

## I. Set Up

A. Happy New Year. Later this month we will return to our series on renewal. This time it will be focused on the church. Today is the first of three weeks of reflections on the advice Peter shares in the short letter we call 2 Peter.

## II. Intro

A. Happy New Year. I think everyone loves a clear start. And for various reasons welcomes a chance to turn the calendar on 2021. I'm not sure anyone thinks that simple – and somewhat arbitrary act

B. I want to begin this year – this sermon – by thinking about endings. In particular, by thinking about famous last things.

C. There is a category of “famous lasts.” For instance, you have famous last words. Those who study these things say that most people’s last words are about family. But you have some others that, for various reasons, are memorable:

1. Winston Churchill reportedly said, “I'm bored with it all.”
2. Margaret Sanger said, "let's have a party"
- 3.

D. You also have famous Last Lectures:

1. Mortar Board, an academic honorary, is noted for sponsoring last lectures – for asking a popular professor (in any discipline – economics, English lit, organic chemistry) to speak to students as if it is the last lecture they will ever give.
2. A few years ago, back in 2006, Dr. Randy Pausch - a computer science professor at Carnegie Mellon, gave a famous last lecture. He was 46, had young children, much going for him, but was dying of pancreatic cancer. A video of his lecture – which you can pull up online - went viral. And was followed by a book.
3. About ten years ago, when I was able to spend some time with John Stott – a very prominent, very accomplished British pastor, author and leader – he announced that on August 17<sup>th</sup>, 2007 he would give his last sermon. And that after that he would not speak again.
  - a) Stott was well into his 80s and was declining. I had been at an event where he was speaking, and it was wonderful, but at some point he stopped and after an awkward pause said, “I seem to have lost my place. I am very sorry. I rather think I must sit down. My apologies.”
  - b) I was sitting close to him and we all said – honestly – that his comments were brilliant, and that we’d all take thirty percent of John Stott over one hundred percent of most anyone else. But he said, “I need to be done.”
4. And a few months later, he preached his final sermon.

E. About a year before he had said that he’d written his last book. I’d asked:

1. Are you done because you’re tired?
2. Because you have said all you have to say? (he’d written sixty books and thousands of articles).

3. Or are you losing your ability to write.
  4. He'd said all three, but mostly the last.
- F. To this category of lasts we can add "last letters."
1. The most prominent – to me anyway – is 2 Timothy.
    - a) Paul is in prison in Rome and does not expect to get out. He writes a letter to a young pastor named Timothy that is gold. It is full of the kind of refined reflections as he hands over the mantle.
- G. In 2 Peter we get a similar letter from Peter.
1. We think they both die around the same time under the hand of Nero – the Roman leader who is famous for burning Rome (which he may or may not have done, but he did:
    - a) Blame Christians for it – which led to a lot of problem for the early church;
    - b) Took advantage of the fire to expand his palace.
  2. The book of Acts stops – it notably does not end per se, because we are still writing our own chapters in the story of the church. But when it ends it does so without talking about the death of Peter or Paul or the destruction of Rome.
    - a) Tradition tells us that Peter was crucified upside down and Paul was beheaded.
- III. The point is, shortly before he died, Peter writes a last letter.
- A. It seems as if – like his earlier letter - it was written from Rome to a network of churches scattered in Asia Minor (think modern Turkey).
- B. And it covers a few big themes. After giving an initial plea – a charge - to "Never stop growing in faith" – he goes after a group of corrupt leaders (false teachers) who are attacking Peter and other apostles and generally creating confusion. He counters their charges to restore some order.
1. He reminds them that he is writing about Jesus – who he saw and can write personally about.
  2. He assures them that he saw Jesus alive after death and promised He will return.
  3. He assures them that the Old Testament prophets were real and their messages was true.
- IV. **V1: Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ,**
- A. We know Peter.
1. Former fisherman. Brother of Andrew. The man formerly known as Simon.
  2. He quickly emerged as a leader of the apostles.
  3. In the Gospels, he talks a lot – often without thinking first – and he is impetuous to the point of being a bit flaky:
    - a) In Matthew 14, he gets out of the boat to walk on water – and then sinks.

- b) In John 18, he picks up a sword and launches an attack on the Roman who'd come to arrest Jesus.
- c) In John 21, he jumps out of the boat to swim to shore.
- d) I think we could get an ADHD diagnosis right here.
- e) Of course, in the Gospels he is also the guy who denies Jesus.

4. In the Book of Acts he is bold:

- a) In Acts 2, he preaches the first sermon – and many thousand come to faith.
- b) In Acts 4 he goes toe-to-toe with the religious leaders. They threaten to kill him, and this man, who had recently backed down from a young girl who tried to link him to Jesus, now says, “do whatever you want. I will not stop talking about this man.”
- c) There are a handful of things that have changed between his denial of Christ and his bold stand:
  - (1) The resurrection – he was convinced Jesus rose from the dead.
  - (2) He has spent forty days with Jesus during which time:
    - (a) Jesus had connected a lot of the dots – explained the Bible to him. Showed how the Old Testament had been pointing to him.
    - (b) Jesus had also forgiven him and then commissioned him. “Feed my sheep.” That charge he repeated three times, which was how many times Peter had denied him.
  - (3) Another game changer was the arrival of the Holy Spirit.
  - (4) And then, you have the power of reflection and commitment to say, “I’m not doing that again. I am ready, come what may. Next time, I will not back down.”

5. It is hard to know how much of Peter’s changed demeanor to attribute to these issues – or other possible factors. What is clear is that the Peter of Acts is different than the Peter of the Gospels.

- a) Not perfect – he makes some mistakes in Acts. He famously gets taken to the woodshed by Paul for failing to stand up for the Gospel.

6. But we have Peter 1 in the Gospels, and then Peter 2 in Acts and then we have Peter 3 in his epistles.

B. Before we turn to the text let me note that Peter is a great guy to pay attention to because:

- 1. He survived a big crash. As you may have noticed, not many people end well in the Bible.
  - a) Incidentally, I recently heard a lecture from Arthur Brooks, the author, former president of AEI and now a professor at Harvard Business School.
    - (1) As an aside, he noted (graph)

b) The point here is, Peter is worth studying in part because he recovered from a big crash. There are two men who deny Christ at the end of the Gospels.

(1) Judas, who sells him out and then, in remorse, commits suicide.

(2) And Peter, who repents and grows.

2. Which is a second reason to listen to him. Not only does he recover, he grows.

a) The Peter of his letters is so much brighter – his Greek is so polished that one of the reasons some scholars say he couldn't have written it is because he was an uneducated fisherman whose literary skills could not be this good.

(1) I've noted this before. Seminary students want their Greek exams to be out of one of the Gospels or Acts. Or something by Paul. Not Hebrews or Peter – those are much harder to work in.

b) He is wise and godly

3. And what we are about to see is that he is also humble.

#### V. **Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ.**

A. The man who kept pushing himself to the front, starts by identifying himself as a servant.

B. A friend noted that in Christian circles we make much of servant leadership, and then spend all our time talking about how to lead. He said he was tired of all of that. He said we need to direct all of these leaders to quiet places of serving.

C. Peter identifies himself as a servant.

#### VI. **To those who through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours:** in other words, to other Christians.

A. There is nothing unusual here, but it gets missed all the same. Peter does not say, "I am writing to the uber religious. I am writing to those who have pulled themselves up through will power and religious ritual. I am writing to the holy. To those who's good outweighs their bad, to those who have earned God's favor." No. He talks about those who have received "the righteousness of Jesus."

B. He is writing to those who have agreed to be rescued. Who have accepted the work of Jesus on their behalf. Men and women, if your hope lies in your effort, you are lost. Men and women, if you think you are better than other people you are deluded. The right response to the Gospel – to Jesus – is amazement that he would rescue a sinner such as yourself.

C. This remains so often misunderstood. Please hear me: Jesus is not a guide, a coach, a fellow traveler or a uniquely good – a particularly God-conscious – person. This is what most religious leaders claim. Mohammad, Confucius, Buddha and others. They claim to be a normal person slightly ahead of other people on the path of enlightenment.

D. Jesus makes very different claims. He claims to be the eternal Creator who came in the flesh to rescue us. We are not saved by becoming like him, we are saved by trusting in Him.

VII. **V2: Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.** This is very standard. Paul says the same kind of things. “Grace and peace” get thrown around a lot in the openings of first century Christian letters.

VIII. **V3 His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.**

- A. Two things to make note of: First, we have what we need to live a faithful life.
- B. Second, we are being offered – promised - a godly life, not an easy life.
  - 1. Many think the offer is other than it is. Many think that they have a deal with God. And the deal is, if I believe and pray, you will give me what I want. You will endorse my dreams.
  - 2. No. God will give us what we need – what we would ask for if we had perfect insight and an eternal perspective. God will help us grow and move forward even in the face of trials and set backs.
- C. We had a good Christmas as a family – and it included the news that our youngest son and his wife are pregnant. We had a fun and easy and COVID free Christmas with close family. Our Christmas with extended family was initially disrupted by COVID hitting a niece and her children. And then a second niece’s husband – I officiated at their wedding this past year – faced some horrible medical challenges that disrupted everything.
- D. I share that to say, as a family there has been lots of communication and prayer. And in addition to praying for healing, I find myself praying that the challenges this young couple faces makes them better – stronger, kinder, my thoughtful, more dependent on God and more godly.

IX. **V4: Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.**

- A. Not all desires are evil, but evil desires certainly are and they must be fought.

X. **V5 For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love.**

- A. We could park here for a long time. I got a text from someone saying, “well, I have three days to lose 24 pounds and read through the Old Testament twice. I probably will not make it.” No, probably not.
- B. “I’m not a big advocate of resolutions, but if you are shopping around for one, here you go.

XI. As you might imagine, there are lots of blogs for pastors.

- A. We tend to be a wordy bunch, full of (I’ll say advice, not hot air). There are lots of mostly other pastors offering advice about how to lead a church at this moment.
- B. And they can be very helpful. I skim a couple most days.

- C. They are disappointingly trendy. In a way that leads me to believe that not that many people are thinking for themselves, doing their own study, prayer and reflection.
- D. I share this to note, the big theme recently is, “how to lead when you have no idea where you are going.” How to get people to follow when you have no idea where you are going. What to do next when you have no idea where you are going.” There is a theme.
- E. On the one hand, I get it.
1. There has been a lot of responding lately. A lot of guessing and re-guessing. Lots of plans made and then scraped – for all the obvious reasons, starting with the pace of change and factoring in Omicron.
  2. In my lifetime it’s seldom been as hard to know what tomorrow holds, let alone the future. And I have never really known when it was easy.
    - a) When I started as senior pastor, I had two comics on my door.
      - (1) A Far Side in which a blood hound was leading some sort of raucous posse. And the bubble over the dog said, “I can’t smell a thing.”
      - (2) And the other was a chess board with pieces moved all over, and in the middle of the board was a pawn with a bubble over it saying, “how did I end up pastor of this church?”
    - b) The chair of the elder board told me to take them down because they didn’t inspire confidence.
- F. So, on the one hand, I get it. But on the other hand, I find myself wanting to push back, first because we have never really known what was coming.
1. As James writes, in James 4: <sup>13</sup> Now listen, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.” <sup>14</sup> Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. <sup>15</sup> Instead, you ought to say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.”
- G. But second, because we do.
1. Jesus wins. He will return in power and glory as King of Kings.
  2. And we will live after we die. We will face God. Our lives will be assessed by the perfect, all-knowing judge.
    - a) There are aspects of that that are understandably scary.
    - b) But there are also aspects of that that are wonderfully glorious. And there is a sense in which, this is all we need to know.
- H. So let me say this:
1. We have no idea whether Omicron is going to keep surging – and whether that is a good or bad thing.
  2. And I have no idea whether China is going to make a move on Taiwan or Putin is going to make a move on Ukraine, and what Iran or North Korea will do next.
  3. And we do not know where the market will head, and what will happen with crypto or gas prices or big tech.

4. But – big point – while we are not certain what the next ten days or ten years will hold, we know how this ends. We know what we need to know.

- a) We know that God will prevail.
- b) We know that His kingdom will come.
- c) We know that no matter how unsettled things become in the days, weeks and months ahead, nothing in heaven has changed. Nothing that ultimately matters has changed and we have no need to be anxious.

I. And that is because of Christ – not because we are smart or better or special. It is because of Christ – to whom we want to cling as we move into 2022.

**XII. <sup>3</sup>His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.<sup>4</sup>Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. <sup>5</sup>For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; <sup>6</sup>and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; <sup>7</sup>and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love**