

CHAPTER 26

The Latter End Is Worse Than the Beginning (2 Peter 2:20)

“**F**or if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning.”

An Important Distinction to Keep Clear

The first key to arriving at the proper interpretation of this passage is distinguishing between the *unsaved false teachers* (vv. 1, 17) and the *vulnerable new believers* (v. 18).

For when they [the unsaved false teachers] speak great swelling words of emptiness, they [the unsaved false teachers] allure through the lusts of the flesh, through lewdness, the ones who have actually escaped [new believers who have recently been saved] from those who live in error. While they [unsaved false teachers] promise them [new believers] liberty, they [the unsaved false teachers] themselves are slaves of corruption; for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage. For if, after they have escaped [the new believers] the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they [the new believers] are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them [the new believers] than the beginning. For it would have been

better for them [the new believers] not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them [the new believers]. But it has happened to them [the new believers] according to the true proverb: "A dog returns to his own vomit," and, "a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire."

Verses 20-22 have in view the effects of false teaching on these recent converts ("the ones who have actually [recently] escaped"). In comparing 2 Peter 1 (which everyone agrees refers to believers in Christ) with these new believers in chapter 2, three observations are important.

1. The words "they *have escaped*" (v. 20) also occur in 1:4, "by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, *having escaped* the corruption that is in the world through lust." Clearly, genuine believers are in view.
2. The phrase "the pollutions of the world" (v. 20) is similar to 1:4, "having escaped *the corruption that is in the world* through lust."
3. The words "through the *knowledge* of the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ" (2:20) are related to the description of these believers in 1:1-3:

Simon Peter, a bondservant and apostle of *Jesus Christ*, to those who have obtained like precious faith with us by the righteousness of our God *and Savior Jesus Christ*: Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the *knowledge* of God and of *Jesus our Lord*, as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the *knowledge* of Him who called us by glory and virtue.

Also the phrase "*again* entangled" indicates these new believers had temporarily enjoyed deliverance from the enslaving effects of the world after their salvation, but were "*again* entangled" because they were heeding these false teachers of corruption.

In What Way Would It Have Been Better to Have Never Known the Way of Righteousness?

What, however, is meant by, "For it would have been better for them [the new believers] not to have known the way of righteousness" which was delivered to them? This cannot be referring to the Gospel since it would never be better for a sinner not to have known the plan of salvation, which would have resulted in their eternal destiny being Hell instead of Heaven. Rather, Peter is using this term ("way of righteousness") to refer to the Christian life by grace through faith which results in practical holiness or righteousness in a believer's life. This is in keeping with his reference to the "holy commandment" (v. 21) that he mentioned in 1 Peter 1:13-16:

Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is holy, *you also be holy in all your conduct*, because it is written, "*Be holy, for I am holy.*"

In What Sense is "the Latter End Worse for Them Than the Beginning"?

The two illustrations of verse 22 highlight the answer: "But it has happened to them according to the true proverb: 'A dog returns to his own vomit,' and, 'a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire.'" When originally eating some bad food, a dog doesn't know any better and so he vomits. That's understandable. But then to eat the vomit is *worse than the beginning* because the dog now knows better. The same is true of the hog that was accustomed to wallowing in the mire. The sow did not know any better until it had been washed. But then to go back to her wallowing in the mire is *worse than the beginning* because she has experienced freedom from the mire and now knows better. In the same way these new believers had come to faith in Christ and had escaped the pollutions of the world to some degree. For them to now return to their previous bondage to the world because of the influence of false teachers is *worse than the beginning* since they now know

better, having “escaped the pollutions of the world” and now knowing “the way of righteousness.”

Does this passage teach that a believer can lose his eternal salvation if he returns to the pollutions of the world? No! Does this teach that you were never truly saved if you, like the dog and hog, return to your sinful ways? Never! In addition, this passage does not address “false professors” of salvation; but instead, it addresses new believers who become entangled again with the corruption of the world because of false teaching that has affected their progressive sanctification. If you have been saved by God’s grace, don’t forsake sound doctrine, nor believe every so-called Bible teacher that comes peddling his doctrine to you (2 Cor. 4:2). Otherwise, will you be like the dog who returns to the vomit of the world after Christ has set you free. What a miserable existence and worthless life! Instead, listen carefully and respond by faith to Peter’s closing exhortation in this epistle:

You therefore, beloved, since you know this beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen. (2 Peter 3:17-18)

All my life-long I had panted
For a drink from some cool spring
That I hoped would quench the burning
Of the thirst I felt within.

Feeding on the husks around me
Till my strength was almost gone,
Longed my soul for something better,
Only still to hunger on.

Poor I was, and sought for riches,
Something that would satisfy;
But the dust I gathered round me
Only mocked my soul’s sad cry.

Well of water, ever springing,
Bread of Life, so rich and free,

Untold wealth that never faileth,
My Redeemer is to me.

Hallelujah! I have found Him—
Whom my soul so long has craved!
Jesus satisfies my longings;
Thro' His blood I now am saved.¹

¹ Clara T. Williams, *Satisfied*.