

Introduction

In 1978 the American economy was in shambles, with high interest rates and high unemployment. Somehow, in the midst of this a 40-story hotel was built in Kansas City. A defining feature of this hotel was its massive walkways through its lobby. The lobby was a multi-story atrium filled with elevated walkways.

The support for the fourth-floor walkway was a massive, threaded steel rod that also supported the second-floor walkway. During construction the threads were damaged and rather than re-thread the rod on-site, everyone involved decided to terminate the rod and add a second. They didn't realize they were doubling the stress on the nut holding up the fourth-floor walkway.

In 1981 about 1,600 people were gathered in the atrium for a corporate event. About 40 people were on the second-floor walkway and nearly another 20 were on the fourth-floor walkway. Suddenly guests heard a popping noise and then the fourth-floor walkway collapsed onto the second-floor walkway, which immediately collapsed to the main floor as well. One-hundred fourteen people were killed and 216 were injured.

In 2009 the Lotus Riverside Compound was being built in Shanghai, China. Eleven thirteen-story apartment buildings were being constructed. One day during construction a heavy rain saturated the soil and the workers sensed something was off. All but one sensed something was off and made it to safety before the building fell over—literally, *fell over*. The foundation for the building simply could not hold up the building. Seeing the building itself laying on its side shows it was a remarkably strong building. There are cracks, of course, but it didn't disintegrate into rubble on impact. It, well, it just fell over.

There are many such examples throughout history of buildings collapsing because their support or their foundation wasn't sufficient. In Luke 13 Jesus mentioned the tower of Siloam collapsing and killing eighteen. Luke doesn't tell us why it collapsed but given no earthquake was mentioned and only the tower was mentioned, it's not hard to figure out there was something in its foundation that made the building unstable.

A foundation is essential for a building's stability. Its weight must be distributed evenly to the ground. This depends, of course, on soil conditions, water saturation levels, load distribution. If soil shifts or shrinks or expands, such as wet soil does in freezing weather, it can cause a building to collapse.

We, too, have a foundation. Because we have a foundation we are also vulnerable to collapse. When we walk we are relying on the proper distribution of our weight. This foundation is significantly more complicated as the weight that must be properly distributed is constantly moving. As Jim shared a while back, when we walk we are constantly interrupting a fall. Each time we put the other foot forward we redistribute our weight and thus avoid the fall. Unless we hit a crack in the pavement, or our foot steps on ice. You know what happens next. There are devices designed to give us a more firm footing in the winter. They simply provide a secure foundation when walking on ice.

If walking is a fall that is constantly interrupted, surely life itself can be described this way. The ground, so to speak, is always shifting underneath us and there are always obstacles being placed in our path that create trip hazards. God has given us 1–2 Peter for this reason: to provide for us a firm foundation that will lead to our stability.

Today in our final text in this series, Peter gives us a summary of his letter and shows us what that foundation is. We're in verses 17–18.

2 Pet 3:17 You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability.

¹⁸ But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

2 Peter 3:17–18

Remember, Beloved

In these verses Peter draws his letter to a close. He addresses the believers in Pontus and Galatia and Cappadocia and Asia and Bithynia again as “beloved”, as those dearly loved in Christ. He’s addressed them this way a number of times. In his first letter he says, “Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh” (1 Pet 2:11). He later said, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you” (1 Pet 4:12). In the beginning of chapter 3 of his second letter he said, “This is now the second letter I am writing to you, beloved. In both of them I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder” (2 Pet 3:1). Then he said, “Do not overlook this one fact, beloved” (2 Pet 3:8) and then explained the timelessness of God as motivation for their faithfulness. A few verses later he wrote, “Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for [his promises], be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish” (2 Pet 3:14).

One thing that is clear is calling them beloved is itself a message. In each case being beloved is directly tied to their holiness and their perseverance. Throughout his first letter he sought to encourage them to remain faithful to Jesus, even though faithfulness to him leads to suffering. As he said in that first letter, the world is surprised when we “do not join them in the same flood of debauchery” (1 Pet 4:4). That is, unbelievers are surprised when Christians actually live as Christians. This necessarily means we do not worship the idols of those around us. This is what surprises unbelievers.

So Peter says, “Do that. Surprise unbelievers by living faithfully to Jesus, even though they may react with anger and hatred and, perhaps, even with violence”. Peter’s purpose is evangelistic. He wants them to remain faithful to the Lord as a witness to his gospel.

In his second letter he sought to encourage them to resist the temptation of false teachers. They seek to exploit God’s people with sensuality, with unrestrained self-indulgence. Resist them, he says. Instead, as those who are beloved, “be diligent to be found by the Lord without spot or blemish, and at peace with God”. In chapter 2 he says the false teachers “are blots and blemishes”—stains, the very stains they must not accept in themselves.

The point is clear in both letters: faithfulness to Jesus includes both righteousness and right belief. You cannot have one without the other. If your behavior is right but your beliefs are not, you are not faithful to Jesus. If your beliefs are right but your behavior is not, you are not faithful to Jesus. Faithfulness to the Lord requires righteousness and right belief.

Peter says in verse 17 that his recipients knew this before he wrote the letters! To say this another way, there is nothing *new* in these two letters. He said in chapter 3, “I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of *reminder*. They already knew this information. He’s reminding them of it. What is important to note is the need for *regular reminding*.

I knew a man who said he would not attend Bible studies at his church because, in his words, “I know what I believe”. I really wanted to ask him, “Then why don’t you live it?” The posture needed to make such a claim indicates he did, in fact, need to attend a Bible study.

Real belief, believing the right things, is not merely an intellectual achievement. Believing the right things requires living the right way. If Peter insists the believers in these five provinces needed to be reminded, despite having been taught by at least two apostles, despite living so close in time to the actual event of the resurrection, why on earth would anyone today assume he or she did not need to be reminded?

The arrogance of the claim that knowing what one believes precludes and obviates the need for Bible study is staggering. In Psalm 119 David repeatedly said how much he loved and meditated on God’s law. He *knew* God’s law. That is, he *knew* what he believed about God. Did he mean he no longer needed to study God’s law? Of course not! Everyone needs to be reminded. Even Peter!

Earlier in chapter 3 Peter mentions things that are hard to understand in Paul’s letters. Remember that Galatia is one of the five provinces he’s writing to, and the Galatians had received a letter directly from Paul. Paul wrote this:

Gal 2:11 But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹² For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. ¹³ And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. ¹⁴ But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?”

Galatians 2:11–14

Cephas is simply the Aramaic form of Peter, both of which mean “Rock”. Surely this was somewhere in Peter’s mind when he mentioned the things that are hard to understand: “Why would this man call me out like that *in holy Scripture!*?” Peter, the great apostle, would eat and drink with Gentiles, demonstrating the truth of the gospel. He ate what they ate, even though eating such food was a violation of Jewish culture. It once had been a violation of the law, but Jesus declared all foods clean. Paul calls out Peter because when some more strict Jews showed up, Peter stopped eating and hanging out with Gentile believers. This was a denial of the gospel so Paul called him out *publicly*. If *Peter* needed to be reminded, surely we do, too!

This is why Peter wrote these two letters. He writes them both to urge those believers—and us—to be faithful to Jesus.

Take Care

In these final verses Peter summarizes the two major points of this particular letter. He says in verse 17 that, while they've known this, they must take care that they are not carried away by the error of lawless people and lose their own stability.

This is an imperative, an instruction. Peter is expecting an active response. They must “take care”. They must be on guard, or keep watch, or be on the lookout, or guard against, or *protect*. This is the word Peter used in chapter 2 when he wrote that God did not spare the ancient world but *preserved* Noah and his family. That is, God guarded or protected and took care of Noah.

Specifically, Peter wants them to take care that they do not get carried away with the error of the false teachers. As we've seen, Peter does not come out and say, “They are teaching this error”. We're able to piece together at least some of it. They were denying the reality of future judgment. They were denying the reality of the Lord's return. They were scoffing and mocking those who were eagerly waiting for his return. They were advocating sensuality—unrestrained self-indulgence. Bede put it so well.

Since you already know that the heretics are bringing in many crazy errors—that some deny that there will be a future judgment, some pervert the words of God, some interpret Scripture wrongly, some give themselves over to their lusts, and some deceive the hearts of the innocent by their frauds—you must be on guard so that you are not taken away from the firm foundation of your faith by their cleverness.

Bede the Venerable, On 2 Peter

Whether bad behavior or bad beliefs, Peter wants them to be on guard against these things. To protect against them. To be on the lookout for them, so that they can be avoided. The difficulty is there is always some appeal to false teachers and/or false teaching. If there is no appeal, a false teacher could never gain a following. People would see them as just cranks. Because they tend to be clever, they can make you think they have something worth offering. This was Satan's tactic in the garden. The “serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field” (Gen 3:1). Because of their craftiness, we must be on guard against them. As Dan put it, we need to ignore the noise and focus on the signal.

Peter adds the real reason for taking care to not be carried away by them: you'd lose your own stability. Here Peter returns to the beginning of his letter. In chapter 1, verses 5–10, he reminds them that God's divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness. Our salvation, both our destiny to be with the Lord forever and our present transformation in this life, has been *granted* to us. This is why we are beloved. Because of our status as God's beloved, we have been granted these things. Here's what Peter said.

2 Pet 1:5 For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, ⁶ and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, ⁷ and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. ⁸ For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ For whoever lacks these qualities is

so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. ¹⁰ Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall.

2 Peter 1:5–10

Conversion to faith in Christ is merely the beginning of salvation. We must make every effort to supplement our faith. The idea that a person could simply believe in a sort of one-time event—think of the person who “prayed the prayer”—and then go on without any real change is an idea foreign to the Scriptures. As Protestants we’ve so emphasized salvation by faith we’ve completely ignored the reality that faith without works is dead. That is, faith without works isn’t really faith at all. Works are the evidence the Holy Spirit is at work through your faith. Good works are the visible and tangible response of obedience to the Spirit’s work in you.

Peter urges them to engage in the work of adding to their faith. Faith cannot be without works. Real, genuine faith in the Lord results in transformation. This doesn’t mean you’re suddenly perfect, but if you don’t begin down that path to complete and total transformation, you don’t have real, genuine faith. This is why Peter urges them to make every effort to add virtue and knowledge and self-control and steadfastness and godliness and brotherly affection and love to their faith. This pursuit, he says, will help keep them from *falling*.

In verse 17 we see this idea includes taking care to avoid being carried away by the false teachers. This will prevent you from losing your own stability—it will keep you from falling. This is Peter’s first instruction in these final verses. Take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability.

Grow in the Grace and Knowledge of Jesus

In verse 18 Peter issues his second command. Both commands are summaries of his two major points in this letter. The first is to avoid false teaching. Believe the right things. Hold to the faith once delivered. Because false teachers always arise among God’s people, as they have since the days of Adam and Eve, be on guard against it. The second command is the other major point: grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus. In a nutshell, this is the call to holiness and godliness.

Peter has labored over this point throughout the letter. Ostensibly, he’s writing to fight against false teaching that had begun to infiltrate the churches. He knew this would continue long after he was gone. A significant way in which we fight against falsehood is by living the truth. As we just saw, God’s divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness. He has given us his precious and very great promises. We must, therefore, be diligent to confirm our calling and election.

In chapter 2 he warns that God did not spare angels who sinned. If he wouldn’t spare angels, then mere human beings will surely be judged. The effect of the false teachers’ teaching is a disregard for holiness, largely on account of no fear of future judgment. If judgment sounds scary and affects your behavior—preventing you from doing the things you want to do—then just change what you think about judgment! Deny it is coming and sear your conscience against such fear, and then go and do what you want.

A substantial remedy against embracing this false teaching is to pursue holiness. In fact, Peter says in chapter 3 that judgment is coming and this truth ought to result in the pursuit of holiness and godliness. We are waiting for his return and for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. This is central to our hope as Christians.

This pursuit of being like Christ is central to this letter. As we saw earlier he began with the declaration that the divine power of the Lord Jesus has already granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness. This means there is not one of us here who does not have everything necessary for life and godliness. There is no one here who lacks anything necessary for life and godliness. We have obtained a faith of equal standing with that of the apostles by the very righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus, the very one who, by his divine power, has granted to us *all things* that pertain to life and godliness.

When Peter instructs us in chapter 1 to add to our faith virtue and knowledge and self-control, we already have the means to do this, for the Lord has given us everything necessary for life and godliness. When he says in chapter 3 to be diligent to be found by the Lord without spot or blemish at his return, we already have the means to do this. When he says we ought to be the sort who live lives of holiness and godliness, we already have the means to do this.

We already know this! He says, “knowing this beforehand”, do these two things. He’s writing to remind us of these things for we, being human, are very prone to forget. This is why he issues his second command in verse 18: grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus.

Notice the flow of thought here. Peter says in verse 15 to count the patience of the Lord as salvation. In verse 9 he says the Lord isn’t slow to fulfill his promise of complete and total transformation when the Lord returns but is *patient* toward his people, not wanting any of them to perish but for all of them to come to repentance. This is why he says again to count that patience as salvation for the Lord’s seeming delay in coming again results in the salvation of all those who will come to Christ.

Then he mentions Paul’s letters and counts them among the Scriptures. He says the false teachers were distorting and twisting things in Paul’s letters, just like they twist the *other* Scriptures. What’s his point here? Nowhere does Scripture advocate sensuality. Scripture repeatedly warns against unrestrained self-indulgence. Repeatedly. This is because the Scriptures repeatedly denounce *idolatry*.

We hear the term idolatry and we often think of a physical idol, or as we often see in the Old Testament, a *carved image*. To grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus is to turn increasingly away from idols and increasingly toward the Lord Jesus. Idolatry is, in a nutshell, unbelief.

Idolatry

To grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus is to grow in your personal experience of Jesus. Knowledge in the Bible is usually a personal knowledge, like a man knowing his wife. It is far more than mere information about her. So it with the knowledge of Jesus. It is the intimate relationship with God that Peter has in mind. Peter does not mean God is a thing to be studied, as if you gain a certain level of knowledge and then you never have to “study” again.

Knowing the Lord is a life-long endeavor, and it's necessarily a move away from idolatry. Richard Keyes wrote,

A careful reading of the Old and New Testaments shows that idolatry is nothing like the crude, simplistic picture that springs to mind of an idol sculpture in some distant country. As the main category to describe unbelief, the idea is highly sophisticated... Idols are not just on pagan altars, but in well-educated human hearts and minds. The apostle Paul associates the dynamics of human greed, lust, craving, and coveting with idolatry. The Bible does not allow us to marginalize idolatry to the fringes of life...it is found on center stage.

Richard Keyes, "The Idol Factory"

Martin Luther pointed out that you cannot break commandments 2–10 without also breaking the first commandment: you shall have no other gods before me. As Keyes pointed out, the apostle Paul this same point by associating coveting with idolatry.

Col 3:5 Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

Colossians 3:5

The first commandment is: You shall have no other gods before me. What is the tenth commandment? "You shall not covet". What does Paul say? Coveting is *idolatry*. The tenth commandment, then, is really, "You shall have no other gods before me". Rebecca Pippert put it so well.

Whatever controls us is our lord. The person who seeks power is controlled by power. The person who seeks acceptance is controlled by the people he or she wants to please. We do not control ourselves. We are controlled by the lord of our life.

Rebecca Manly Pippert, "Out of the Saltshaker"

This is the real problem with sin management. When we reduce following Jesus to not sinning, we are really replacing the Lord Jesus with an idol: behavioral management. Yes, we should all sin less, but how do we go about this? If we focus on not sinning, we inevitably end up trying to manage our sin. This becomes our purpose, and sin management becomes our lord. This is not where Peter leaves us. He says we are to grow in the grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus. In Becky Pippert's words, we are controlled by the Lord of our life. If we will pursue Jesus above all else, we will be controlled by him, not our own desires, *even if those desires appear to be good desires*, like managing our sin.

If we will pursue Jesus we will seek him no matter the cost. We will endure all things for his sake. When we are mocked and hated by others for our faithfulness to Jesus, which is another way to say for refusing to worship the idols of the culture around us, we will gladly endure for we get Jesus. When false teachers come along and offer us a life of unrestrained self-indulgence we will refuse to give in to their falsehoods for we get Jesus.

If we will pursue the Lord above all things, we will not have any other gods before him. If we will pursue the Lord above all things, we will not covet, which is to say, we will not

have any other gods before him. So it is with all the commands. If we put him first, we necessarily turn away from idols.

Tim Keller said that if there is something other than Jesus that we must have in order to be happy and content, *something that is more important to us than God*, that thing has enslaved us; we therefore have an idol. It's easy to argue against this and say, "But nothing is more important to me than the Lord!" Great! Ask yourself this: am I happy and content with what I have? Only you can answer that. Only you can know what is in your heart and whether you are secretly miserable because you do not have something—well, something *other than the Lord*.

Keller goes on to say that you can't simply tell someone, "You have the Lord, so be happy!" The problem is idols tend to be deeply rooted. They cannot simply be displaced by just a true word. Here's how he put it:

Telling someone (or yourself) that "God loves you, so rejoice!" is insufficient, because you still hold a belief that says, "Even if God loves you but you don't have this particular thing that you treasure, you are still a failure."

You must replace this belief by repenting for the sin beneath it all—your particular idolatry.

Tim Keller, "Gospel In Life"

How, then, do we deal with the problem? Peter tells us! How, though? He says we must grow in the grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus. To explain this, let me go back to a sermon early in this series, all the way back in 1 Peter 2. There I cited a sermon by Thomas Chalmers called, "The Expulsive Power of a New Affection".

Chalmers said, essentially, there are two ways to fight against idolatry in the human heart. The first way is to learn to hate the thing that has grabbed hold of your heart. The problem is it is extremely difficult to pull something out of your heart. It's deeply rooted. Nature abhors a vacuum so simply pulling one idol out will just pull another idol in to replace it. Instead, there is the second way, and that is to exchange the old affection for a new one, namely, for the Lord. Loving the Lord pushes out the old affection through the expulsive power of a new affection. You can't pull idolatry out of your heart; you must push it out with love and affection for the Lord. This is what Paul is getting at in 2 Corinthians 3.

^{2 Cor 3:18} And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

2 Corinthians 3:18

By beholding the Lord we are transformed into his image. This transformation is what drives the idols out of our hearts for there is not enough room for the Lord and for idols. He is big enough to fill any void an idol might try to occupy.

Idols are constantly trying to trip us. Like the false teachers themselves in chapter 2 verse 19, they promise you freedom, but they themselves are slaves to corruption. They can never give you what is promised. The false teachers are merely offering an empty idol, one that has no real promises it can keep. The Lord can expel it from our heart.

Application

The antidote is found in Peter's closing words. Grow in the grace and *knowledge* of the Lord Jesus. Love him above all else. Pursue him before all other things. Love him. *Have no other gods before him.*

Peter understands something profound, something that becomes more clear as he approaches the end of his life. He said in chapter 1 the Lord had revealed to him his death was near. These are his dying words to us.

What would you say if you knew *you* were going to die soon? What would you say to those closest to you, to those you love deeply? I doubt you're going to remind them what temperature the washer should be at for white clothes or dark. You're probably not going to remind them how to change the oil in the car. You're certainly not going to suggest you didn't spend enough hours working. No; you're going to tell them how much you love them and how much they mean to you. You're going to tell them of your desire for them to flourish, to live life to its fullest, a life spent following Jesus. You will remind them what is most important.

By the time Peter wrote this second letter he had suffered greatly. He remembers what it was like to be unstable in his own faith, whether the three times he denied the Lord Jesus, or the time he denied the Lord Jesus again by failing to live out the gospel when he denied Christian fellowship to Gentile believers. He remembers how much he has suffered for following Jesus and for proclaiming the gospel.

Through it all he has grown in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus. He has witnessed repeatedly the goodness of God in his life as the Holy Spirit has molded and shaped and transformed him. He understands the importance of having a firm foundation because he knows how close he came to falling away completely. He has seen numerous converts who had given up and walked away from the faith or who had fallen back into their former way of life. He's seen the damage that could be done to the name of Christ by those who followed the lies of false teachers rather than pursue the promises of Christ.

We spend entirely too much effort trying to make ourselves stable through the idols we pursue, whether money or pleasure or popularity or family or reputation. Your stability comes from being found in Jesus. Stability is not found in circumstances, for circumstances constantly change and can change at any moment. Peter's point in these two letters is to not let circumstances dictate your life. Your life is found in Christ.

Nowhere in Scripture is your stability or your steadfastness depicted as a result of circumstances or your own effort. Stability is found only in a Person. If Jesus is your foundation then the storms of life cannot make you unstable, whether those storms are financial or relational or medical. When you get a call from your boss that there might not be enough money to meet payroll or your adult child is making all the wrong choices or you are constantly bombarded by temptation, there's only one foundation that cannot move. His name is Jesus.