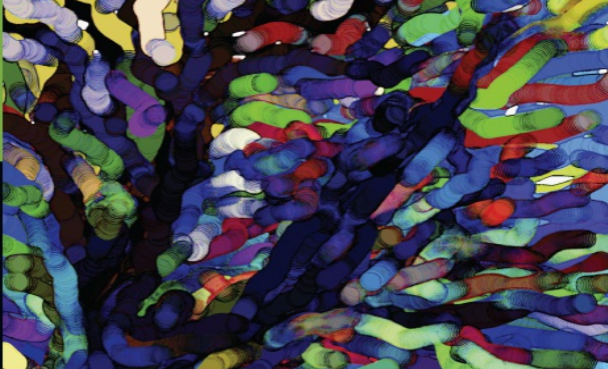


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DICK LUCAS & CHRISTOPHER GREEN

The Message of

2 Peter & Jude

THE NEW TESTAMENT SERIES EDITOR: JOHN R. W. STOTT

The Message of 2 Peter and Jude
The promise of his coming

Dick Lucas

Formerly Rector of St Helen's Church, Bishopsgate, London, and Chairman of The Proclamation Trust

and Christopher Green

Vice Principal of Oak Hill College, London, and formerly Minister of Emmanuel Church, Tolworth, Surrey

Series editors:

J. A. Motyer (OT)

John Stott (NT)

Derek Tidball (Bible Themes)



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General preface

THE BIBLE SPEAKS TODAY describes three series of expositions, based on the books of the Old and New Testaments, and on Bible themes that run through the whole of Scripture. Each series is characterized by a threefold ideal:

- to expound the biblical text with accuracy
- to relate it to contemporary life, and
- to be readable.

These books are, therefore, not ‘commentaries’, for the commentary seeks rather to elucidate the text than to apply it, and tends to be a work rather of reference than of literature. Nor, on the other hand, do they contain the kinds of ‘sermons’ that attempt to be contemporary and readable without taking Scripture seriously enough. The contributors to *The Bible Speaks Today* series are all united in their convictions that God still speaks through what he has spoken, and that nothing is more necessary for the life, health and growth of Christians than that they should hear what the Spirit is saying to them through his ancient — yet ever modern — Word.

ALEC MOTYER
JOHN STOTT
DEREK TIDBALL
Series editors

Authors' preface

'I confess there is no end of books. Pride and ambition may put many upon scribbling, and filling the world with chaff and vanity; so that there needeth a restraint rather than an incitement. Some merely blur paper, which is no small discouragement to modest and able men.' When the great Puritan commentator, Thomas Manton, wrote those words in his commentary on Jude, ¹ he set up a warning that has been largely heeded; 2 Peter and Jude could lay claim to being the two least valued and noticed books of the New Testament. Their special contribution to Christian living lies unrecognized and unread at the back of most Bibles.

Rediscovering what these two writers have to say could well be a bracing exercise for today's churches. We may claim familiarity with most parts of the New Testament, but here we are in undeniably difficult and strange territory, and we are tempted to head back to more familiar landscapes. But when we find a part of the Bible that the churches ignore in public, and that Christians find irrelevant in private, then we may be sure that the enemy considers he has gained a major advantage. We must recover these letters, and learn again what these early Christian leaders risked their lives to teach. It is because of the unfamiliarity of these letters, as well as their difficulties, that this exposition is slightly longer than one would expect from the length of the basic material.

It might seem odd that two New Testament letters have been grouped together in one book, when they are not by the same author or written to the same readers. The reason will become clearer if the two letters are read side by side, for they share a large number of ideas and words, and 2 Peter contains what looks like the whole of Jude. They make a natural pair. We should not be fooled by their similarity, though, since they are two distinct and independent letters. This exposition has tried to mark out their different profiles and concerns.

Readers who are well versed in New Testament studies will know that the precise nature of the relationship between 2 Peter and Jude has been the subject of considerable debate, and even this non-technical exposition could hardly avoid the topic without being accused of ostrich-like tendencies. The discussion, however, is far too complex to include in the body of the text without holding up what Peter and Jude are saying. Readers who want to look at that subject (or, indeed, other matters that scholars debate) will therefore find that they are referred to the Appendix, 'The Authorship of 2 Peter and Jude'. The literature on 2 Peter and Jude has until fairly recently been comparatively meagre, but Richard Bauckham's magisterial commentary and subsequent book (see the [Bibliography](#)) have shown that these letters have a robust theology and a positive place in the New Testament.

The exposition itself is based on the New International Version, which is reproduced at the appropriate point in each section. In keeping with the aim of *The Bible Speaks Today* series, we have tried to produce an exposition which is aimed at any Christian who has a desire to understand God's Word better, and to live it out.

No doubt readers will sense the irony that a book about the work of two authors is itself the work of two authors. The two Introductions, which contain the core of our understanding of the letters, have been written by Dick Lucas, and the verse-by-verse exposition and Appendix by Christopher Green. Nevertheless, as we have worked together on the project it has become increasingly difficult to remember whose ideas were whose; and both of us have worked through the letters in the quiet of the study, the heat of the pulpit and the give-and-take of the lecture room.

The members of St Helen's, Bishopsgate, and various other churches around the country have listened to many talks and sermons on 2 Peter and Jude, and prayed with us that the book might be finished; we thank them for their support. Over some years, students of the Cornhill Training Course in London have not only heard the material but asked awkward questions about it. We hope those students will find that we have practised what we taught about exposition. The staff and readers of Inter-Varsity Press, and in particular Colin Duriez and Jo Bramwell, have been unfailingly helpful, patient and positive, and John Stott has shown great generosity in the time he has invested in the meticulous editorial skill with which he has helped this book reach its current state. Our debt to them is great, but none of them can be held to blame for mistakes which we may have made.

It is our desire that the message of these letters, so muted in our day and yet so greatly needed, will be taught from the pulpits and believed in the hearts of many Christians, and that they will steel those in positions of authority in the churches to take action in accord with their demands. As the God who speaks in these letters said to Isaiah, 'This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word' (Is. 66:2).

CHRISTOPHER GREEN
DICK LUCAS

Chief abbreviations

- ANF* *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, edited by A. Roberts and S. Donaldson, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950–51; reissued Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1989).
- AV The Authorized (King James') Version of the Bible (1611).
- BAGD Walter Bauer, *A Greek — English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, translated and adapted by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, second edition, revised and augmented by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker from Bauer's fifth (1958) edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).
- DJG* *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, edited by J. B. Green, S. McKnight and I. H. Marshall (Leicester and Downers Grove: IVP, 1992).
- GNB The Good News Bible (NT, 1966, fourth edition 1976; OT, 1976; second edition of the complete Bible, 1992, 1994).
- IBD* *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, edited by J. D. Douglas *et al.*, 3 vols. (Leicester: IVP; Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1980).
- ISBE* *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, edited by James Orr, new edition edited by G. W. Bromiley, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979–).
- INT* *An Introduction to the New Testament*, by D. A. Carson, D. J. Moo and L. Morris (Grand Rapids: Zondervan; Leicester: Apollos, 1993).
- JB The Jerusalem Bible (1966).
- JBP *The New Testament in Modern English*, by J. B. Phillips (London: Collins, 1958).
- JBL* *Journal of Biblical Literature*.
- JSNT* *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*.
- LB The Living Bible (1962–70; British edition 1974).
- LS H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *Greek — English Lexicon*, ninth edition, revised by H. S. Jones and R. McKenzie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940).
- LXX The Old Testament in Greek according to the Septuagint, third century BC.
- Moffatt J. Moffatt, *A New Translation of the Bible* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1926, OT and NT in one volume; revised 1935).
- MM J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan (eds.), *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament Illustrated from the Papyri and other Non-Literary Sources* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1914–30; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1930).
- NASB The New American Standard Bible (1963).
- NDT* *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. S. B. Ferguson, D. F. Wright and J. I. Packer (Leicester and Downers Grove: IVP, 1988).
- NEB The New English Bible (NT, 1961, second edition, 1970; OT, 1970).
- NIDNTT* *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, edited by C. Brown, 4 vols. (Exeter: Paternoster, 1975–78; revised edition, 1986).
- NIV The New International Version of the Bible (1973, 1978, 1984).
- NKJV The New King James Version of the Bible (1982).
- NovTest* *Novum Testamentum*.
- NPNF* *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, second

series, edited by H. Wace and P. Schaff, 14 vols. (1890–1900; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975).

NRSV The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (1989).

NTI *New Testament Introduction*, by Donald Guthrie (IVP, fourth edition, 1990).

NTS *New Testament Studies*.

OTP *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, edited by J. H. Charlesworth (London: Darton Longman and Todd; New York: Doubleday, 1983).

REB The Revised English Bible (1989).

RSV The Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NT, 1946, second edition, 1971; OT, 1952).

RV The Revised Version of the Bible (1881–85).

TDNT *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, translated by G. W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946–76).

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Introduction to 2 Peter

At a recent preachers' conference, where local church leaders and pastors had met to stimulate one another in the work of teaching the Bible accurately and effectively, an outline on 2 Peter 3:18 was brought forward to be assessed by the group. This 'sermon skeleton' was a comprehensive one, using the fine exhortation to 'grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour' as a launching-pad for an overview of New Testament teaching on Christian growth in godliness, a notable theme of 2 Peter. Much excellent material had been gathered together on the necessity for spiritual maturity, and a practical application made to the effect that the watching world would hardly be impressed by Christian claims until confronted with believing people who had grown to their full stature as disciples of Jesus.

Naturally, this application was a truth no-one in the group was minded to deny. But by this time, as we studied 2 Peter together, it had emerged that the apostle's final exhortation had a very different thrust. Once the warning of 3:17 against false teachers was taken into account (an elementary example of context control), it became obvious that here, in this particular letter, 'growth in grace' was being urged as indispensable, not to impress the world but to rescue the young believers from spiritual disaster. The seductive influence of new and forceful teachers, recently at work in the congregations, was already destabilizing the faithful. These 'lawless men', unrestrained by apostolic authority, were attracting a numerous following through their high-sounding promises to bring the believers into a hitherto unknown 'freedom' of experience (2:19).

The purpose of 2 Peter is twofold: to expose such false guides for what they were (hence the colourful diatribe of chapter 2) and, more important still, to set before the churches the conditions of survival when doctrinal and moral perversions infiltrate their fellowships, appearing to carry all before them. So, in 3:17, the appeal to Peter's 'secure friends' is that they should be on their guard against error lest they 'fall from' their 'secure position'. Evidently the apostle values 'stability' very highly (1:12). Seeing the trouble-makers as essentially unstable people (3:16), he repeatedly urges the Christians to safeguard the security of their own position (1:10). Finally, in 3:18, the wisest way to do this is expounded in terms of steady growth in the favour of God, and in the knowledge of Christ.

2 Peter, then, is a homily on Christian growth, set in the context of threats to Christian stability from a type of destructive and heretical teaching (2:1–3) that is as common today as it was in apostolic times and that seems to hold out a perpetual attraction to some vigorous evangelical communities. In 1:1–11 we possess what is a classic New Testament exposition of this theme, including the brilliant little ladder of advance towards maturity, from faith to love, in verses 5–7. Arguments concerning the origin (whether Hellenistic or not) of such catalogues of virtues are of little interest compared with the fact that this 'programme for progress' has obviously been carefully edited to expose the manifest failures of the errorists. It is because these new spiritual guides patently lacked goodness, self-control and godliness (to name but three of the qualities) that Peter commends (perhaps 'commands' would be a more accurate word) to his readers a very different way of living.

A homily on spiritual growth, then, from the pen of the apostle Peter, lies before us. But growth in what? The answer to this question goes to the heart of 2 Peter and the apostolic concerns that led to the writing of this letter. What is at stake in the life of the young churches is nothing less than the true knowledge of God.

1. The knowledge of God

This emphasis on 'knowing' the Lord and 'knowing' the truth, repeatedly underscored, is characteristic of 2 Peter. There are two sides to this 'knowing'. First, there is that knowledge of God and of his Son Jesus Christ, which is the initial gift of free grace, constituting us true believers (1:2, 3, 8; the Greek word is *epignōsis*). There is no inequality here between Christian and Christian. Even more impressive, there is no inequality between the apostle (belonging to the first generation), and those of the second and third generations (1:1), so Peter's readers lack nothing of 'apostolicity' in their faith. No charge against them, on the score of the full validity of their spiritual standing or experience, can be sustained. This is the important assurance 2 Peter is intended to convey from the beginning.

The implication must be that the new teaching cast doubts on the proper standing as Christian people of Peter's readers. It is notoriously easy to 'seduce the unstable' (2:14; that is, the young Christian) by exploiting easy dissatisfactions with spiritual progress, and longings for a deeper fellowship with the God who has made himself known. In 2 Peter 1:1 the apostle Peter gives these new converts the same assurance that Paul gives his readers in Ephesians 1:3: God 'has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ'.

Secondly, there is that knowledge of the truth as it is in Jesus, which can be built up by application and endeavour only over a long period (e.g. 1:5, 6; cf. 3:18; the Greek word here is *gnōsis*). This distinction between the knowledge that is given, and a knowledge that is gained, is an important key to understanding apostolic Christianity.

2. The false teachers

What then of the new propagandists? It was as 'teachers' that they had come among the people (2:1, 3); but were they themselves possessors of a true knowledge of God? At first sight it seems as though they were. In 2:20–21 we are told three times of their knowledge (*epignōsis*) of Christ and his 'way'. At the same time, we are told of their comprehensive surrender to sensuality (2:19–20) as evidence of turning their backs on the authority of divine truth (2:21). Students of 2 Peter have been perplexed by these statements, especially since the striking proverb of 2:22 suggests, very starkly, that the essential natures of these men had never been changed. Experience of contemporary church life, however, presents us with similarly baffling examples of those whose early faith and ministry bore every sign of genuineness, yet who later

denied the ‘Lord who bought them’ (2:1). Not infrequently, this has led to the practice of immorality of the most shameful kind (described in 2 Pet. 2).

2 Peter excels in conciseness, while putting before us a rounded picture. The apostolic tests of an authentic ‘knowledge’ of God centre on whether or not both ‘the way of truth’ (2:2) and ‘the way of righteousness’ (2:21) are followed. What is demanded of the Christian, and therefore of the Christian teacher, is not only pure (or wholesome) thinking (3:1) but also pure (or wholesome) living (3:14). No claims to special illumination should be countenanced by the people of God, especially when sound doctrine is repudiated and sound morality is rejected in word and deed. 2 Peter 2:1–10 combines both these aspects, but particularly the latter, as being ‘especially true’ (verse 10) of those responsible for the new teaching agitating the churches in Peter’s time.

And what of their knowledge, in the sense of acquired understanding (*gnōsis*)? Here, chapter 3 seems unequivocal. Apparently, there was among them a deliberate ignorance of unpalatable truth (3:5), as well as that instability that leads unbalanced enthusiasts to distort Scripture (3:16). It is intriguing to read that ‘our dear brother Paul’ (so Peter writes) was treated in just such cavalier fashion by his opponents.

It is not so much the familiar approach of a ‘liberal theology’ that easily dismisses what Paul writes as inappropriate in today’s different cultural setting, as the unprincipled ‘distortions’ of Paul’s teachings practised by those who feel bound to accept his authority. Their method is to twist the plain import of Paul’s words and sentences in order to produce a very different meaning, one that will be more acceptable to their contemporaries.

In spelling out the ‘ignorance’ of the newcomers, Peter insists that, for their part, his readers must not ‘forget’ (we will return later to the importance of this concept) certain bedrock realities. With exceptional economy of words, these are beautifully set down in 3:8–10; they go to the heart of the difference between a genuine Christian outlook and its counterfeit.

Verse 8 will surely have reminded Peter’s readers of Psalm 90, with its emphasis on the painful brevity of life, making this world wholly inadequate as a permanent home, or resting-place, for all who possess eternity in their hearts. Generations of believers have found in the eternal God alone a true refuge and satisfying dwelling-place. By contrast, the new teachers are entirely content with this world as their home, and look for no other. This is because they do not know the Lord, either in his anger¹ or in his compassion.²

Verse 9 famously spells out the glory of the divine patience: if the Lord delays his coming it is because of his longsuffering with sinners. But the new teachers were foolish enough to interpret mercy and forbearance as betraying divine impotence or negligence. Again, they did not know the Lord.³

Verse 10 is another splendid stroke. The force of the ‘thief’ analogy, as used by Christ, lies in the fact, now as then, that the burglar unerringly comes just when you do not expect him! But the new teachers had very clear notions about when the ‘coming’ should have taken place. It was they, not the orthodox believers, who insisted that Christ had promised an immediate return. Because this had not taken place, they no longer expected the realization of this promise. Ironically, this refusal of theirs any longer to expect the return of Christ fulfils the very conditions that will precede the Lord’s return. But then they did not know the Lord or take seriously the demands of serving him.⁴

In all this, the false prophets of Peter’s day, as in ours, revealed themselves as men of the world in contrast with the proper otherworldliness of the true Christian (3:11–13). This has special application to Christians living at the end of the twentieth century, when the reigning orthodoxies of secularism are crumbling. In rejecting transcendence, a thoroughgoing materialism forces people to seek happiness solely in this world. It is now clear that in making sense of life and human hopes this is not working out. If fashionable theology follows secular trends (as it normally does a few years later), however, we can expect to find the popular preachers of the day rejecting the transcendent nature of the Bible message, and promising their listeners that spiritual hunger and heavenly aspirations can find complete satisfaction in the here and now. The result will be a consumer-orientated church suitable for a consumer-orientated society — and in the end, bitter disillusionment — but not before wave succeeds wave of ‘special offers’ and yet more exaggerated promises, each in turn to be laid aside in hopeless disappointment (*cf.* 2:17–19).

3. The apostolic eye-witnesses

What then can Peter put before the churches to counter the influence of the new voices being heard everywhere, especially when soon his own voice will be silent (1:14)? How can he secure for the believers a right understanding of the ‘very great and precious promises’ of the gospel (1:4), so that they know what is theirs to experience and achieve in this life, as well as what is to be theirs in the new heavens and new earth, glorious realities to be anticipated with eagerness (3:12–14)? The answer to such questions takes us right back to the origins of true prophecy in 1:12–21, perhaps the greatest single treasure within this letter.

The section 1:12–15 contains Peter’s justification for writing. It is of primary importance in unlocking the message of 2 Peter, and is not to be downgraded as though it were merely a brief section in praise of repetition and memory work in the teaching ministry! Here Peter records a message, received from the risen Lord, that in a short while he is to depart from the earthly scene. It is a dramatic warning of little time left for his apostolic labours. It galvanizes Peter into making immediate arrangements so that gospel truth will be maintained when he is gone. True, the congregations are ‘firmly established’ in the truth they presently have (1:12). Nevertheless, the spread of the new lawlessness compels the apostle, while he still lives among them, continually to refresh their minds concerning their spiritual foundations. His efforts are to be concentrated on ensuring that the churches go on living under the rule of his apostolic testimony long after he has gone from the scene. Unless this happens, the post-apostolic church will, before long, forfeit its apostolicity in character and

life.

The apostolic testimony of which Peter writes in 1:16–18 confirms the prophetic word (a contemporary description of the Old Testament as a whole), the foundational authority of which is described in 1:19–21. Through both apostolic testimony and prophetic word God speaks of ‘the power and coming of Christ’ (1:16), that climactic day of God when the world will be destroyed (3:10–12), from which final cataclysm God’s people will escape to enter their new and eternal home (3:13). This terrible time of judgment that will see the ‘destruction of ungodly men’ (3:7) will also see the final demonstration of God’s power to rescue the godly, a power anticipated in the present experience of Christian people whenever they are rescued from trials and temptations (e.g. 2:9).⁵

When Peter preached the coming of Christ to judge the world,⁶ he was not charting or concocting imaginary descriptions of the future of planet Earth, as his rivals, the false teachers, may have accused him (or as they themselves practised for profit; 2:3). His message depended for its integrity on what he, and his fellow apostles, both saw (1:16) and heard (1:18). At the transfiguration they were, for a brief moment, eye-witnesses of the divine sovereignty of Christ, just as later they were eye-witnesses of his bodily resurrection.⁷ In this unique, historical sense the apostles were witnesses of Christ’s ‘honour and glory’. As Peter reminds his readers in a telling little phrase, ‘we were with him’ (1:18).

But what could Peter and his friends make of so unexpected and awesome a sight? It is recorded elsewhere that, at the time, they woefully misunderstood its significance.⁸ What they needed was an authoritative interpretation of the event they saw. And this, literally, was what was provided by the voice from heaven (twice, in verses 17 and 18, it is insisted that this voice was not of earthly origin). Intriguingly for us, the heavenly message was couched in Old Testament language, a God-given confirmation of the truth of the prophetic word; and it spoke of a messianic king⁹ who was, at the same time, a Suffering Servant.¹⁰ Thus, for Peter especially, was solved the agonizing question of how one who would suffer could conceivably be Messiah.¹¹

4. The prophetic word

When the prophets proclaimed the coming of Christ to save all who believe,¹² they were not ‘speaking visions from their own minds’ as false prophets in all times are wont to do.¹³ Nor, like the false teachers described in 3:3, were they driven to say what they did because of their own strong personal desires or aspirations. It was the Spirit of God who, irresistibly, swept them along (1:21) in order to provide a God-given explanation, or interpretation, of the great saving acts of God in Israel’s history (1:20). Just as it was of first importance to understand the evil desires that impelled the new teachers to mock the truth (3:3), so it was of first importance to recognize how different was the ultimate source of the true prophets’ inspiration (1:20).

Since the prophetic word, as we have it, is an understanding of the Old Testament history of salvation given once for all by God to the prophets, both to speak to their contemporaries and to write down for the benefit of future generations, we are not to ascribe the teaching of the prophets to their own individual wisdom or insight. If their message had been like that of normal teachers, however gifted — limited by human fallibility and the inevitable prejudices of their times — we might well seek for help to reinterpret the Old Testament story according to our own modern lights.

But, insists our apostle, true prophecy never came by the ‘will of man’, that is by the prophet’s own deliberate purpose or individual viewpoint. The Old Testament prophet was not volunteering his ideas or perceptions, only to be corrected by a more scholarly successor! 2 Peter 1:21, if taken with full seriousness, rules out completely any thought that we can treat the book of the prophet Isaiah (or any other Old Testament prophet, or indeed the Old Testament Scriptures as a whole) like any other book. If what Peter says is true, then the prophetic word remains for ever God’s Word. It is not merely the prophet of long ago who speaks, but the living God himself. And if that is so, we shall be wise not to attempt to reinterpret what he says as though we were now in possession of some superior wisdom.

We are now in a position to grasp the enormous significance in 2 Peter of the repeated injunctions to remember or recall ‘these things’, that is, the authentic message of the apostles and prophets (1:12–15; 3:1–2). Words spoken in days past (3:2) can appear to lack the immediacy of words spoken in the present. There is a natural craving for a voice from heaven. That indeed has been given (1:18), but not to us. Unhappily, there are still those who trade, with some success, on the gullibility of unstable believers, and, by the use of bold claims and fictitious anecdotes (2:3), confuse the churches with claims that God’s Spirit is speaking a fresh message through them.

The essential ministry of the pastor, therefore, is that which recalls the work and words of Christ (hence the normal church furniture of table and pulpit). Just as the sermon loses its legitimacy if it does not make known ‘the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints’,¹⁴ so the supper likewise forfeits its legitimacy if it does not celebrate what Christ *has* done, once for all, by his sacrifice of himself on the cross. The moment we cease to be reminded of ‘these things’, the vacuum is likely to be filled by new ‘prophets’ and ‘priests’. The churches, then unanchored to the Word of God and the work of Christ, cease to be truly ‘apostolic’, despite their claims.

These realities lie behind the powerful exhortation of 1:19. It is to this original ‘prophetic word’ that Christians would ‘do well to pay attention’, rather than to the showy new ‘prophets’. For, as long as this world lasts, there never will be any divine light by which the churches may be guided other than the Scriptures. When Christ returns, and not until that day ‘dawns’, the morning star will arise in our hearts. This almost certainly refers to an inward illumination that will accompany the outward revelation, so that every believer on that day will be able to comprehend fully what then is so magnificently disclosed.¹⁵ Very possibly, the new teachers were professing to have been given just such a personal

enlightenment, enabling them to put aside the Scriptures as now superseded by the 'inner light', a claim frequently made in the history of the churches.

5. The authentic gospel

What then, according to this letter, is the genuine gospel message, against which we, like Peter's readers, can measure all fraudulent 'promises' made by new and popular teachers who echo the spirit of their times?

A fine description of Peter's gospel is given in 1:16. His preaching centred on 'the power and coming' of Christ (1:16). Particularly noteworthy is his concentration on Christ's *second coming* to judge, rather than upon his first coming to save, a prior emphasis that is noticeable elsewhere in Peter's teaching.^[16] This difference should not be overstated, as though Peter had no message of present salvation. But it does mean that Peter's good news was primarily *eschatological*, as spelt out in chapter 3. Thus the ridicule heaped upon the idea of Christ's return by the new teachers (3:4) is not noted here by the apostle as an attack on one particular article of the faith, but as a rejection of the gospel as a whole.

By such an emphasis, Peter must be condemning the exaggerated promises made by the trouble-makers. Their message aroused intense excitement by claiming that the future expectations of the Christian, linked in apostolic teaching with the world to come (note the 'looking forward' that occurs three times in 3:12–14), were to be expected *in this life* and experienced by all who followed their instruction and accepted their authority.

As so often happens, those who make such unreal claims are forced to live a lie (2:19). Even worse when heavenly aspirations are, in practice, disregarded, the appeal of such teachers must inevitably be to the passionate desires of the earthly nature, whether for prosperity, pleasure or any other form of self-seeking.^[17]

But Peter, as always (and despite modern criticism of his plain speaking in chapter 2), does not over-react to error. For instance, it is true that righteousness (a notable theme in this letter) is at home only in the new heaven and new earth (3:13), so that justice will never be perfectly done in this world; yet the apostle demands that by lip (2:5) and life (2:7–8) righteousness should be the goal in this life of every Christian disciple. Or again, although God's power will be displayed to humankind in all its inevitable authority only when Christ returns in glory, nonetheless divine power *is* manifested and recognized now by (hardest of all tests) the transformation of human nature in its depravity (*cf.* 2:22) to godliness and genuine goodness (1:3–5). In the same way, while eventual rescue and escape from those evil desires that corrupt the whole world must await the final catastrophe (3:10–13), yet by participating in the divine nature, a real escape from those who live in error is our joyful experience now (2:18; *cf.* 1:4). The initial verses of 2 Peter provide us with a lovely picture of what is ours now to delight in, namely an apostolic faith, freshly minted as in the earliest days of pentecostal power, with grace and peace in abundance, while the third and concluding chapter delights to speak about the glories that will be ours only at Christ's return.

In 2 Peter the alarm bells are ringing. Churches may be attacked from without to the point of near destruction (as evidenced today in Iran, Sudan, and North Korea, to name only three examples of cruel oppression). But almost more deadly still is that self-destructive madness that operates within the churches as a direct consequence of ruinous heresies secretly introduced into the mainstream of church teaching (2:1). This letter is not the only apostolic warning about such matters. If the denunciations of chapter 2 are vehement in their ruthless exposure of evil men, Paul warned in similar fashion of 'savage wolves' among the flock.^[18] The western church of the twentieth century has seen many of its congregations dangerously depleted, indeed its buildings often emptied, by a rationalistic philosophy of religion that is not a genuine Christian theology at all. It is certain that the errors threatening the stability of the churches to which Peter writes included denials of orthodox beliefs. In particular, it is evident that the person of Christ was belittled in terms of his divine sovereignty and universal lordship. Why else the clear emphasis on his deity in the initial address (1:1)? The fine designation 'our Lord and Saviour (Jesus Christ)' appears in the New Testament only in 2 Peter, and here four times (1:11; 2:20; 3:2, 18). The final doxology is one of only two in the New Testament in which Christ alone is the object.^[19] So clear is the apostle about Jesus as his 'Lord and God' that it is often impossible to be certain whether he is writing of God or of Jesus, as for example in 1:3.

Yet it is perhaps right to say that the lethal consequences of the newcomers lay even more in their sensuality and insatiable greed. Here the 'filthy lives of lawless men' were reminiscent of the cities of the plain (2:7). Openly shameless, they followed their own evil desires and taught others to do the same.^[20] The combination of moral collapse following upon doctrinal declension is a familiar one in days of apostasy, and 2 Peter puts in our hands a powerful trumpet to sound when we find ourselves, like Noah, living in such times (2:5).

But Peter is a true pastor as well as a skilled polemicist. He warns the faithful, but not to the point where they lose their confidence in the sovereign control of the Lord over his church. It may seem that God is sleeping while wolves ravage the flock (2:3b). But from the very beginning, the condemnation of false guides has been pronounced and their doom is certain. God will not spare the ungodly of today, for he did not spare them in times past (2:4–10). A terrible prospect lies ahead for the spiritual manipulators and exploiters, for those who distort the Word of God.^[21] And for apostate church leaders who sit loose to scriptural authority and faithlessly accommodate their message and moral standards to the spirit of the age. 'What is going to happen to the ungodly' (2:6), as expounded by Peter, is evidently intended to be terrifying, and we ought to be frightened by such warnings. 'If God did not spare angels' there can be no position of high privilege that offers any protection in the dreadful day of judgment. We who teach have been warned, and the people of God reassured. The lying teachers of Peter's day, as of ours, have 'long ago' had sentence passed on them by the Lord of the church. In the eternal world, their punishment continues to the present as they are kept for the day of final accountability.

But for those who seek to make their ‘calling and election sure’ (1:10) there is, at life’s end, an abundant entrance awaiting them into the eternal kingdom of Christ. If in 2 Peter there is an almost unimaginable severity for the apostate and the false prophet, there is also a vista, beyond our dreams, of unbounded joys for those who, never forgetful of what has been done for them (1:9), daily seek to increase, more and more, in the grace and knowledge of God.

1. The genuine article (2 Peter 1:1–2)

Fakes are a nuisance. Fake artists make fools of collectors, fake financiers embezzle millions at the expense of honest investors, fake scientists inflate their own reputations by riding on the back of other people’s hard research. In some other areas of life, though, fakes are not merely a nuisance but actually pose a serious threat. There is, for example, the potential damage caused by religious fakes. The obvious ones, those who are in it just for the money or the prestige, can be avoided without too much difficulty. Harder to uncover, but much more destructive in the end, are the well-meaning but muddled individuals who pass on a mixture of easy platitudes, biblical-sounding phrases and a view of life that is twisted out of any recognizable biblical shape. Such Christian con-men are the reason Peter wrote this letter. They not only prey on people’s wallets or good nature; ultimately they can wreck our eternal destiny, since a false gospel tells lies about God.

Fakes lie at the heart of Peter’s concern in this letter. He mentions false prophets and false teachers (2:1). They turn out to be false disciples (2:15), teaching stories they have made up (2:3). It is an alarming prospect, and we might be tempted to think that these words apply to darker days than our own. Peter is insistent, though, that ‘there will be false teachers among you’ (2:1), and he is writing this letter to ‘stimulate you to wholesome thinking’ (3:1). He is alerting his readers to the ever-present danger of being fooled by, or even becoming, Christian fakes. His urgency is caused by the nearness of his own death (1:13–15), which will mean an inevitable severing of one more link in the chain that bound the early church to the authentic message that Jesus taught. Peter’s reason for writing is to enshrine that teaching decisively, so that after his death no group or faction can claim that he was the originator of their perverted gospel.

Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ,

To those who through the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours:

² Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

These first two verses follow the standard opening to an ancient letter, but they also begin to crystallize Peter’s concern. He wants us to ensure that the Christianity which we have received, believed, lived and passed on to others is the genuine article and not a substitute. Peter isolates four areas where we should check what we believe against what he believes: where our gospel came from; whether it is as good as the original; what difference it makes in real life; and the doctrine it teaches. In other words, we need first to check our gospel’s origin, then its quality, thirdly its results, and fourthly its content.

1. The genuine apostle: the gospel’s origin (1:1a)

Peter presents himself in the normal way at the start of the letter, and explains his credentials. From its first word, this letter claims to be the authentic writing of an apostolic eye-witness of Jesus’ life, teaching, death and resurrection.^[1] Jesus had called *Simon* (literally ‘Simeon’)^[2] among his first disciples,^[3] and made this rough-hewn individualistic fisherman into someone he could use as a leader, a ‘fisher of men’ who would ‘feed my sheep’.^[4] Simon took a long time to learn, and the gospels stare unblinkingly at his frequent misunderstandings of Jesus. But he still made sure that Mark wrote it all down to encourage every generation of slow-learning disciples.^[5]

Jesus renamed him *Peter*, ‘the rock’, because he had acknowledged that Jesus was ‘the Christ, the Son of the living God’. Jesus replied, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’^[6] Quite clearly, Peter was going to be significant in the history and authority of the church. He dominates the first half of Acts as strongly as Paul dominates the second, and he proved as vital to the racial spread of the gospel as Paul was to its geographical spread.^[7] Peter took the initiative to include Samaritans and Gentiles as Christians, and although he never made those decisions alone, it is clear that his fellow apostles knew that Jesus had given him this door-opening responsibility. Significantly, once Gentiles believed and the Council of Jerusalem decided that it was possible to be a Christian without becoming a Jew, Peter had made his greatest speech and does not appear again in the book of Acts. He had discharged his role.

Simon Peter emerges as a man of enormous courage and tenacity, strengths he would need as he was repeatedly beaten and imprisoned for his faith. He left the church in Jerusalem under James’s leadership so that he could evangelize in Corinth, Pontus-Bythnia and, less happily, Antioch.^[8] By the time of 1 Peter he is in ‘Babylon’.^[9] meaning the imperial capital Rome. The New Testament does not record his further work and death, but later Christian writers touch on it. Irenaeus^[10] says that Paul and Peter founded the church in Rome together, although this is unlikely since Paul wrote to the church in Rome which he said he had not visited, and since Acts records Paul’s first arrival in Rome to be greeted by

existing Christians.^[11] The early church historian Eusebius simply states that Paul and Peter cooperated in this period.^[12] There is reasonable certainty that he was martyred with Paul under the Emperor Nero. The Roman historian Tacitus records Nero's ghastly pleasures. 'Derision accompanied [the Christians'] end: they were covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed, were burned to serve as lamps by night.'^[13] Babylon indeed. Our letter was written on the eve of Peter's death, 'because I know I will soon put [my body] aside, as our Lord Jesus has made clear to me. And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will be able to remember these things' (1:14-15).^[14]

Peter describes himself in two ways which define his position between God and the church: he is *a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ*.

a. Simon Peter the servant

In one sense, to describe himself as Jesus Christ's servant simply says that he is a willing disciple, as all Christians should be. Jesus has said that on the last day our only true self-description will be as 'unworthy servants',^[15] because our best still falls below God's perfect requirement.

Yet Peter's focus here is less on his humility than on his God-given authority. In the Old Testament it was seen as a position of great honour to be owned by God as his slave, and Israel rightly took enormous pride in being called the servant of God.^[16] So seriously did they take it that one Israelite could not sell another Israelite into slavery; both were already slaves, God's slaves.^[17] Israel's leaders, judges, kings and prophets were all called God's servants because they did his will and must therefore be obeyed;^[18] and even a pagan king, Nebuchadnezzar, could be called God's servant because he helped the Jews to return from exile.^[19] Over the decades, though, Israel's leaders increasingly fell short of the ideal, and prophets began to speak of the one who would come in the future and be God's perfect Servant.^[20]

When Peter calls himself *a servant ... of Jesus Christ*, he is claiming as special a role within the church as Isaiah, Jeremiah and even David had within Israel. Nor is Peter alone, for Paul and Timothy, James, John and Jude claimed the same title with the same power.^[21] When Peter claims to be the servant of Jesus Christ, we must pay attention to his message.

b. Simon Peter the apostle

Secondly, Peter calls himself an *apostle of Jesus Christ*. Again, this is a word with a wide range of meanings. The Greek word *apostolos* means a messenger commissioned to a task by a particular person. Uniquely, Jesus Christ is 'the apostle ... we confess',^[22] because he was sent (literally, 'apostled')^[23] by God to save us. In a much broader sense, Barnabas, Silas, Titus and Timothy are apostles,^[24] and Andronicus and Junias are 'outstanding among the apostles',^[25] who are 'those itinerant missionaries who were recognized by the churches as constituting a distinct group among the participants in the work of spreading the gospel'.^[26] In that loose sense there are still 'apostles', or 'sent Christians', today, working as evangelists, missionaries and church-planters.

Normally in the New Testament, 'apostle' has a third meaning, referring only to a precise group of twelve among Jesus' followers, who had been commissioned by Jesus as his representatives.^[27] When the decision was made to replace Judas, they looked for 'one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection.'^[28] To be called an apostle, it was not enough merely to have seen the risen Jesus, for Paul mentions five hundred people in that category but does not call them apostles.^[29] Paul himself could claim exceptional entrance only because of his personal commissioning by the risen Jesus on the Damascus road.^[30] It was a group to which many people wanted to belong because of the prestige of being a named and commissioned delegate of the Lord Jesus.^[31]

That unique group and its teaching are irreplaceable and authoritative, and they stand in the grand line of God's delegates and spokesmen. In the Old Testament there are five great commissioning scenes where God's agents are 'sent' to his people. God said to Moses, 'I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.' He said to Gideon, 'Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?' He asked Isaiah, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?' And I said, "Here am I. Send me!" He commanded Jeremiah, 'You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you.' He warned Ezekiel, 'Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me.'^[32] In that sense (God's directly commissioned delegates), God's apostles are an exclusive group. It is not surprising to find that the New Testament linked apostles and prophets in unique authority, the church being 'built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets'.^[33]

Peter's self-description as an *apostle of Jesus Christ* is thus a second high claim. At a time when there were calls to replace, supplement or question the apostolic gospel, he writes as a direct source of that gospel, and he will use his letter to call the Christians back to it. He is claiming to be the New Testament equivalent of an Old Testament prophet. We face the same pressures today as Peter's readers did then. The gospel is seen by some as inadequate to meet the needs of modern men and women, and as requiring radical redrafting to be relevant. It will be important to acknowledge, along with Peter's first readers, that apostles in his tightly defined sense do not exist today, and to draw a sharp line between

apostolic authority and our submission to that authority. We may call Christian leaders today ‘apostolic’ if they teach the message the apostles taught, but it is misleading to call them ‘apostles’. Neither the questions of a secular society nor supposed new revelations from God permit us to alter the content of Peter’s apostolic message.^[34]

c. *Simon Peter the servant and apostle of Jesus Christ*

When Jesus washed his disciples’ feet, he said, ‘I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger (*apostolos*) greater than the one who sent him.’^[35] The reason for Peter’s importance and authority today lies not in his intellect or personality, but in the one who sent Peter to us as an apostle, the one of whom he is now a servant, Jesus Christ.

2. The genuine Christian: the gospel’s quality (1:1b)

Peter and his fellow apostles, who actually knew and heard Jesus, undoubtedly benefited from that experience, and it was wonderful that those who had actually crucified Jesus could hear from Peter that they could be forgiven. We, however, live two thousand years from those events, and many people question their relevance. Distance seems to make the message less significant. Even Peter’s first readers felt this, for he writes to reassure them that despite their remoteness from the gospel events, they (and we) are as privileged as the apostles. Peter does not identify his readers in either letter, and their open address to all Christians makes them timelessly relevant. This has led to their common title, ‘catholic epistles’.^[36]

a. *You have received a faith ...*

How does someone become a Christian? One person might say, ‘Because I believe,’ and another, ‘Because God chose me.’ According to Peter, both ways of stating it are correct. On the one hand, we believe. It is a fundamental definition of a Christian that he or she is a ‘believe-er’; that he or she ‘has *faith*’ (the two words have the same root in the Greek). By ‘faith’ here, Peter could mean the objective facts of ‘the faith’, but it is more likely that he means to stress the subjective ‘faith’ in Jesus Christ that is the inward reality of every live Christian.^[37] But Peter also knows that it is not our feeble faith that holds us close to God. It is God who does all the holding, and that is the reality behind the word *received*. The Greek word *lanchanō* comes from politics, and was used of the appointment of government officials, ‘of persons who have a post assigned to them by lot’.^[38] Here it implies that the fact that any Christian believes at all is evidence of ‘the sheer fairness’^[39] of God. Christians who survive a lifetime of trouble are not evidence of their own resilience and toughness; rather, they see increasingly clearly that any progress has been God’s doing, and not their own.

b. *... as precious as ours ...*

Marvellously, Peter says that this faith was the same experience that the first Christians had, and that everything they found precious in the gospel these Christians find *as precious* too. The superficial differences are vast. Above all, he writes as one of the apostles (indicated by *ours*) to non-apostles. But he also writes as a Jew to Gentiles, and as a first-generation Christian to those who will be alive long after his death; in fact, to people like us. Yet the youngest Gentile Christian has *received a faith as precious as ours*, first-century Jews and apostles though they were. Can anything speak of God’s wonderful impartiality more than the truth that we stand in the same relation to him as did all the generations of believers in the past? They may be giants and inspiring examples, but how gracious of God to fling open the doors of his heaven so wide as to include absolutely anyone who has faith!

c. *... through the righteousness of our God and Saviour*

One word Peter uses sums up everything he has said so far — *righteousness*. He is using the word slightly differently from the way Paul uses it. This is not the righteous declaration God speaks over his people; it is the righteousness which God is in himself, his character, his moral uprightness and utter impartiality. ‘As in 1 Peter (2:24; 3:12, 14, 18; 4:18), so in this Epistle (2:5, 7–8, 21; 3:13) the word has the ethical associations which we find given to it in the Old Testament.’^[40] Peter says that this fairness of God guarantees that what he received and believed is what his first readers later received and believed, and indeed, what we receive and believe. God’s righteousness ensures that men and women, Jew and Gentile, first-century and twentieth, all receive the same message and offer from God.

3. The genuine experience: the gospel’s results (1:2)

The third area Peter wants his readers to check is the difference genuine Christianity makes. He says that it gives *grace and peace ... through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord*.

a. *Grace and peace*

New Testament writers frequently started their letters by taking over the standard secular way of opening a letter.^[41] *Grace* (*charis*) normally meant no more than ‘hello’, but they coupled it with the usual Hebrew greeting, *peace* (*šālôm*, *shalom*; both greetings are still used today in Greece and Israel respectively) to produce a new and beautiful idea. It acknowledged that the church in a particular place would contain both converted Jews and converted Gentiles. Peter employs this greeting to show from the outset that grace and peace are at the heart of what he believes and what the Christians are slipping away from. They are what Peter longs and prays for them to experience.

Grace means the generous heart of God who determines to treat sinful men and women as he lovingly wishes rather than as they actually deserve. It is God the Father’s sovereign good pleasure, totally unmerited by us, which raises us from

the ash-heap to a throne of glory. It is the servant-like manner of God the Son who became a man, lived, taught, died, rose again and reigns for us. It is the humble work of God the Holy Spirit who equips us to love and serve him now with his grace-gifts (*charismata*), and who is the down-payment for the day when we shall be changed into the likeness of Jesus Christ himself. The gospel is grace, God's good pleasure to delight in people who do not deserve it.

The immediate result of God's grace is that his rightful anger at our disobedience is appeased, and that we have *peace* with him. That is achieved through the death of *our God and Saviour Jesus Christ*. Ever since Adam and Eve were banished from Eden after their attempt at moral autonomy, humans and God have not been at peace; Jesus said we have been in a state of barely disguised hostility.^[42] Yet the hope of peace with God runs through the Old Testament,^[43] and was won by the cross, as the risen Jesus demonstrated. 'On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you!"'^[44] That becomes Peter's message in Acts: 'the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.'^[45] As a result of being reconciled to God by the death of Jesus on the cross, we have peace with God. But we also have peace with one another. Peter spoke those words to the Gentile Cornelius as the gospel was suddenly extended to those who were outside the racial Jewish fold. Peter and the other apostles thus extend this greeting to all Christians, including us, for if we are Christians the gospel is doing its work and God is re-creating his people under his rule. If we slip away from the message of grace, we forfeit peace with God and face only his anger.

b. Knowledge

Peter says this grace and peace come *through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord*. Knowledge is another important term in his letter.^[46] It is possible that Peter means the knowledge that God has of us, but in view of the way the word-group is used later (1:5, 8, 16, 20; 2:20–21; 3:3, 17–18), it is much more likely that he means the knowledge we have of God. Peter uses two related but distinct Greek words for 'knowledge'.^[47] *Gnōsis* is the word he uses for 'information knowledge' (1:5–6; 3:18; and as a verb in 1:20; 3:3). As he makes clear, that is the kind of knowledge which we can add to or grow in by being better informed about God and his Word. We can have that kind of knowledge by understanding Bible passages, reading good books and being well taught. But it is dangerously easy to be a well-informed non-Christian who misses the key ingredient, which is Peter's other word for 'knowledge', *epignōsis*.^[48] It has the sense of 'personal knowledge', the knowledge of a husband or wife or good friend that goes beyond knowing things *about* them and actually knows *them*. Knowing God is so momentous that Peter uses the word almost with the meaning of being converted (1:2, 3, 8; 2:20; in 2:21 twice as a verb). This is an essential foundation, for if we do not know Christ himself then it is empty to know about him. Peter is not making any point about intelligence or stupidity, because this is a knowledge that God gives. Such an amazing gift of grace and peace can come only through a personal knowledge of God himself, face to face and person to person; and that genuine personal knowledge of God is guaranteed only if we remain within the authentic gospel. Our deadly danger, as Peter is going to tell us, is that we might prefer to exchange that truth for a lie.

4. The genuine Christ: the gospel's content (1:1b–2)

Just as water flowing from a pure mountain spring can be polluted by a chemical works downstream, so an initially pure gospel can be polluted by muddled teaching — and a polluted gospel is a powerless gospel. In these verses Peter makes four extraordinary statements about Jesus, the man he knew as a close friend, and he designs them as indicators of the purity of our message's content.

a. Jesus is the Saviour

Our *Saviour Jesus Christ* is a frequent phrase on the lips of Christians. But it is awesome in its meaning, as we can see by turning the phrase on its head and asking, 'What is it that Jesus saves us from?' Peter gives clues in his use of this surprisingly rare New Testament term.^[49] He calls Jesus 'Saviour' five times (1:1, 11; 2:20; 3:2, 18) and talks of 'salvation' once (3:15). These highlight the three tenses of salvation: past, present and future. Of the past, Peter says we have 'been cleansed from [our] past sins' (1:9), and he attributes that work to our *Saviour Jesus Christ* (1:1). Of the present, he says that genuine Christians 'have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ' (2:20). Of the future, he writes that Christians need not be concerned about the apparent delay of the second coming, because 'our Lord's patience means salvation' (3:15). We can say, then, that Jesus Christ has saved us, because those sins which defiled us in God's sight have been cleansed away. We can say that he is saving us, because he protects us from the influences in the world which pull us away from him. And we can say that he will save us, because on the day of judgment the only safe place to hide will be behind the cross. Of those three meanings, it is that third sense of ultimate salvation which will dominate Peter's letter.

b. Jesus is God

Peter goes further than saying Jesus is Saviour — he says he is *our God and Saviour Jesus Christ*. Some find these words too strong to be simply about Jesus Christ, and say that Peter is distinguishing between two persons of the Godhead: God and Jesus Christ. Most scholars today think this unlikely.^[50] Peter attributes full deity to Jesus. Yet there is subtlety in his position, for only a few words later he makes another distinction, *the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord*. Just as it is clear in the first case that Peter is speaking of one person, there it is equally obvious that he is speaking of two: God the

Father and Jesus Christ. Quite clearly, Peter is articulating in an early form what later became recognized as orthodox Christianity: ‘the Father is God, the Son is God and the Holy Ghost [Spirit] is God, and yet there are not three Gods but one God’.^[51]

It is quite right for us to affirm that Jesus Christ is God, and quite right for us to affirm that Jesus Christ is not all there is to God. In his lifetime on earth he accepted and described himself with Old Testament titles for God, such as ‘shepherd’, ‘bridegroom’, ‘rock’ and ‘vinedresser’; his teaching had an authoritative note which had not been heard since God spoke at Sinai; he spoke, acted and promised as only the God of Israel could.^[52] Yet he submitted himself to the will of ‘the Father’, he prayed to ‘the Father’ and spoke of going to ‘my Father’.^[53] The balance was striking at the end of his life on earth, when he said, ‘I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’, but did not quibble when Thomas recognized him as ‘my Lord and my God’.^[54] As the first Christians read their Old Testaments in the light of what had happened, they saw that they lived at the time of ‘Immanuel’ — which means, ‘God with us’.^[55] Peter shares this clarity, for he will call Jesus ‘God’, but he will not call God ‘Jesus’. Peter does not directly mention Jesus’ humanity here, but the truth that God the Son really became a man who was a first-century Jewish carpenter called Jesus still breathes through his letter. He mentions Jesus by name nine times, as he had been used to doing to his face for three years; and as he remembers what happened in that time (2:16–18), and what Jesus said (e.g. 3:10, alluding to Lk. 12:39). One of the most remarkable features of the titles Peter gives Jesus is that he writes about one of his closest friends, and yet recognizes him as God.

c. *Jesus is the Christ*

This combination, ‘Jesus’ and ‘Christ’, is so normal that it is difficult to recapture how radical it must have seemed to Peter and the other first Christians as they used it in their teaching and praying. *Christ* (Greek *christos*, literally, ‘anointed one’; in Hebrew, *māšiah*, ‘Messiah’) was the name used for the one who would fulfil all the Old Testament hopes. Prophets, priests and kings were anointed with oil to show that they were dedicated to God as his servants,^[56] but *the* Servant would be *the* Messiah, the one above all others who would fulfil God’s plan. When Peter first dared to breathe the phrase, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God’,^[57] he was breaking wholly new ground in Israel’s dealings with God by identifying this man as the fulfilment of God’s plan for humankind. Of course, Peter did not fully understand what he was saying; and when Jesus immediately explained that he must suffer as the Christ, Peter rebuked him, thinking that the Christ should be a glorious king. Jesus insisted that death was his destiny, and after his resurrection it was that sense of inevitability that began to control the first Christians’ thinking. It became the heart of Peter’s message to the crowd on the day of Pentecost: ‘This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him ... God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact ... God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ’.^[58] The risen Jesus is the glorious, lordly Christ precisely because he went the way of the cross, and it is that to which Peter and the other apostles are witnesses.

d. *Jesus is the Lord*

Lord (*kyrios*) was the standard translation in the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament) for the Hebrew name of God, Yahweh. To call Jesus *Lord* among people who knew their Old Testaments, then, was to say that Jesus was present all the way through the history of Israel as their covenant Lord. Whenever Christians read that the Lord did such and such, they were to understand Jesus as acting there. How else could they explain Jesus’ thinking through Psalm 23, ‘The Lord is my shepherd’, and coming to the conclusion, ‘I am the good shepherd’?^[59]

They would also be aware that the titles ‘Saviour’, ‘Lord’ and ‘God’ were used in contemporary religious groups and political circles as titles for the Emperor. To use them of Jesus was therefore to make a decisive stand against all the other claimants for Jesus’ crown. This would have sounded ludicrous to non-Christians, because the cross of Christ does not resonate with apparent heavenly glory, any more than his whipped body wearing a fool’s crown and robe resonates with political glory. But such is the wisdom of God that it turns such apparent foolishness into wisdom, and such apparent weakness into glory.^[60]

This fourfold description of Jesus is important because it puts him at the focal point of human history. As *God*, he guarantees that his words and his works cannot be replaced or revoked; as *Christ*, he fulfils all the Old Testament promises; as *Saviour*, he died on the cross for our salvation in the past, present and future; and as *Lord* he claims the right to our individual love and obedience — notice how Peter calls him *our* Lord.

There is a constant temptation to separate these four titles. Michael Green writes that 2 Peter ‘was written to people who claim Jesus as Saviour but do not obey him as Lord. That appears to be the reason why the writer significantly combines the roles of Lord and Saviour’^[61] (1:11; 2:20; 3:2; 3:18). These two titles go together. It is only because Jesus is the Lord that he can be the Saviour; and if he is the Saviour then he owns those he has saved, and he has the right to be their Lord. The words are inseparable. The reason this is so central to Peter’s letter is that the false teachers are denying the future coming of Jesus Christ. Peter reminds the Christians that the Judge on judgment day will be Jesus, and the Saviour on judgment day will be Jesus. On that day Jesus will be, visibly and finally, both Lord and Saviour. As a result, we should live in gratitude for his salvation and in obedience to his lordship. He is ‘the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him’.^[62]

This description of Jesus is the wonder of the message Peter spoke on the day of Pentecost, where themes of Saviour, Lord, God and Christ emerge and intertwine.

‘Let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.’

... The people ... were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’

Peter replied, ‘Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off — for all whom the Lord our God will call.’

With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, ‘Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.’^[63]

2. The power and the promises (2 Peter 1:3–4)

In this section, Peter gives some of the most thrilling promises of any in the Bible. As Bengel says, ‘There is a wonderful cheerfulness in this opening.’^[1] But Peter is also alert to the danger of taking shortcuts to heaven, and behaving as if God had magically so transformed us that the categories of ‘sin’ and ‘obedience’ have become irrelevant. He does not want us to forget that Christians talk of Jesus as their Lord as well as their Saviour.

*His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.*⁴ *Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.*

In private, Christians will often admit to envying non-Christian friends in their free-wheeling lifestyles and morality. They see other people, who sometimes call themselves more ‘liberated’ Christians, enjoying things which the Bible clearly forbids. They might feel sure that such behaviour is wrong, but secretly wish they could join in. They are paralysed into indecision, sometimes wishing they had the courage to enjoy a fully committed Christianity, and at other times wishing they had the courage to forget it and enjoy being utterly pagan. Peter warns that obedient Christians are not killjoys or repressed, and that a Christianity which wants to have the best of both worlds will actually have the best of neither. This present world is being ‘kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men’ (3:7), and the future world will be a ‘home of righteousness’ (3:13). We face a choice, and to choose a home in one world will mean not having a home in the other.

There is a fine division of responsibility as we live in this world in the hope of a future home. Jesus Christ has the power and makes the promises (verses 3–4), but we need to add to our faith consistent changes in character in order to be effective, productive, clear-sighted Christians (verses 5–11). Peter’s letter is constructed around Jesus Christ’s power (chapter 2) and promises (chapter 3), and this section introduces the main ideas in miniature.

Peter’s timescale is central to his thinking. He says that Jesus Christ has given us two massive resources. To equip us in the present, Jesus *has given us everything we need for life and godliness*. To direct us to the future, *he has given us his very great and precious promises*. Those two resources make up the great gift of the ‘faith’ we ‘have received’ (1:1), but we shall need to keep a strong hold on each of them individually, and not confuse them. Peter has a clear perspective on the practical results of being a disciple today, but he says that such a committed life will make sense only if we have a deeper perspective on God’s future plans for the universe. 2 Peter is one of the most explicitly future-oriented books in the New Testament, and Peter will demonstrate the everyday implications of that future goal. The ‘now’ of the power and the ‘then’ of the promises go inextricably together, and he will show that there are awful consequences if they are uncoupled.

Peter wrote one sentence which extends from verse 1 to verse 11 in the Greek, but that makes such hard reading in English that modern versions start a new paragraph here at verse 3. There is an important connection between verse 2 and verse 3, though,^[2] and it lies in that *knowledge* that Christians have of Jesus Christ (verse 2), in which they must grow (verses 3 and 8).

Peter makes a number of startling assertions about Jesus and his work in this section. They are phrased in the language and form of Greek philosophy and religion, and some have accused him of uncritically absorbing the secular spirit of his age.^[3] But Peter’s background remains so thoroughly Jewish, and his ideas so thoroughly Christian, that we have to account for his odd vocabulary in another way.^[4] As he begins his exposure of the problem, he answers a fool according to his folly,^[5] by showing up the worldly nature of the error and using secular language to do it. It can be a risky tactic to adopt,^[6] but here it warns the Christians of the danger of the position they were about to fall into, which was that of becoming utterly indistinguishable from surrounding paganism, and aping non-Christian concerns.

1. The power of Jesus Christ (1:3)

This is one of the relatively few occasions on which the New Testament actually calls Jesus divine,^[7] and it is for a reason. Even people with no religious commitment may speak of their religious experiences, and some church people affirm these as genuine encounters with God. Peter will not rest with such diplomatic generalizations, because he wants to anchor everything to Jesus Christ, who uniquely has *divine power*. The idea of God’s power is a frequent one in the Bible, covering every major stage in the history of God’s people. Peter wants to make that link between Jesus and the great acts

of God in the past, and to remind us of the power that accompanied Jesus' ministry. But two clues show that he is also working within a secular environment. First, although the phrase 'divine power' does not echo any particular phrase in the Bible, it was very frequent in contemporary secular writing. Secondly, although the word 'divine' is confined in the New Testament to this letter and Paul's speech in Athens,^[8] it was common currency outside.^[9] It is repeated in verse 4 in the phrase *divine nature*, and the two phrases form a bracket around this paragraph. The word, *theios*, could be used by the apostles either in order to put their thoughts into words that non-Christians would understand or, as here, to show how some of the Christians' ideas were shading off into paganism.

For the first time the question is becoming clear, and it is one that is not confined to Peter's time. Is the power of Jesus Christ sufficient on its own to strengthen the resolve of anxious and tempted Christians in a tough and attractively pagan world? Peter's answer is that Jesus' power is more than adequate, for Jesus not only sets the highest standards for Christians to live up to, he also gives the resources to meet those standards, and in the end he will defeat the forces who oppose him. Everything hangs on that last point, for if Jesus does not have the ultimate power to enforce his rightful rule, then it is really no power at all. People look back to Jesus' remarkable teaching and miracles, and rightly think that they see there the great power of God. But Peter sees a greater working of Jesus' *divine power* in the seemingly unimpressive reality of men and women able to live lives that honour Jesus. People look back to the Jewish carpenter friend of Peter, whose dreams led to the cross in weakness; but Peter looked forward as well, to Jesus' mighty return as King and Judge. 'The *dunamis*, power and authority of Christ, is the sword which St Peter holds over the head of the false teachers.'^[10]

a. Jesus Christ sets the challenge for us

Jesus Christ sets high standards in *life and godliness*, which are best thought of not as two things but one, a 'godly life'.^[11] Those high standards were apparent throughout his life and teaching, and nowhere more clearly than in the Sermon on the Mount. There he said that 'unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven'.^[12] We are so used to hearing Jesus' religious contemporaries marked low for their standards that it comes as something of a shock to realize that Jesus meant this as an awesome warning. The people to whom he spoke assumed that the Pharisees and teachers of the law were the very model of scrupulous perfection, and to be required to exceed that standard was breathtakingly ambitious and radical. Jesus had shown that those Pharisees who were spiritually open enough to want to learn from him had to go further. The Pharisee Nicodemus had to be 'born again', and the teacher of the law who agreed with Jesus on God's standards was told only that he was 'not far from the kingdom of God'.^[13] Jesus taught that the Pharisees' perfection was inadequate because it was built on reconstructing the law so as to demand the least of themselves. He reconstructed it to demand the most, and he made that standard irrevocable. That level of positive perfection is the godly life.

Such a standard seems hopelessly naïve, because ordinary human beings are not necessarily noble or altruistic. Some suggest a lower standard that more people can reach. But in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is not setting out a new and more demanding code of ethics that only a few disciplined ascetics can achieve. Rather, he is redefining the people of God. They are the people who recognize him as their lawgiver, who come to him not on the basis of their perfection or strength but in their imperfection and weakness. They are men and women who ask for forgiveness, not approval,^[14] and their perfection is not interior and invisible, but worked out in everyday life.

The word translated *godliness* is *eusebeia*, the word ordinary non-Christians would use to describe what they would hope to be the results of their religious practices in observable holiness. It spoke of decency, honesty, trust and integrity, and could mean something that a religious person has earned or deserved. Peter had encountered that misunderstanding in the first few months of Christian leadership, when a man's miraculous healing was causing a stir. The people were thinking that Peter must be a very good man, since God used him in this way. Instead, Peter directs them to Jesus. 'Why do you stare at us as if by our own power (*dunamis*) or godliness (*eusebeia*) we had made this man walk?'^[15] Because it has this overtone of man-made piety, it is a word the New Testament normally avoids;^[16] but it has a sharp significance in an environment where non-Christians were becoming scandalized at the immorality of church leaders (2:2). The ordinary Christian, faced with a battle against sin, could easily give in to despair. Are we to follow those who claim to be our leaders but clearly lead us into sin? Are they right in teaching us that fighting sin is an outdated battle? Peter says that the quality of a Christian's discipleship should be so evident that non-Christians should be able to watch us reaching, and even surpassing, their highest standards of life and godliness.

b. Jesus Christ meets the challenge for us

If the high expectations of the New Testament are not watered down, the average Christian is left feeling massively daunted. Peter's answer to that inadequacy is that Jesus Christ *has given us everything we need for life and godliness*. This is a slight under-translation, because *has given* renders *dōreomai*, which can mean a generous imperial gift, or even volunteering for service.^[17] It underlines the graciousness and generosity of the giver. Jesus Christ has generously given all that could ever be required to be godly. Merely by being Christians, we are in touch with everything we need to live a godly life. That supremely important word 'everything' is both a tremendous encouragement and a tremendous warning.

It is encouragement because it means that there is nothing extra to find out or gain access to than we have already obtained just through being Christians. The gospel is sufficient for us to meet God's requirements. If there is a major scientific, artistic, moral or philosophical question, or even a matter of personal decision-making, which the Bible does not address, then we have to assume that although it may be intriguing and important from a human perspective, it is irrelevant to the quest for a godly life. God has made his directions for life perfectly clear and sufficient, for *he has given us*

everything we need, and that provides a clear view on what is centrally important in his plan and what is relatively trivial.

There will always be people who want to supplement the work of Christ with extra teaching, and convince us that we are living less than Christian lives, while their particular form of teaching is the ingredient missing from traditional Christianity. It takes different forms: Christ plus healing, Christ plus success, Christ plus prosperity, Christ plus counselling, Christ plus an overwhelming experience. Anxious Christians may spend many years going through these, searching for an assurance that is already theirs in Christ. Simply by being Christians we have access to everything we need to live a life that pleases God. Those who want to add to that are false teachers.

That sufficiency of Christ is good news. But the tremendous warning these words contain is that we have to face up to our accountability to him. We cannot blame God for not making us godly enough or not making his will clear enough, for we already have *everything we need*. A godly life is not something that only a few super-saints are destined to achieve, for Peter says it is well within the reach of the ordinary Christian. There is no point in seeking a special secret of sanctification that will transform us into godly people in a faster way than ordinary Christian obedience. There is no other way. If there were, it would mean that the death of Christ is sufficient to save but insufficient to sanctify. Peter will lay out later how to live a godly life (verses 5–11), and it will be a matter of hard submission to God's Word. The Christian who is not godly has only one person to blame.

We gain access to the remarkable resource that will enable us to meet this daunting challenge *through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness*. This is again the knowledge of Jesus Christ that comes when we are converted ('*epignōsis* knowledge'), and which is the birthright of every Christian. We are not to look for the source of that knowledge in our experience of conversion, however, for Peter ties it back to the ministry of Jesus. All the apostles had an especially clear memory of being *called* by Jesus,^[18] but the *we* and *us* must mean that Peter remembered a moment when Jesus called all Christians.^[19] Perhaps he recollected the occasion on which Jesus gave the invitation, 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.'^[20] We may remember having responded to that invitation at a particular time, but it would be wrong to identify that event with the moment we were called. We have a vital link with the historical Jesus.

Peter underlines that truth by saying that the way Jesus called us was *by his own glory and goodness* (and perhaps again it is right to combine the two words and talk of Jesus' 'glorious goodness').^[21] What has attracted men and women to Jesus Christ for nearly two thousand years is his unique ability to reflect the glory and goodness of the invisible God^[22] into our visible and fallen world. Goodness, *aretē*, is another common word from Greek religion, which also makes Old Testament appearances, partnered, as it is here, by the word *glory*.^[23] The two words could be merely synonyms. But 'goodness' here probably means 'a manifestation of divine power, [a] miracle'.^[24] Peter does not want to focus on Jesus' goodness in the abstract, but in the reality of what God has done and achieved. That forces us back to Jesus' life, teaching, example and miracles, and to his transfiguration, which will be so central to this letter. Above all, it forces us back to the great manifestation of God's power in Jesus' death and resurrection.^[25] In other words, people may seem to become Christians because they find Jesus' ministry deeply attractive, but underneath that, Peter says, is the saving work of Christ which has called us into fellowship with the Father, and it is only through the cross that we have knowledge of him.^[26]

c. Who fails the challenge?

The false teachers threatening the churches to which Peter is writing found this idea of high standards an unnecessary burden. They collected followers by 'appealing to the lustful desires of sinful human nature' instead (2:18). The reason, which will become clearer in chapter 2, is that they denied that Jesus Christ has any power to judge, in which case there is no reason to live up to his exacting standards. They saw non-Christians all around them living a life which was the total opposite of Jesus' standards and yet thoroughly enjoying themselves, and that made them feel privately envious. They began to wish that Christians did not have to stand out from the crowd. They had started to argue that Christian theology and morality should develop and grow over time, and that it should lose some of what they might have called its primitive judgmentalism. Peter is firm in reply. No, he says, the Jesus who will return to judge will measure us by the standards he has left us and which he has equipped us to fulfil.

2. The promises of Jesus Christ (1:4)

Jesus Christ's glorious goodness is demonstrated in the second great resource he makes available to us: *he has given us his very great and precious promises*. The theme of 'promise' runs throughout the Bible, stemming from the promise God made in the garden of Eden, that the disastrous fall would not determine humanity's destiny irrevocably.^[27] Chapter 2 of this letter focuses on the promises that God made to Noah and Lot, that they would not be destroyed in the judgment played out in the flood and the end of Sodom and Gomorrah. Of all the biblical promises, Peter has in mind the particular group to do with God's decisive role at the end of history, 'the promise of his coming' (3:4, AV). These are the promises that the false teachers question (3:4), and that Peter defends (3:9). In fact, the heart of Peter's reply to the false teachers is that Jesus Christ will return to reign, visibly and unchallenged. The false teachers have decided that this is not the case, and so what Peter sees as future (such as being morally perfect) the errorists have to bring into the present. Because they cannot pretend to be perfect, they have to decide that such standards are unnecessary. They too make a promise, for they 'promise ... freedom', but they are in no state to fulfil it, for they are still 'slaves of depravity' (2:19).

a. *The promise of glory*

In one breathtaking phrase Peter brings into view the ultimate content of the promises of Jesus Christ, that we shall *participate in the divine nature*. It is a claim without equal in the New Testament, and Sidebottom calls it ‘the strikingly original note in 2 Peter’.^[28] Some writers dislike it intensely and imply that it is semi-pagan. ‘It would be hard to find in the whole New Testament a sentence which, in its expression, its individual motifs and its whole trend, more clearly marks the relapse of Christianity into Hellenistic dualism.’^[29] Yet although it is a unique phrase in the New Testament, it is not a unique idea. Peter wrote in his first letter that Christians ‘will share in the glory to be revealed’.^[30] and Paul wrote of our ‘adoption as sons’, that we might be ‘conformed to the likeness of his Son’.^[31] And of course Paul’s key phrases ‘in Christ’ and ‘with Christ’ locate our destiny within the destiny of Jesus himself.^[32]

At this high point of the New Testament, we must not play down the wonder of what Peter says. There is a long tradition, beginning with Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–c. 215), that places more weight on this verse than it can fairly carry.^[33] and we must preserve the awesome distance between the creator God and everything and everyone he makes. To say that we are God, or become God, would be a shocking misinterpretation of Peter. Nevertheless, we should still marvel with Calvin that ‘it is the purpose of the gospel to make us sooner or later like God; indeed it is, so to speak, a kind of deification’.^[34] Peter is able to promise far more than the false teachers can ever do, because he is pinning his faith on the promises of God.

This participation in the divine nature is solely an act of God’s graciousness, his undeserved generosity, in order that we might *escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires*. Peter will make a major theme of the rightness of God’s judgment on the world, and how there is only one route of escape (3:10–12). Either we share the character of those who are being judged, or we share the character of the one who does the judging. Peter has put the gospel into a form of words appropriate to a society ‘haunted by the conception of *phthora*, *corruption*’.^[35] because he wants to create a hunger in the lives of his readers for the highest promise that God makes. Any other promise seems insipid and irrelevant beside that.

b. *The promise of escape*

Peter will explain in his letter what it is that Christians can expect here and now, and what should be expected only in the future. To use the technical word, what is at issue is eschatology, the doctrine of the last days.

Attitudes to the last days can take two forms, which are sometimes called ‘under-realized’ and ‘over-realized’ eschatology. ‘Under-realized’ eschatology does not take into account the tremendous difference in the relationship between humankind and God that has been effected by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It approaches God as if the Old Testament model were still appropriate. Even though there are no more animal sacrifices, it will design awesome buildings, and perform mystical music and uplifting spectacle, conveying a sense of mystery and dread. Such an approach can leave a Christian feeling that God is still as unapproachable as ever, except for a tiny spiritual élite; and that the way to please this distant God is to follow a strict regimen of rules as if to appease the God who was not fully appeased by the death of his Son.

‘Over-realized’ eschatology is an opposite error, which is to think that everything Jesus promised for the time after his death must be true for us now. His resurrection inaugurated the new age, and so every blessing promised for the new age must be fully available now. The elements of truth in this cannot conceal its weakness. A compassionate view of the real world shows us that even the most Christ-like Christian still sins or falls sick. A further version of this view says that those promises will not in fact be kept, and that people have to do the best they can, living with impossible Christian ideals in a far from perfect world.

The answer to both errors is to understand God’s timing. These are the ‘in-between’ times, in between Christ’s coming as servant and his coming as Lord. One day we shall have resurrection bodies like Christ’s, but in the meantime Christians die; one day we shall have a perfect desire to please God, but in the meantime we still sin. We do not have to pretend that God has kept promises which he says will be fulfilled only in the future, but we do have to believe them and not water them down.

Peter is concerned because he sees a highly liberal ‘over-realized’ eschatology in the churches to which he writes. The false teachers denied any future element in Christianity at all. They were sophisticated ‘scuffers’ (3:3) who thought that the ideas of Jesus’ return and judgment were too crude and simplistic (3:4), and that they were metaphors that had to be reinterpreted and adjusted to meet the questions of modern people. Jesus’ standards, they argued, had to be interpreted in a new way to be acceptable to modern lifestyles.

Peter is quite clear about what this means, and in order to counter it he restates basic Christian truth in a fresh way. Unlike some Greek philosophers, and modern New Agers, the Bible teaches that we are humans, not gods. We were made by God, according to Genesis 1:26. We are created rather than creators. We fell, not from godliness in heaven, but from full humanity on earth. Nor is it our automatic destiny (as again some Greek and modern religions teach) to be absorbed into the Godhead as we evolve (either spiritually or scientifically) into greater or better humans. The Bible treats our rebellion against God as a deep tragedy, and the fall was not a growth point or step upwards. Some will always see the physical world as base and bad, and the spiritual world as elevated and true. They say that the way to find God is to escape the physical realm in a mystical experience. But Peter is clear that the *corruption* we are to flee is not our physical bodies, but sin. In 2 Peter, the ‘world’ (*kosmos*) is always rebellious human society which is under judgment and which will be destroyed (1:4; 2:5, 20; 3:6).^[36] The appropriate Christian reaction is to run away from those things which cause God’s anger (2:18, 20). God does not call us to seek him on a higher, non-material plane by out-of-the-body experiences,

transcendental meditation or visions, shaking off the supposed limitations of our bodies. Being human in human society is a right and good thing. Having understood this, though, we are not to be so identified with God's world that we cease to flee the corruption in it, which is in rebellion against him, and which he will destroy.³⁷

Peter calls Christians to live out the new relationship with Jesus Christ in practical obedience today while still keeping hold of the fact that much, much more remains in store. We do not pretend to be perfect, which would make his promises unnecessary; or say that we do not need to be perfect, and so make his promises cheap and tawdry. Instead, we can say that we *will be* perfect, and that makes them *very great*³⁸ and *precious promises*. God will do all that he has promised to bring us to a position of deep intimacy with him.

These words immensely influenced the young John Wesley in the middle of his spiritual crisis early in the morning of 24 May 1730. Looking back on that crucial day, he wrote in his diary for 4 June, 'All these days I scarce remember to have opened the New Testament, but upon some great and precious promise. And I saw, more than ever, that the gospel is in truth but one great promise, from the beginning of it to the end.'³⁹ He had grasped Peter's massive time-scale, and understood that the full evidence of Jesus' power will be seen only in the future when he keeps his promise. That truth frees us from having to pretend to be perfectly whole people today. We are Christians who are gripped by God's promises for the future, thrilled by them, and motivated to live godly lives now in his power.

3. The productive Christian (2 Peter 1:5–11)

James Hogg, a nineteenth-century Scottish writer, wrote an extraordinary novel called *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. The central character is so absolutely convinced of the certainty of his salvation, and sure that he is a member of 'the elect', that he commits a series of increasingly gross and self-indulgent acts. He is so secure in the belief that his behaviour will not affect his eternal destiny that he feels completely freed from any restraint, even to the point of murder. The book was written as a sharp parody of an extreme position, and we should be grateful that very few Christians have had the foolishness and wickedness to go so far.

Even so, we frequently come across a false understanding of Christian freedom which says that if we are justified by God's irrevocable grace, we enjoy a new kind of relationship with God where ideas of law and obedience are inappropriate. Those from a conservative position suddenly feel free to do things that earlier generations of Christians judged wrong. Television loves to expose those Christian leaders whose sense of spiritual security is so strong that they feel free to enjoy various forbidden fruits. More radically minded people wonder what to do with those parts of the New Testament which forbid some behaviour in an apparently legalistic way. Should they be seen as hangers on from Old Testament thinking, the New Testament writer having failed to absorb the full implications of the gospel? Should Paul's requirement for sex to be contained within heterosexual marriage be deleted as firmly as he deleted the requirement for circumcision? Anxious Christians think they lack the key to Christian growth and certainty, and move from guru to guru seeking the touch of God to change them. Some even claim to have had an experience that makes it impossible for them to sin, and therefore the battles Peter writes about are not ones that need concern them.

When such thinking occurs, the connection between private, internalized 'faith' and public, observable 'obedience' has been severed. People say that provided they believe as the early Christians believed, they need not behave as the early Christians behaved. A convenient contrast is drawn between the supposedly simple, liberating message and ethics of Jesus and the supposedly complicated, restricting theology of the later New Testament, which is usually blamed on Paul. Permission is thus given to reinterpret the requirements of the New Testament by saying that whether or not they were correct expressions of Christian obedience then, they are hardly so today. On a less sophisticated level, the gospel might be reduced to a few simplistic phrases and slogans, and the more demanding parts of the New Testament neatly avoided.

Such positions are fundamentally wrong. They set up a wholly false division between Jesus, who most certainly did teach a very complex theology,¹ and the first Christians. They open the way for a destructive liberalism, for if the first Christians had not sufficiently thought through their ethics, it is inevitable that they had not thought through their doctrine either. If the one is not binding on us, neither is the other. Most importantly for 2 Peter, such positions do not see that the first Christians could not divide belief from behaviour precisely because they could not teach theology apart from ethics.² Peter would say that if we believe what he believes, then we must behave as he behaves. If we do not see that need, and if we do not follow his prescription, we demonstrate that we actually believe something different, a false gospel.

One of the major concerns of Peter's letter is that Christian faith which is firmly rooted must make a radical difference to the way we behave. We will want to please Jesus Christ more, rather than presume upon his love. In this section, he shows that our faith, if it is genuine, sets up a chain of deep, internal, and experiential changes that will meet our hunger for God's reality.

1. The effective Christian (1:5–9)

a. Adding to our faith

If Peter was talking about 'the faith', he would be saying something very odd here. He would be teaching that we need to add new doctrines to the faith, which is the false teachers' mistake. He would also be contradicting what he has just said about already having been given 'everything we need for life and godliness' (1:3). He is, however, still talking about *faith* as he meant it in verse 1, the individual belief of the Christian.