

Introduction

Ricky Gervais, an atheist and comedian, had a conversation with Stephen Colbert some years ago. Colbert is also a comedian but he is a devout Roman Catholic who teaches at his church. With zero comment on his politics, some of his arguments for the truth of the gospel have been quite surprising and quite profound. In this particular interview Gervais made an interesting claim. He said if all scientific knowledge were suddenly lost, it would only be a matter of time before we discovered all the scientific knowledge again. He then said if the Bible were suddenly lost, we couldn't reconstruct its teaching. Therefore, he argues, science is true and religion is false.

He has a point, but he's wrong. If all *history* books were suddenly lost, we would never know of the existence of Julius Caesar, would we? Does this mean Julius Caesar never really existed? No, of course it doesn't. The truth is we know science in a different way than we know history. What Ricky Gervais fails to recognize is that Christianity is rooted in historical reality. One cannot prove that Julius Caesar was proclaimed dictator for life in 44 BC in the same way that one can prove a helium atom has two electrons with a nucleus containing two protons and at least one neutron. We don't *know* history in the same way we *know* science and he's conflating these two.

The truth is Christianity is based entirely in a Person who is a real historical figure. It is not an ethical framework as many religions are today. It is not merely a way of life. It is not a rigid system of rites and rituals as ancient pagan religion was, with no real requirements for how you live your life—so long as you keep the rituals. Christianity rests entirely on the historical reality of Jesus of Nazareth, of his life, death, burial, and resurrection.

What this means is Jesus is the authority bearing the weight of Christianity. Because the truth of Christianity rests on the Person of Jesus, our faith is as real as Jesus is real. Even more, this means all of God's purposes are rooted in this particular Person.

Our text this morning is not about apologetics, though it has a strong apologetic tone to it. It is not about proving something to skeptics. In it Peter explains the purpose for our lives today. He illustrates for us that how you and I live, how we interact with one another, how we interact with those around us, what we believe, all come together for a specific purpose, and that purpose is, quite literally, *brilliant*. We're in 2 Peter 1.

² Pet 1:16 For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. ¹⁷ For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," ¹⁸ we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. ¹⁹ And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star

rises in your hearts, ²⁰ knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. ²¹ For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

2 Peter 1:16–21

The God-Man

If you read through 2 Peter you would notice something striking in verse 16 of our text. We looked at verses 12–15 last week. In that text Peter said, “*I* intend always to remind you of these qualities...*I* think it is right ...to stir you up by way of reminder...*I* will make every effort ...that you may recall these things”. Verse 16? “For *we* did not follow cleverly devised myths”.

Peter switches from the first person singular to the first person plural. Who makes up this group of “we”? The context makes it clear: Peter is speaking as one of the apostles, the witnesses chosen by the Lord Jesus himself. In speaking on behalf of the apostles Peter begins his argument against the false teachers who have begun attacking the churches in these five provinces.

He makes an important first point: we did not follow cleverly devised myths. In the ancient world a myth was a device to teach uneducated people. Often a myth was an engaging tale intended to teach folk about the social order or about the gods. A myth was an explanatory narrative. Often when people read verse 16 they read it as Peter saying, “Christianity is true but other religions are fairy tales”. That is not Peter's point. He is saying that he and the other apostles did not make up the stories of the Lord Jesus in order to explain something, but were simply reporting what they heard and saw.

He says they—again, the apostles—made known to them “the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ”. In doing so they weren't making up anything but were reporting what took place. He says specifically, “the power and coming” of Jesus. What, exactly, is meant by “power and coming”? The word for “coming” is *παρουσία*. If you study theology in a formal context this is one of those words that are often used in a technical sense. This word is used of the Lord Jesus thirteen times outside of 2 Peter. It is used in verse 16 and a couple times in chapter 3, for a total of sixteen times in the New Testament.

In chapter 3 we read more about the content of the false teaching, and Peter uses this word. There the scoffers ask,

^{2 Pet 3:4} They will say, “Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.”

2 Peter 3:4

It is also used in verse 12 of that chapter:

^{2 Pet 3:12} ~~waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn!~~

2 Peter 3:12

What is clear in the other fifteen uses of the word “coming” is they refer to the *return* of the Lord Jesus, not his incarnation, or first coming. If the other fifteen uses of the word clearly, unambiguously refer to his future coming, what is the likelihood this word in verse 16 refers to his first coming? Zero. Peter tells them he and the other apostles did not make up stories in order to teach them when they spoke of Christ’s power and coming—that is, his return to this world.

Instead, he makes a declaration that changes the entire framework for understanding the gospel of Jesus: “but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty”. The apostles did not have to come up with cleverly devised myths for they simply declared what they themselves had *witnessed*. That is, the truth of the Lord Jesus is rooted in historical reality. No, you cannot prove the resurrection of Jesus in a laboratory, but it is historical fact nonetheless.

He uses a word that would have stood out to a first-century Jew: we were eyewitnesses of his *majesty*. This is a direct claim of the divinity of Christ. The ancient Jews used this word to describe God. In fact, Peter uses it to refer to God the Father in verse 17. A declaration was made by “the Majestic Glory”. For ancient Jews, only God is majestic. Peter says he and the other apostles saw the majesty of Jesus. That is, they saw the divinity, or the divine nature, of Jesus.

They saw a human, of course. Jesus was born of the virgin Mary, indicating his birth was no ordinary birth. He had to learn walk and talk, to feed himself. He had to be potty trained and had to learn how to read. He was human in every way, yet Peter and the apostles saw his *majesty*. That is, while he was truly human, he was also truly divine. He is God and Man—the God-Man.

The Transfiguration

There were glimpses of this all along. We know from history that Mark wrote his Gospel by recording everything Peter shared with him. In his Gospel we see Jesus cast out demons, demonstrating a super-human authority. Jesus healed many individuals and even cleansed a leper. He healed a paralytic. He healed a man whose hand was deformed from birth. He calmed a storm with just a word. He healed a woman who had suffered from bleeding for twelve long years and he raised Jairus’ daughter from the dead. He fed 5,000 men, plus women and children, and used a little boy’s lunch to do so. He walked on water. He healed a deaf man. Then he fed another group; this time there were 4,000. All this in Mark’s Gospel, and then after all this the Pharisees asked him for a sign. Prove to us you’re someone special.

Then in Mark’s Gospel Jesus tells his disciples he’s going to suffer many things and when he goes to Jerusalem he will be killed and after three days he will rise from the dead. In fact, he tells them this in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And in all three of these Gospels the authors give very precise timing for what comes next. In Matthew and Mark after *six days* they went up a mountain. In Luke’s Gospel he shares some things and then says after eight days they went up a mountain. Giving such a precise timeframe is a signal from the author that what comes next is important. Peter describes what came next in verses 17–18.

He says Jesus received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice of the Majestic Glory declared, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased”. Peter adds that they weren’t just *eyewitnesses*—they were also *earwitnesses* for they heard this

voice speak these words! He says they were with Jesus on the mountain when this happened. Specifically, Peter, James, and John were on the mountain when this happened. Three people witnessed this take place. As the law of Moses required, two or three witnesses were necessary to prove a matter.

This is an historical event, not a cleverly devised myth. It happened. They heard it with their own ears and saw it with their own eyes. It is a fulfillment of Psalm 2! Look at this psalm.

Ps 2:1 Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? 2 The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying, 3 “Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.”

4 He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. 5 Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, 6 “As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.”

7 I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, “You are my Son; today I have begotten you. 8 Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. 9 You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.”

10 Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. 11 Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. 12 Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

Psalm 2

Notice the centrality of the Son in God’s plans for the world. All of human history exists for the Son. All nations will bow to him. All peoples will confess that he is Lord. One’s posture toward the Son is the most critical thing about a person. That is, the singular most important thing a person can do is live by faith in the Son of God. “Kiss the Son”. Honor him. Trust him. Follow him. Live for him.

Now remember what Peter is doing in this text: he has begun his refutation of the false teachers. They are teaching falsely about the Lord’s return and about coming judgment. In response to this Peter points his readers to the Transfiguration of Jesus. He says they were eyewitnesses of his majesty, and majesty points to his divinity. Here’s the text in Matthew 17.

Mt 17:1 And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. 2 And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. 3 And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 4 And Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.” 5 He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” 6 When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces

and were terrified. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Rise, and have no fear.” ⁸ And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.
Matthew 17:1–8

Notice the connections to Psalm 2. Jesus took them up a mountain. God says he set his King on his holy hill. Jesus was transfigured—he was visibly changed. Suddenly his face shone like the sun. They saw his *majesty*, his divine essence. When the Son of God took on human form he “emptied himself”, as Paul put it. He appeared to be an ordinary human. Here in the transfiguration the curtain is pulled back, so to speak, and Peter, James, and John saw his majesty. They saw God’s Anointed, his King who will rule over all things.

They also saw Moses and Elijah appear with him. Why these two? Why not Noah or David or Abraham? Why Moses and Elijah? They represent the law and the prophets. Jesus said in Matthew 5 he had come to fulfill the law and the prophets. He said this in Luke 24:

Lk 24:44 Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.”
Luke 24:44

The Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms all spoke of one who would come from God and share God’s divine majesty. It wasn’t until after the resurrection that the apostles—the eyewitnesses of these things—began to fully understand what this all meant. God had become one of us, lived, died, and rose again, thus fulfilling all that Scripture had foretold.

Peter reminds his readers of the Transfiguration of Jesus as a refutation of the false teachers to point them to true, absolute authority: the Lord Jesus himself, full of majesty and glory. God in every way. What happens on this mountain is the curtain is pulled back so they can see the true, full identity of Jesus. Yes, he was human in every way. Yes, he had been born, nursed at his mother’s breast, learned to walk and talk, all the stuff a normal, ordinary human did. Through this Transfiguration his true identity is revealed. We see his divinity. We see who he is in eternity past and we see who he is in eternity future. We see he is God Almighty in his timeless, eternal present.

The Truth

To refute the false teachers, he points his readers to Jesus. Specifically, he points them to the revelation of Jesus on the mountain where God says, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” What’s interesting is Peter’s initial response is to try to honor all three—Jesus, Moses, and Elijah—by putting up three tents for them. These tents would protect them from the harsh sun and would be an act of hospitality. Peter recognizes the significance of the moment and wants to *do something*.

While he’s still yapping away, God interrupts. He’s not gonna have any of that nonsense. He immediately puts an end to Peter’s confusion. He and James and John are not there to see the glory of three great men of God. He’s there to see the glory of the Son of God. While Peter is still speaking God the Father makes his presence known and speaks the words from

Psalm 2: this is my Son. Jesus, not Moses. Jesus, not Elijah. Jesus is my beloved Son. I am well pleased with Jesus. *Listen to him.*

Jesus himself said he is the way, *the truth*, and the life. False teaching—heresy—is any teaching that contradicts the core of our faith. What is that core? It is that we worship one God in Trinity through the Son. He is the center of our faith. The false teachers were teaching in error about the return to this world of the Son of God and about coming judgment, which were attacks on the Son himself. Peter points his readers to the transfiguration in order to ground their thinking in Jesus.

He says in verse 18 they were *earwitnesses* of God’s direct testimony concerning Jesus. Then he adds that they have the prophetic word “more fully confirmed”. That is, they had read the prophetic word. They knew Psalm 2. They knew what the Law and the Prophets said about the coming King. On the mountain they saw the majesty of Jesus and heard the Majestic Glory speak concerning him. This more fully confirms the truth proclaimed by the prophets.

He says in verse 19 they, his readers, would do well to pay attention to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place. As Psalm 119 says, God’s word is a lamp unto our feet. Pay attention, he says, until the day dawns—the day of Christ the prophets spoke of. Then he gets back to the issue of authority.

In verse 20 he says we must know this first of all: no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. Interestingly, this has been, well, *interpreted* in a couple ways. Many read this and assume Peter means that no one can privately interpret what the prophets said. That is, the Bible doesn’t mean whatever you want it to mean. Now, that’s true! But that’s not what Peter is saying.

When the prophets spoke, this speaking and writing was in response to what they were shown. The prophets who saw visions or heard directly from God did not interpret what they saw or heard and then share their interpretation. No prophecy of Scripture came to us in that way. He clarifies in verse 20: no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

What this means in practice is God spoke to the prophets or gave them a vision and then rather than write down *their own* interpretation of the vision, the prophets wrote what they heard or saw. In other words, rather than interpret, they simply communicated what God had to say. The Spirit of God was actively involved in this transmission of holy Scripture, ensuring that what they wrote was true and accurate.

Each writer still had his own personality involved. Mark writes his Gospel very differently than Matthew, for example. His personality is quite different from Matthew and it shows. Even though the writers wrote from their own experience and education and personality, the Spirit still moved each man to write in such a way that the Scripture they produced is utterly reliable and without error.

Why is Peter making this point? Remember, the false teachers are making false claims about the coming of Christ and about final judgment. In a nutshell, they’re claiming he’s not coming again and they’re claiming judgment is not a thing to be feared. Rather than just respond by saying, “Nuh-uh! They’re wrong!”, Peter points his readers to the truth of God in Christ, as witnessed by the apostles and as recorded in holy Scripture under inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

What is very interesting here is the utter lack of a personal claim to authority. Peter

never indicates he has some particular role for ensuring doctrinal and theological purity for the entire church. He doesn't act in a way that would suggest some authority handed directly to him by Jesus. Rather, Jesus is the authority. Holy Scripture bears witness to that authority. Peter and the other apostles saw that authority on display. Peter points his readers to Jesus as the truth.

Faithful Presence

Why is Peter writing this? The occasion for this second letter is the rise of false teachers among them. There are some who have begun distorting the truth of God in Christ for personal gain and Peter writes to refute these false teachers, but there's more than just encouraging them to remain pure in doctrine. He wrote his first letter because the elect exiles in these five provinces had begun to suffer for their faithfulness to Jesus, but there's more than just encouraging them to remain faithful in the midst of suffering. Why did he write that first letter? His aim is ultimately the same: he wants these followers of Jesus to remain faithfully present. His aim is their *gospel presence*.

In 1 Peter faithful presence meant remaining engaged in their communities, insofar as doing so would not compromise their faith in Jesus. By all means, go to the community picnic—but don't participate in the community's sacrifice. Engage with your neighbors at your neighbor's block party, but if your neighbor says, "I offered this meat in sacrifice this morning", don't eat it, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10. Remaining *faithfully* present requires being present in the world while also being *faithful*.

What is often lost in discussions many have about missional living and about outreach and evangelism and of a faithful witness is the importance of faithful and patient presence. Part of that faithful presence is holding to the truth that has been delivered. That truth centers on the revelation of God in Christ. Jesus is the center of our faith. A faithful presence requires holding fast to the truth that is the Lord Jesus.

There is something significant for us to see. Faithful presence requires holding fast to the truth of God in Christ through his Spirit. Holding fast to that truth is not a mere intellectual holding, however. It is more significant than simply believing the right things. Think of what Peter has said in this letter.

Last week we looked at the previous paragraph. The Spirit of God has given us each other—the church—as a reminder of the truth of God. The Spirit of God has given us holy Scripture as a reminder of the truth of God. The Spirit himself acts the Great Reminder of the truth of God. Right before that we read of certain qualities we must pursue. For this very reason, Peter says, we must add to our faith things like virtue and knowledge and self-control and steadfastness and godliness and brotherly affection and love. For this very reason. What reason?

² Pet 1:3 His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, ⁴ by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. ⁵ For

this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge...

2 Peter 1:3–5

God in Christ through his Spirit has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, that we may become partakers of the divine nature. That is, we become like God. Paul put this another way: he made him to be sin, who knew no sin, that we might become the righteousness of God. We are being transformed into the image of Christ from one degree of glory to another. God’s divine power has granted all this to us. For this very reason we make every effort to add these various qualities to our faith.

These qualities demonstrate we are in Christ. That is, they are a testimony to our salvation. These are so important Peter will spend—quite literally—the rest of his life ensuring they will remember these things. Why? He and the other apostles didn’t make up the stuff they were proclaiming. They didn’t come up with cleverly devised myths to pass on—stories for which they all suffered dearly to proclaim.

Application

God has given us everything necessary for life and godliness, and these things—life and godliness—are incredible means he has given for his mission. Salvation is eternal life, and eternal life begins now. This life is a transformed life, even as we are still being transformed from one degree of glory to another, and this culminates in partaking of the divine nature. We become like God. It’s interesting that Matthew says Jesus’ “face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light” (Mt 17:2). Just a few chapters earlier Jesus said,

Mt 13:43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

Matthew 13:43

What the Lord Jesus possesses naturally we inherit by grace. Our salvation is our participation in the life of God. As Paul said, the life I live in the flesh is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. The Spirit of God fills me with life, that I may reflect the glory of Christ in ever increasing measure.

Think of what this means for us. God has placed us where we are that we might participate in his mission. This requires our faithful presence, and faithful presence requires right doctrine. That right doctrine centers on the glory of God in Trinity. Right doctrine points us to right living, for being transformed by God means our behavior becomes more holy. We become more and more righteous—more and more like Jesus.

The apostles are no longer here to give their eyewitness and earwitness testimony as those who saw his majesty and heard the voice of the Majestic Glory. But you and I here, and we are his eyewitnesses, for we see his glory in each other. We see his power on display in each other. We witness together the goodness of God as our lives are transformed by his grace.

Our faithful presence—our *gospel presence*—is predicated on the reality that we have seen God’s glory. We are eyewitnesses, even if we see indirectly. They gazed upon his glory

with their own eyes; we *experience* his glory in our lives. If we have not been transformed by his gospel, then we're just taking up space. If there is no difference in our lives and in our attitudes and in our values, there is no purpose to our presence in this community.

The mission of God includes the transformation of his people. Our role as witnesses is to show them his glory by being his transformed people. In doing so we show the world what they would look like if they were Christians, too. How you and I live is eyewitness testimony to the world of the power and glory of God in the face of Christ.

God is working to save his people from sin and death, and he uses those he has saved to draw others to faith and repentance. One day Jesus said we, too, will shine like the sun. Until that day comes, we reflect his glory to those around us. We are his eyewitnesses, for others should be able to see us and recognize his glory on display in our lives. God has given us as *mirrors* to those around us, that we may reflect his glory.