned in II Peter 3:12, in whose sight "a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day" as he reveals to us in II Peter 3:8.

Here in II Peter 3:18, Peter seems to have remembered the idea from Psalm 90, that he quoted in II Peter 3:8, if the thousands of years which separate us from the first coming of Christ are nothing in God's sight, then the day which sees His return can last for an eternity. It may be that Peter was expressing the idea that the effects of the day of Christ's return will last eternally.

In the meantime, as we look forward with vision to that day, what must we be doing? Peter has made sure that he tells us. He encourages us to be fruitful Christians—obedient, dynamic, proactive, enthusiastic, and loyal members of His church! And, God has given us the liberty, the freedom to do just that.

Today, most professing Christians have a false understanding of Christian freedom, which says that if we are justified by God's grace, we enjoy a new kind of relationship with God where ideas of law and obedience are inappropriate. Of course, we know that to be false. This supposed license to dark areas of life encourages people to feel free to do things that earlier generations judged wrong.

Television loves to expose those religious leaders whose sense of spiritual security is so strong that they feel free to enjoy various lusts and desires. Unstable minded people wonder what to do with those parts of the New Testament that forbid some behavior in a

seemingly legalistic way. We see people who have no association with Christianity scratching their heads at why professing Christians commit the sins that they do in their lives.

Should they be seen as hangovers from the Old Testament way of thinking, the New Testament writer having failed to absorb the full implications of the gospel? As Paul said, "Certainly not."

Anxious Christians think they lack the key to Christian growth and certainty, and move from religious teacher to spiritual guide to false teacher and sometimes back through again—accumulating and discarding teachers and guides as one would baseball trading cards.

Some people have been so influenced by false teachings regarding Christian liberty that they claim to be above sinning, and therefore the battles that Peter writes about are not ones that concern them. They certainly should be ones that concern those of us who are trying to be steadfast. In the Worldwide Church of God there were a couple of ministers, who I will not use by name, who felt that they were above not only the law of God, but the law of the land. They both ended up in prison. One was using the youth groups to run drugs back and forth over the Mexican border. I am sure that they thought that they were steadfast members of God's church. People reason in weird, distorted and insane ways. I am here to warn you and to remind you that none of us is above any of that. We have to be diligent and remain close to God, and not let people entice us away with any number of things. Quite often, it is just personality and friendships which entice us.

If the Christians of the first century had not sufficiently thought through the doctrines of Christ, it is inevitable that they would not have thought through their beliefs and moral values either. If the one is not binding on us, neither is the other, either. So, there is just no logic in this Christian liberty that people follow that lets them think that they can do anything because they are above the law.

In contrast to the false teachers, the early Christians could not and would not separate belief from behavior because they could not teach theology apart from moral values. They learned that lesson from the Old Testament, where the Ten Commandments open with theology: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me."

What Peter is telling us in his second letter is that firmly founded Christian faith must make a radical difference in the way we act, in the way we live our lives twenty four

hours a day and seven days a week. We should want to please Jesus Christ more, rather than being presumptuous that His love and grace will cause Him to overlook our sins.

II Peter 1:3-4 as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.

Remember later on in his letter, Peter says that the false teachers are dragged away in error by their lust. In verse 3, the phrase "who called us by glory and virtue," is literally, "by His own glory and virtue." God's glory emanates His natural attributes and His virtue emanates His moral attributes. God's power is manifested in His glory and virtue. Since we have been given such wonderful promises, we have a responsibility to also develop those virtues.

In verse 4, "escaped" indicates that we are pursued by Satan and our own human nature to draw us back to the corruption of the world, but God is helping or has helped us get away. We stay away by overcoming sin, Satan and our own human nature. In this light, Peter tells us to fight the enticements of the false teachers that aim to erode a Christian's steadfastness in the truth.

He spends a great deal of time warning about the errors of the false teachers and scoffers, as do the other New Testament writers. At the beginning of his letter in chapter 1, he tells us how to remain steadfast in the truth and how to produce growth in the faith. We have been over this list time and time again, but I want you to understand how important it is as a reminder from Peter.

I Peter 1:5-9 But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins.

Here, Peter shows that our faith, if it is genuine, sets up a chain of deep and internal

changes that will meet our hunger for God's way of life. He tells us to pursue the development of Christian character. Peter names essential Christian virtues that have to be added to each other in order to be effective. They work as a unit—as a whole way of life. We are not complete Christians with one of them, or with most of them, we must have all of them.

Peter's chain of eight virtues starts with faith and ends in love. We are expected to have faith and out of it must grow other excellencies. In verse 5, "add" is used in the sense of supplying or providing. Paul uses the same word in Galatians 3:5 where he says, "...He who supplies the Spirit to you..."

The original Greek word implies "an extremely generous giver." We are to cooperate with God, to work with Him without thinking of the price. Of course, the price humanly to us is the enticements, the materialistic things of the world, as well as sacrificing for one another, especially sacrificing ourselves on behalf of God's work. God is the benefactor, and this emphasizes the price that Jesus paid to be our Savior.

Many translations say to "**add**" one virtue to another; but the Greek says, "to develop one virtue in the exercise of another." This means that as we work, exercise, and use each of these we are developing the others. Each new quality springs out of and perfects the other.

Each virtue is chosen for its sharpness in pinpointing the errors of the false teachers whom the church was encountering in Peter's time. Rather than thinking of Peter moving logically from step to step in this list, it might be better to think of him drawing a rounded description of Christian character. Not one item in this list can be done without. This is not a linear growth, but a growth of all of them at the same time. It increases in our effectiveness and adds more firmness in our character.

None of the Christian virtues seems logically dependent on its place in the chain to exist, so we should not say that we cannot persevere until we have first achieved self-control. Instead, a Christian without perseverance is missing a vital ingredient.

Faith must be both foundational and functional. This requires that we have vision, that is, that we have the great full future picture in mind, and this is the reason we have to make every effort to live a life here and now which is consistent with God's way of life. With faith we want to become like the Master we believe in, and this leads to Christ-like qualities.

Briefly, I want to go through each of these in very short summary to remind us of what

we should be developing within ourselves.

Apparently, virtue or goodness was a matter of great concern to thinking non-Christians of Peter's day. The thing that makes a person virtuous, good or excellent in life is not a complicated philosophical one. However, that is what the false teachers of Peter's day were doing. They were making it complicated using Greek logic and clever analogies and such.

The ideal person is Jesus Christ, and we will find our excellence in imitating Him. Since His goodness was shown by what He did, our faith will show itself to others in our active goodness. It means that we believe the way Christ lived is God's way of life, and that it is the best way for us to live. False teachers do not believe this, because they have turned their backs on the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

II Peter 2:20-22 For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning. For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them. But it has happened to them according to the true proverb: 'A dog returns to his own vomit,' and, 'a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire.' [Again, I repeat, that Peter is writing this letter to steadfast Christians, and people who think that they are solid and firm in the truth.]

The false teachers are far from having fled the enticing wickedness of the world; they are entangled in it and overcome by it. They talk a great deal about faith, but do not exhibit in their lives any of that practical goodness which is essential in a Christian's development. "Faith without works is dead."

If we, being Christians, are supposed to produce the kind of true witness that non-Christians admire for our genuine goodness, it should not surprise us that the visible immorality of the false teachers will bring the way of truth into disgrace. We see today, Christians being portrayed on TV and in movies as homosexuals and adulterers and many other horrific sins.

Thanks to these false teachers, the world publicly recognizes professing Christian leaders advocating wrong standards that non-Christians find unprincipled. Many in the world see the hypocrisy of many professing Christians. "Believe in Christ," they say, but

their actions say, "Whatever you do, do not be like Him." Our President has done this very thing, and advocated following Christ's way of life, when in his own actions he does nothing of the sort. Not to just pick on him as our leader. We are to have respect for our leaders, but he comes out as the most pronounced example at this point.

II Peter 1:5 But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge

The next quality in II Peter 1:5 is knowledge, which is insight and understanding. The "knowledge" that is to be exercised with faith is insight into the will of God. Moral zeal must be guided by knowledge or it will run into a "zeal of God, but not according to knowledge."

Peter is referring to information about God the Father and Jesus Christ, their way of life and what pleases them. It is the kind of knowledge that comes from reading, thinking and discussing the truth of God—discussing with one another because "iron sharpens iron." If we want to grow in Christ-like goodness, we will have a hunger and desire to grow in our knowledge of the Father and the Son.

A non-Christian may, at times, be able to only make a distinction between what is true and what is false; but a true Christian not only makes a distinction between what is true and false, he also makes a distinction between what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is bad, and what is loving and what is hateful. This is a tremendous difference!

False teachers always seem to think they have newer knowledge offering freedom from this or that. But, Peter says that it is based on stories that they have made up, and empty, boastful words. They may appear highly intelligent and intellectually respectable.

Nothing in II Peter says that Christians automatically have high intelligence, and that people who teach error are idiots. Peter does believe, though, that the most intellectually feeble Christians have knowledge, and that the most intellectually gifted heretics "blaspheme in matters they do not understand."

Proverbs 1:7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, But fools despise wisdom and instruction.

I have always been impressed with the way, King Solomon, as well as other writers,

have been able to concisely place so much in so short a number of words, to have such a great impact in the Proverbs. In Proverbs 1:7 Solomon shows the advantage of acting according to the dictates of wisdom; and in the following verses he shows the danger of acting contrary to them.

Intellectually gifted heretics dramatically contrast with the knowledge, understanding and wisdom God provides His saints.

Proverbs 2:1-11 My son, if you receive my words, And treasure my commands within you, So that you incline your ear to wisdom, And apply your heart to understanding; Yes, if you cry out for discernment, And lift up your voice for understanding, If you seek her as silver, And search for her as for hidden treasures; Then you will understand the fear of the LOORD, And find the knowledge of God. For the LOORD gives wisdom; From His mouth come knowledge and understanding; He stores up sound wisdom for the upright; He is a shield to those who walk uprightly; He guards the paths of justice, And preserves the way of His saints. Then you will understand righteousness and justice, Equity and every good path. When wisdom enters your heart, And knowledge is pleasant to your soul, Discretion will preserve you; Understanding will keep you, [Some of the most encouraging words in the Bible.]

This fear, or reverence, is said to be the beginning—the essential principle—the first moving influence of knowledge. No one can ever become truly wise, who does not begin with proper fear of God. We find in the false teachers and those who try to speak against other members, or members in God's church, they lack the fear of God. If they did fear God, they would fear to say such things about others, especially since they are based on lies. As we know, half-truths are the same as full lies, there is no such thing as white lies.

II Peter 1:6 to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness,

In addition to knowledge, exercise self-control. When we understand how God views us with regard to the world, that is, that we are precious to Him, and that we are to live differently in this world from the rest of the inhabitants of this planet, we begin to understand that we have a responsibility to develop self-control. Self-control is the reaction to our rejection of the enticements and desires of the world. Wisdom is the right

use of knowledge, and wisdom guided by the Holy Spirit produces self-control.

This is the complete opposite of the lifestyle adopted and taught by the false teachers. People who feel under no obligation to control themselves in going after "new truths" which are "old lies" repackaged to appear to be true. In reality, they are, at best, distortions of the truth.

II Peter 2:1-2 But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed.

These false teachers are at ease in following their own evil desires because they cast off restraint. They lack self-control.

II Peter 3:3 knowing this first: that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, [These are emphatic, definite statements that these things will happen. So, ask yourselves, "What button needs to be pushed for you to be able to be drawn away?"]

Self-control is the manifestation of God's work in man through the Holy Spirit. Christian self-mastery is seen in the control of rebellious desires and lusts and the resistance against the appeal of tempting false teachings and worldly pleasures

II Peter 1:6 to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness,

Perseverance is the willingness to endure tough times because of the promise of better times ahead.

It is patient endurance. Perseverance views time through God's eyes. God's plan must be carried out according to His will, according to His good pleasure. Peter tells us in II Peter 3:8 that "with God a thousand years is as one day."

Patient endurance requires vision—foresight. It is the ability to continue in the faith and resist the pressures of the world indefinitely. What if you were to live 900 years? Would

you be able to endure and persevere that long? I have to think about that, not without a lot of God's help.

The false teachers, who do not believe in the ability of God to intervene in the world, are reduced to scoffing. "Where is this 'coming' that He promised?"

It is not necessarily the tough times or hardships, which Peter fears, will cause us to stop persevering. It is the insidious enticements of those who refuse to believe that there is any point to biblically based Christian behavior. They do not really believe Christ will return. Christianity without the return of Christ would be a religion without hope.

II Peter 1:6 to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, [exercise godliness].

Godliness supposes knowledge, reverence, affection, dependence, submission, gratitude, and obedience. Godliness is the character and conduct, which is determined by the principle of heartfelt love or fear of God. There can be no true worship of God without it: only a dead "form" of religion.

Godliness is devotion to God first and foremost. It is a very practical awareness of God in every aspect of life. It means more than religious profession and a godly conduct; it also means the reality and power of a vital union with God. There has to be an intimate relationship. As a person becomes bitter about any number of things, that personal relationship is damaged.

The person who has this godliness always correctly worships God and gives Him His due; but he always correctly serves his fellow men and gives them their due. Godliness is reverence toward God. It also means right respect and proper regard for others. It is love toward God first and then to man. You are very familiar with these phrases and Peter tells us these things by way of a reminder.

II Peter 1:7 to godliness brotherly kindness,

Righteousness involves not only our obedience and submission to God, but also our attitude with regard to our problems with people. Peter turns first to our relationships with other Christians.

The two English words, "brotherly kindness," are used to translate one Greek word,

"Philadelphia."

It is a common term for proper relationships within a family unit. It is warmth of affection. The New Testament is the only place where the word has been found outside the context of a home. It is Peter's intent that we understand that when he uses this word "Philadelphia," it is to be applied as to a family, and we are a family.

The use of the Greek word "Philadelphia" would be somewhat surprising to a first century reader. Peter's use of the word here in verse seven implies that we should have a quality of relationships that is noticeably different and satisfying, demanding a special and unique loyalty to one another. Loyalty is something that many people in God's church have forgotten about. I think once the Worldwide Church of God changed the doctrines, and we felt as though we had been abandoned, our loyalty seemed to wane and go out of the door.

God wants us to have loyalty to one another as brethren. If one of the brethren is doing something that he should not be doing, you should be able to go to him personally and explain to him that he should be careful because what he is doing is a sin. I am not talking about petty things; I am talking about things that are very serious. We should also be able to go to someone else if he has offended us. I would say that 98% of the time someone may not even realize he had said it and that it was not an offence at all just a misunderstanding.

For us, the metaphor is dimmed through familiarity, but we must not lose the reality of the fact that when Peter calls the Christians "brethren" in II Peter 1:10, he means it as "my brothers and sisters."

II Peter 1:7 to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love.

Last, but not least, is the need to love. This word is thrown around as if it means nothing. Society has a major impact on that. It is self-sacrificing action on behalf of another. Love is the keeping of the commandments. This means that it is love for anyone, Christian or not.

Love is discernible by its indiscriminate and deliberate habit of loving not just brethren, but also those outside of the family circle. But, of course, it is intended for the family first. There should be a special affection, a true and warm love, for our brothers and sisters in Christ as of the same family.

One of the trademarks of Christian maturity is a growing dissatisfaction with our level of

godliness. This should not cause hopelessness and depression, but make even more loving and us determined to develop these qualities in increasing measure and to become even more self-controlled, even more persevering.

Peter emphasizes that this growth is our own responsibility—not that we turn all our problems over to God relinquishing our own responsibility. Progressive growth in the virtues is a sign of spiritual growth and helps prevent Laodiceanism.

II Peter 1:8, 9 For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins.

Here, we see Peter directly referencing the false teachers, those who promote their own ideas while discarding the truth. True Christian knowledge is more than irrelevant book learning. It changes us and then impacts the world. Peter points out that we are not to focus on knowledge, as the false teachers do, at the expense of either our families or the church. Peter is not telling us bury our heads in the scripture and other books at the expense of our families. We should balance these things, but still always have a strong desire and a love to study God's Word and also to do it together.

The results of this wrong focus would be to make us ineffective and unproductive. This was the disastrous effect Peter's opponents, the false teachers, were having, with neither work nor fruit to show for themselves. Instead, we should be the opposite—both effective and productive in spiritual fruit.

As we work with God to transform us into the likeness of Christ, we learn to see the world through the eyes of its Savior and its Judge. By believing that Christ will return as Lord and Judge, we will not only avoid the pit-falls of the false teachers as they feel free to follow their own evil desires; but we will be spurred to make every effort to produce work that will stand, and fruit that will last.

By contrast, a person who does not have these qualities in increasing measure is spiritually sick with shortsightedness—he lacks vision. Peter describes this kind of person as "shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten."

What is it that each of these three spiritual disabilities prevents? Someone who is blind cannot see at all, someone who is short-sighted cannot see what lies ahead in the distance, and someone who has forgotten cannot remember what he had learned and

what blessings he received earlier.

This fits the problem of the false teachers and the jeopardy of their victims. An inability to see into the future leads to a failure to understand God's verdict on the corrupt world or the way of salvation. An inability to see into the future leaves them morally and religiously independent of God, and, an inability to see the past means failure to perceive how they can be cleansed from their past sins. They lack vision both forward and backward. They cannot see what they have come from and they cannot see where they are headed.

In their short-sightedness, blindness and forgetfulness they no longer understand their past sins, their present rebellion nor their future condemnation. Peter's concern is that we will come under the influence of these blind guides; and, as Jesus himself said to Peter, "If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit."

By contrast, if we are clear-sighted we will be careful to avoid the misleading directions and useless advice of someone who cannot see where he is going. If we are clear-sighted, we will take the responsibility to continue to the end of our Christian lives more deeply founded within the same hope with which we started with our first love. Two words describe the content of our hope, and that is "calling" and "election."

II Peter 1:10-11 Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble; ["never" is a powerful and emphatic word and it is a word without any doubt.] For so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Our election is God's sovereign choice of us in Christ from before time. Paul said that God chose us in Christ before the creation of the world, and as Peter said in verse 3, our calling is anchored in Jesus' call to follow Him.

We are responsible for eagerly making our calling and election sure. The acid test of the genuineness of our faith is that either we make costly life changes, or we hypocritically treat sin and judgment as irrelevant to our lives.

The word "make" in verse 10 is in a form in the Greek, which emphasizes our responsibility. It is as if Peter were saying, "you, for your part, make sure." The word "sure" in verse 10 has a legal sense, suggesting "ratified"—give your support to, consent to. The evidence that we have been called and chosen will be the energy that

we put forth to making our calling and election sure.

If we make every effort, Peter assures us of blessings that will last for eternity. The first blessing is that we will never fall. That does not mean we will never sin, because the Bible never promises us that kind of perfection outside of God's Kingdom. Nor is it a rigid guarantee of salvation that frees us from activity and responsibility.

Instead, it means that we will never suffer a reverse, because God will never send us back because we are not good enough. Specifically, it means that a true Christian, who is permanently devoted to following Jesus Christ, will never fall into the kind of error the false teachers blunder into because of their blindness and short-sightedness. They fail to take seriously their responsibility to live righteously. The person with the attitude that takes hold of Christ by faith and then lives a life of obedience to Him is the one who proves that his salvation will last.

The second blessing is that we will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our God and of our Savior Jesus Christ. The phrase "For so an entrance will be supplied to you" in verse 11 is the passive form of the verb: "supplied" in the New King James and "ministered" in the King James or "provided" New International version. It is translated "add to" in verse 5.

"For so an entrance will be added to you," "provided for you," as a result of the virtues that we exercise with faith which God helps us to develop in our character. We must never forget that Jesus Christ is the one who paid the price. We cannot take any credit for our own salvation. As Christ died for us, we also must die for one another, in living God's way of life. That is, we should die to sin, ridding our lives of sin and living our lives in service to one another. That takes loyalty, great loyalty to one another. Loyalty has been lacking in the church of God, especially since the breaking up of the Worldwide Church of God. It is something that we absolutely must have.

The welcome into God's Kingdom will be wonderful beyond words, not because God is repaying a price to us, but because He is abundantly providing our needs for an eternity of serving Him. In Peter's words:

"Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless..."