

Introduction

There is the age-old philosophical question that is sometimes asked: does a fish know it's wet? A fish spends its entire life in the water. Does it realize it is always wet? I suspect a fish is aware of water pressure and currents and such, similar to how a typical human can feel the wind. Let me ask a similar question: do you feel as though you have twenty tons of weight pressing on you right now? Because you do.

Air pressure at sea level is about 14.7 pounds *per square inch*. That means on every square inch of your body you are experiencing 14.7 pounds of atmospheric pressure, or weight. An average adult has a surface area of 18–22ft². Pressure acts in all directions, which means your body has about 40,000 pounds of atmosphere pressing against it. You don't feel it pressing down on you because pressure works in all directions, so there's air pushing up against your body and to the right and to the left—all around, equally.

Thankfully, the pressure inside your body is roughly equal to this, so you largely exist in balance. If all the air pressure were suddenly gone, in the ten to fifteen seconds before you lost consciousness, you'd notice your saliva boiling in your mouth. You wouldn't explode, though, because your body is really good at holding in all that pressure.

The reality is we live with this pressure and are largely unaware of it. It's, well, it's like a fish in water. It's what we know. We've never experienced life without it. It's quite *normal*. It's literally the air we breathe.

Our cognitive environment is like this. It's there. It presses on us all the time, but we're largely unaware of it. A cognitive environment is the cultural atmosphere we exist in. It includes all the assumptions we have about life and the world and how it operates. There are things we intuitively understand without the need for explanation. It is the mental and informational context that shapes how you and I perceive the world and make decisions, often while being completely unaware of the influences that shape our thinking.

For example, in much of the world our cognitive environment assumes we will grow up and choose whom we will marry. We cannot imagine having a marriage arranged for us. Dawnae and I had a Muslim couple from Saudi Arabia share a Christmas meal with us years ago. As we spent time getting to know them we learned they met at their wedding. I cannot imagine what that would be like! In a similar way, they could not imagine what it must be like to have all the pressure of finding someone to marry! That's a really big decision that carries a lot of weight!

We don't think much of our process for finding a spouse—and neither do they. We live in different cognitive environments that affect how we see the world. In the Western world we cannot imagine not having a say in our government. Freedom is one of our highest virtues, yet in much of the world and most of human history, the world did not function in this way. Kings and emperors and all sorts of rulers simply ruled over people and most people did not yearn for “freedom”. Like a fish that is “stuck” in water, for much of human history this was just the way it was. We inherit much of our cognitive environment.

Paul says we should not simply accept our cognitive environment. He instructs us in Romans 12 to not be conformed to this world. That is, we must not follow the pattern of thinking that defines those around us. Rather, he says we must be transformed by the renewal of our minds. How we think and perceive, what we value, must be determined by the Lord rather than the cognitive environment we've inherited.

In our text today we will see the danger of allowing the world's pattern of thinking and the world's values systems to control our thinking and evaluation of things. We will see that God calls us to something far greater. We're in 2 Peter 2, verses 17–22.

2 Pet 2:17 These are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm. For them the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved. ¹⁸ For, speaking loud boasts of folly, they entice by sensual passions of the flesh those who are barely escaping from those who live in error. ¹⁹ They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved. ²⁰ For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. ²¹ For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them. ²² What the true proverb says has happened to them: "The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire."

2 Peter 2:17–22

Empty

Peter continues his rebuke of the false teachers. He calls them "waterless springs and mists driven by a storm". A spring was life. In the dry climate of ancient Israel, a spring meant survival. Roads often followed a path that kept the traveler close to springs. To travel too far from a water source could mean death. Imagine on a hot and dusty day you're traveling somewhere and you run out of water. You remember, however, that just over the next hill is a spring. When you get there you discover it's dried up. There is no life-giving water. This is what Peter means. A teacher ought to provide life-giving water but a false teacher is just a waterless spring.

He shifts his metaphor a bit. They are also "mists driven by a storm". Seeing a mist, whether fog or a cloud, gives one hope there will be water, whether in the form of a heavy dew or perhaps even rain. Then the wind picks up and the life-giving water present in the mist disappears. Such are false teachers. They're filled with promise, but they always come up empty. They do not offer life. They only promise, never deliver.

Anyone who would claim to speak on behalf of God holds great promise, for the things of God are life. If what they speak is *not* true, there is no life in their words. They don't offer life. They offer empty promises that can never be fulfilled, for there is no substance to the promise.

Peter says "the gloom of utter darkness" has been reserved for them. This is the word he used for the angels who sinned against God. They were cast into hell in "chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment" (2:4). Here he says the false teachers face the same

gloom of utter darkness. He adds that it has been reserved for them. Then he offers an explanation for why the language he's been using of false teachers is so very strong.

In verse 18 he says, "For". Here's why. For this reason gloom of utter darkness has been reserved for them. Earlier in chapter 2 he explained the evil of these false teachers in terms of their character. They were evil, selfish, greedy. They were willing and eager to exploit those in the church for their own private gain. They were sensual, indulging their lusts, looking for weak and unstable individuals to take advantage of. Peter says such men were unsafe, for they are predators always looking for prey. Here he gives another reason for their condemnation.

They speak loud boasts of folly. That is, they brag about what they offer, but it's only folly—it's *empty*. They are waterless springs, after all. They make big promises, and ought to be able to give life, but as teachers who are *false*, what they offer is emptiness. Unfulfilled promises. They simply cannot deliver on their promises.

He continues. While making these loud boasts of folly, "they entice by sensual passions of the flesh those who are barely escaping from those who live in error". Remember that "sensual" is not limited to "sexual". To live in sensuality includes living in sexual immorality, but sensuality is any form of self-indulgence. It is the consumption of anything merely for the pleasure it brings.

Food is good, and if you're going to eat, you might as well eat something you enjoy. I will never choose a plate of Brussels sprouts for supper. Cooking Brussels sprouts in bacon fat is sufficient to mask the flavor of Brussels sprouts, but if I'm gonna do that, I might as well just eat the bacon. If I'm choosing, I'm eating bacon and leaving the Brussels sprouts. Sensuality does not mean enjoying something. It is the *unrelenting pursuit* of self-indulgence, whether self-indulgence with food, clothing, vacations, possessions, sex, etc. If a person pursues things merely to satisfy his or her own urges, that person is being sensual.

Peter says these false teachers entice by sensual passions of the flesh those who are barely escaping from those who live in error. That is, they are promising them a life of free pursuit of their heart's desire, whatever that particular passion is. If you want it, the false teachers are telling you that you can have it. Have as much of it as you'd like. Indulge! Notice *whom* they are enticing: those who are barely escaping from those who live in error.

Those who live in error are, of course, unbelievers. Unbelievers simply do not live in the truth. They live in error. Those who are being enticed are barely escaping from that life of error. That is, they are new and very immature believers in Jesus who do not yet have the spiritual maturity to withstand temptation. They're on the edge spiritually. They have professed faith in Jesus and maybe have received baptism, yet the former way of life is still attractive to them. They can be easily pushed back into their former way of life.

This is whom the false teachers prey upon. They're not going after the spiritually mature. They're not going after those who are strong in their faith. They go after the unstable, those who are struggling. They see those who are vulnerable and seek to exploit their weaknesses. Peter's anger against the false teachers shifts to their impact on people. Earlier in chapter 2 he explained the problems with their character. Now he's showing the false teachers harm people—*God's* people.

They Promise You Freedom

These false teachers target the weak, like lions hunting a herd of wildebeests. They look for the weak, the sick, the injured, the young—those who have the least ability to resist an attack. Like lions, the false teachers are predators and bring only harm. Peter explains in verse 19 how they entice the weak by sensual passions: they promise them freedom. Freedom from what?

New Testament scholar Douglas Moo says there are three ways Peter indicates they promise freedom. First, they promise freedom from fear of spiritual beings. Our cognitive environment today does not really include spiritual beings. In the ancient world, they believed in various gods, household spirits, the spirits of ancestors, curses and magic, demons. Many lived in fear of offending various spiritual beings, including the gods.

Becoming a Christian in the ancient world did not suddenly change their cognitive environment. It isn't as though a person left paganism and became a Christian and suddenly lost all fear of offending potentially hostile spiritual beings. A person could follow Jesus, believing he and he alone is the one true God, yet still fear hostile spiritual forces.

Peter rebuked the false teachers for their arrogance against spiritual beings in general and angels in particular. They were, it seems, promising people freedom from fear of any of these beings. Peter said earlier that God did not spare the angels who sinned and then said the false teachers, being bold and willful, do not tremble as they blaspheme those same angels. They arrogantly speak against them, though not even the archangel Michael would speak against Satan, as Jude tells us.

That's the first way they promise freedom. The second way they promise freedom is by denying final judgment. A significant part of their false teaching is the claim that there is no future judgment. Peter will address this in chapter 3. Because there is no fear of judgment, there is no fear of sin. This brings us to the third way in which they promise freedom.

Because there is no fear of judgment, there is no constraint on their moral behavior. This is why the false teachers seek to exploit others. Why shouldn't they? If there is no fear of God in bringing harm to others, why not get all that you want? What should stop you from pursuing pleasure, whether in unrestrained sexual behavior or self-indulgence in food, drink, etc.?

The promise of these false teachers is the promise the serpent made in the garden: in the day that you eat of that which is forbidden *you will be like God*. You make your own rules. You live how you want to live. *You do you, boo*. No constraints. No restraints. No one can tell you how to live your life, for *there is no judgment*.

Here's the real problem with these false teachers promising freedom to others: they themselves are slaves. Peter says in verse 19 "they themselves are slaves of corruption". On a very practical level, why should one listen to a slave who tries to tell you about freedom? It would be one thing for, say, a slave in American history functioning like a secret operative, instructing other slaves how to find the Underground Railroad and gain their freedom. There were those who did this, who remained in "slavery" so as to help others gain freedom. Such a slave isn't really a slave but one who is giving his life to help others. I mean a slave who has no hope of freedom for himself, no ideas for how to be free, no real opportunities to gain freedom, but who tells others all about how to experience freedom.

It's like your doctor telling you you need to exercise more and eat healthier while he chain

smokes and binge eats junk food. Or a nutritionist who lives on fast food. A car mechanic whose own car barely runs. Would you ever take voice lessons from a person who cannot carry a tune? Would you hire someone to take down a tree right next to your house if that person had never cut down a tree before? You wouldn't take your sick pet to someone who was not a vet. Can you imagine? "My dog Muffy is really sick. You're a carpenter; can you take a look at her?"

Peter's point isn't merely that the false teachers were slaves. It's that they were slaves of *corruption*. He's already called them blots and blemishes—stains. They're slaves to decay, to rot, to putrescence. Then Peter cites a proverb that was military in origin: "a man is slave to whatever has mastered him". This stems from the practice of taking prisoners of war as slaves. If your army is defeated, you would be a slave to those who overcame you. You wouldn't ask a soldier who had been defeated and was now a prisoner of his captors how to defeat that army. *How would he know?*

These false teachers had been overcome by their own falseness. While they promised freedom from fear of spiritual beings, freedom from judgment, and freedom from moral constraint, they found themselves enslaved to the pursuit of these things.

They had once been free! Peter says they had escaped the defilements of the world. He's using language that sounds like genuine conversion. They once experienced freedom. However, after what appears to have been their escape from it, they return to their sin and are again entangled. He cites another proverb in verse 22: like a dog that returns to its vomit and like a pig that wallows in mud again, so the false teachers return to their filth, the very filth that enslaves them.

Peter declares it would have been better for them to never have known the way of righteousness than for them to have known it and later rejected it. As we saw with the angels who rebelled, with greater knowledge comes greater judgment. Not only will these false teachers face judgment, they will face greater judgment for having rejected the truth and for having led others astray. The warning of James is true: not many should strive to be teachers for those who teach will be judged with greater strictness. These false teachers have no excuse.

This World

There is a way of thinking that comes very naturally to this world. The writers of the New Testament often referred to this system of thinking as "the world". The apostle John, for example, wrote,

¹ Jn 2:15 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶ For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. ¹⁷ And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

1 John 2:15–17

Sometimes the word world means, well, the *world*, and sometimes it means *a system of thinking, of values*. Here John means the world system with its values that are contrary to

those of God. The “world” means the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life. John later writes of false prophets.

¹ Jn 4:1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. ² By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³ and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already. ⁴ Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. ⁵ They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them.

1 John 4:1–5

This is what he means in chapter 3 of his letter when he tells his readers to not be surprised “that the world hates you” (1 Jn 3:13). Of course the world hates Christians, for like Christ’s kingdom, they are not *of this world*. The world is passing away, John says. It’s empty. Foolish. The world is a waterless spring and a mist driven by a storm. This is why John warns us to not love the world, for it is passing away. This is what Paul was getting at in Galatians.

Gal 6:14 But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

Galatians 6:14

In 2 Corinthians he calls Satan “the god of this world” (2 Cor 4:4), for he blinds the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot see the glory of Christ. This is because they are enslaved to a way of thinking and a system of values that are contrary to Christ. As John said, this is the spirit of antichrist.

Look at Paul’s words in Romans.

Rom 12:1 I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Romans 12:1–2

Therefore, Paul says. After spelling out the gospel of Jesus in the first eleven chapters he tells them the appropriate response to that gospel. It is not a life of self-indulgence. A proper response to who Jesus is and what he has done is presenting yourself to the Lord as a living sacrifice, one that is holy and acceptable to God. It is, he says, your *spiritual worship*. How we live our lives declares to all who know us and see us what is most valuable to us. That is, what we worship is readily visible to all around us, for it is the thing central to our lives.

Notice closely what Paul says: do not be conformed *to this world*, to this age, to the pattern of thinking prevalent in our culture—any culture. Do not allow the values of the world to shape you. Do not allow the priorities of the world to shape you. Do not allow the behaviors of the world to shape you. Instead, be transformed by the renewal of your mind. How you think and perceive ought to be transformed by the gospel of Jesus. To say this another way, because the gospel is true, you must love what God loves and hate what God hates. Your life ought to reflect kingdom values, not worldly values.

That World

When piecing together the nature of the false teaching Peter's churches were facing, it's easy to recognize the influence of Epicureanism. Epicurus was a philosopher who lived from 341–270BC. That was, of course, more than 300 years before the false teachers began to arise in Asia, leading to Peter writing his second letter. That may seem like a large time gap but as we'll see, Epicurus' teaching is popular in nearly every age.

Epicurus taught that freedom from pain and discomfort is the highest good. According to him the goal of life is to avoid both bodily pain and mental anxiety. This necessarily resulted in the pursuit of pleasure for self-denial could result in pain of either kind. Natural and necessary desires were to be satisfied and people should live without fear of the gods bringing either judgment or wrath.

In the early 300s, Lactantius, a defender of the Christian faith, wrote critically of Epicureanism nearly 500 years after Epicurus. He argued that the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain cannot be humanity's highest good. In his "Divine Institutes" he wrote,

If any chieftain of pirates or leader of robbers were exhorting his men to acts of violence, what other language could he employ than to say the same things which Epicurus says: that the gods take no notice; that they are not affected with anger nor kind feeling; that the punishment of a future state is not to be dreaded, because souls die after death, and that there is no future state of punishment at all; that pleasure is the greatest good...

Lactantius, The Divine Institutes 3.17

The "freedom" Epicurus offered would naturally appeal to bad guys like pirates and robbers, he says. Freedom from fear of judgment is not actually freedom, but slavery, for it opens up the door to the pursuit of evil. Whether the false teachers in Pontus and Galatia and Cappadocia and Asia and Bithynia were actively following Epicurean philosophy or not, it is clear their thinking and understanding was largely shaped by it.

Epicureanism was in their cognitive environment. These false teachers had adopted the spirit of the age, and the result was not freedom, but slavery. They were slaves to sin. They were slaves of corruption, for their way of life could never give life but only led to death.

The truth of the matter is these false teachers had never really been "in"—not really. They once appeared to have been in Christ. At the very least they said the right things and lived in a way that suggested they were in Christ. Peter warns that if one has escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of Jesus, it would be better to have never known the way of life than to know it and then reject it.

What is most likely is these individuals had come into the church and earnestly desired to follow Christ and to live a transformed life. Then suffering comes and suddenly faithfulness is not so appealing. When friends and family argued that they were not being good citizens on account of refusing to do what good citizens did—you know, sacrifice to the gods—it's not hard to imagine them second-guessing their choice to follow Jesus.

“Look, if Jesus is sovereign, then surely he'd understand that I have to feed my family. It's not like I'm *worshiping* worshiping other gods. Maybe a pinch of incense or something. I gotta keep my guild membership. And yeah, the guild meetings do involve some sexual immorality from time to time. It's not like God cannot forgive that, right? And...didn't Jesus really suffer on the cross? If he suffered, then he took our judgment, and if he took our judgment...then what do we have to fear?”

These seem like very obvious compromises to us, but in the ancient world they would have been subtle. You'd want to be a good citizen, and not participating in civic ceremonies would be perceived as being a bad citizen, and who wants that? With each little compromise comes another, and then the false teachers are outright denying the reality of coming judgment. From “what could it hurt” to “do whatever you want” is not that big a gap.

It could be that some of them came into the church looking to exploit others. Most likely these were folk who began to compromise, who refused to root out their former way of thinking enough, and eventually gave in to their self-indulgence altogether. Peter warns us about denying the apostolic faith once delivered. Not only does it reveal a very wicked character in the false teacher, it harms others. Harming others is something God will not long tolerate. Judgment is coming, and for those who purport to be teachers, their judgment will be far stricter.

Application

So what are we to do with this today? How ought we to apply this text? Like those in the first century, we've inherited a cognitive environment. It changes over the years, and it can change quite rapidly, as culture can change quite rapidly. It isn't merely *easy* to adopt the spirit of the age—that is, to be conformed to this world—it is actually quite *natural*. It is the water we swim in. It's the air we breathe. Like the atmosphere it presses in on us from every side and we're largely unaware of the pressure.

The world continues to tell us what freedom is, and like those false teachers in the first century, those who claim to tell us how to achieve true freedom are actually slaves to their desires. I'm speaking of many teachers in the church today. We see this false teaching about “freedom” in so many ways. For an entire generation Christians were told the way to really accomplish the mission of God was to vote a certain way. The implicit claim was for God to be able to fulfill his purposes in the world we had to do everything in our power to ensure the right man lived in the White House.

The world thinks is power is the means for change. If you control everything you can do whatever you want. The way to have real influence in the world is to win at the ballot box. The Lord Jesus did not accomplish salvation through the exercise of power! He said he could have called more than twelve legions of angels, yet he allowed sinful men to arrest him and beat him and kill him. If we accept our culture's understanding that the best way

to bring about change is to pursue power, we will be living contrary to Jesus. This is the spirit of antichrist John wrote about.

I have yet to hear of a single person who has come to Christ in faith and repentance as the result of a convincing political argument. I have never heard of a person seeing Jesus for who he is because that person was “corrected” regarding tax policy or immigration policy or a Supreme Court nominee. God can do anything; we saw last week that God stopped a false prophet by speaking through a donkey, so I won’t deny that it’s possible for God to save a person in this way. I am saying, however, it’s incredibly unlikely, and it would absolutely be in spite of the messenger rather than because of the messenger.

When we pursue the culture’s idol of political power, even if “our party” wins, we’re not free. We’re enslaved to that idol because now we must do everything to maintain that power. It seems like every four years we’re told this election—not the last one, but *this* election—is the most important ever. Even if “our” party wins, we cannot be satisfied because then there are the midterms. Of course, if you do well at the midterms, there’s another election in two years and the cycle continues. That’s not freedom. That’s slavery.

Our culture has also told us the path to real freedom is to cast off the backwards rules and standards that limit sexual behavior to the bonds of marriage. The so-called Sexual Revolution was supposed to set us free from repressive rules regarding sexual behavior. Whether it’s STDs, unplanned pregnancies, or just broken hearts, it’s quite clear that the Revolution did not bring freedom. It merely brought a new master, for one is now bound to affirm and support everyone’s personal choices and desires. Rather than a gift from God to a husband and wife, sex is now a slave master demanding total allegiance.

As we’ve seen, much of Peter’s concern in these two letters is their faithful presence in a foreign land. Peter is concerned about the mission of God. In his first letter he wrote to believers in these five provinces to encourage them to remain faithful in the midst of hostility against them. He reminded them of their inheritance kept in heaven for them. While they may lose business and income and friends and family for their faithfulness to Jesus, they will never lose Jesus.

Now he writes about false teachers who are working contrary to the mission of God. These believers must remain faithfully present, and this requires rejecting false teachers. It requires refusing to continue swimming in the unfiltered cognitive environment they’ve inherited. It requires allowing the Holy Spirit to shape their thinking and their values, to transform them into men and women of God.

I pointed out last week that both Peter and Jesus reserved his harshest language for false teachers. The Lord himself had great compassion for those who had been taken in by false religious leaders. Not only is their character corrupt, they bring great harm on others. Teachers will receive stricter judgment. We must show mercy and patience for those who are being harmed by them—and this includes unbelievers. They have been lied to by the father of lies. To be faithfully present is to be faithful to the truth of God in Christ, for the world needs to see God’s faithfulness on display. The world needs a faithful gospel witness.

This faithful presence begins in the church and includes how we function, how we make decisions. The church is not a business. We do not make decisions based on profit margins and return on investment. We don’t think of members of the church as customers who will only stick around if we give them the “product” we think they’re willing to pay for. We must reject that way of thinking. That is how the world thinks.

What is implicit in Peter's letter is the need for transformation. The Spirit of God begins his work in us by transforming us—by *renewing our minds* in Paul's words. Instead of asking what will “work” our elders spend time in prayer asking God what he wants us to do, what he wants us to study and teach, what activities he wants us to engage in. Rather than ask God to bless what we've chosen to do, we choose to seek what God is doing and then join him in *his* work.

What you and I need is to have our cognitive environment shaped by the Holy Spirit of God. Our default assumptions about the world ought to begin with God and his purposes. The way we view pain and suffering, joy and gladness, ought to be rooted in the Lord Jesus, in who he is and what he has done. Then, and only then, will we experience true freedom. Real, true, everlasting freedom is found in having the mind of Christ.