

# Adult Teaching Resources

December 6, 2020



## Christmas Letters

**2 Peter 3:1-15a (RCL 3:8-15)—“Patience and Peace”**

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24—“A Sanctified Season”

Romans 16:25-27—“A Christmas Benediction”

Galatians 4:4-7—“Children of the Child”

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# “Patience and Peace”

2 Peter 3:1-15a (RCL 3:8-15)

## FIT Teaching Guide

by David Woody

This adult teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

### Key Text

**2 Peter 5:13**—“But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.”

### Opening

After everyone arrives, ask your large group to form smaller groups of 3-4 in each group. Ask each person to consider this question and share their thoughts with the small group.

How are you living your life for Christ right now?

Give each small group time to share with each other, then open the floor for volunteers to share with the larger group. Have a large group discussion on the ways your folks are living for Christ right now.

How are they “succeeding?”

Where are they falling short?

What does each person see in someone else that might not have been mentioned?

Spend some time in conversation before moving to the Bible.

### Reading the Bible

What is the author’s intention with this second letter? (that they would remember the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets, and the commandment of the Lord and Savior spoken through your apostles.)

Who will come in the last days? (scoffers)

What will they be doing? (scoffing and indulging their own lusts)

What will they say? (“Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!”)

What do they ignore? (that by the word of God heavens existed long ago and an earth was formed out of water and by means of water, through which the world of that time was deluged with water and perished. But by the same word the present heavens and earth have been reserved for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the godless.)

## Reading the Bible *continued*

What does he encourage them not to ignore? (that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day)

How is the Lord with you? (patient)

What does the Lord want? (all to come to repentance)

How will the day of the Lord come? (like a thief)

What will happen on that day? (the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.)

What do they wait for? (new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home)

What are they to do while they wait? (strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.)

## Making Connections

This book was not written by Peter even though it has his name. For you, is it more important for truth to come from a known source or the truth to come from an unknown (or not well-known) source? What difference does one make over the other?

When have you faced a crisis of identity with your faith life? What was the situation? How old were you? What happened?

What beliefs and ideas have you seen creep into Christianity over the years that are not biblical or something considered “Christian?” How do we let those ideas seep in? Why do we let those ideas seep in?

Our Lesson Writer says, “The gospel writers credited Jesus with predicting a day when cosmic catastrophes would herald the return of the “Son of Man” and introduce a time of judgment (Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 21). From the time of Jesus’ ascension into heaven, his followers had anticipated his return with either hope or dread.” What are your thoughts on this? Will there be a day when Jesus returns? Will it happen in your lifetime?

Why do you think folks have heated debates and arguments about Christ’s return? What were you taught about it growing up? How does Christ’s return affect your daily life?

When you hear someone say, “I’ll be there soon,” or “I’m coming home soon,” how do you interpret that? What does “soon” mean to you?

If someone said they were planning to do something “soon” for/with you and a lot of time passed without any action, what would you begin to think? Would you have any hope it would happen? Would you give up on that person?

When someone makes a promise to you, what do you need from them to keep the hope they are true to their word?

When has your time-frame on something not been the same time-frame expected by someone else? How did you communicate your expectations? How did they communicate their expectations? What ultimately happened?

When are you more likely to be productive: when you know the date of the deadline, or when you have unlimited time and freedom to do the work? Why does that way work better for you?

If you were given a report card today on the way you've lived your life as a person of faith, what grade would you get? Where are you excelling? Where do you need to improve?

Are you a person of patience? How does that affect your day-to-day living? How does that affect your faith living?

As a person of faith, what are you waiting for?

## So What?

Ask everyone to gather back together in their small groups from the beginning of the lesson. Ask each group to answer these questions.

Would you rather have a hard deadline on living the life of faith or have no clear answer on when the time has come?

What difference does it make to you to have a deadline?

What difference does it make to not have a deadline?

As you think about living faithfully, when is it too late?

What should we be doing now to be prepared so it's not too late?

Give each small group time to talk and share with each other. Then, open the floor for large group conversation and discussion around these questions. Focus the discussion on what changes folks need to make to live more intentionally with purpose for God now, not waiting for some time later.

## The Challenge

This week, set yourself a deadline for how you want to serve others and live in the way of Christ. Make sure you follow through and do what you set out to do.

## Prayer

*Loving God, as much as we want to know the time and day, we don't. It would be so much easier if you gave us all a holy calendar with the day marked in red. But, what you have given us is the freedom to live for you the best way we can. Help us to be more intentional about how we live, what we say, and what we do. We don't know the time or the day, and we don't want to be too late. Help us, Lord. Amen.*

## Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartledge

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

**What about Advent?**—This text has no apparent connection with Christmas, or with the Sunday that often focuses on peace, and yet the committee behind the Revised Common Lectionary chose it as one of the Advent texts. Why?

Although the author of 2 Peter lived long after the first advent of Jesus, he looked forward to his return at the “Parousia” as a second advent. As Israel had longed for the initial coming of Christ, so the early church anticipated a second appearing.

Whether we expect to meet Christ at “the Second Coming” or at our own “home-going,” we are also called to be patient and faithful as we anticipate our meeting with Christ and the hope of eternal peace.

**Who wrote 2 Peter?**—Most contemporary scholars are convinced that 2 Peter was not the work of the apostle, despite the claim in 1:1 that it was written by “Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ.” The writer’s references to 1 Peter and to Peter’s impending death give the impression that a later writer was trying a bit too hard to establish his credibility by writing in Peter’s name.

Ben Witherington III has argued that 2 Peter could not have been written either by the apostle or the author of 1 Peter, who is also unlikely to have been Simon Peter. In his contribution to the “Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians” series, Witherington wrote: “In terms of perspective, Greek style, theological content, language, dependency upon Jude and a host of other factors, 2 Peter is said to be a clear example of a New Testament text written under an assumed name (pseudepigraphon)” (*A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1–2 Peter* [InterVarsity Press, 2007], 260–61).

A primary argument, based on the text itself, is the reference to the death of “our ancestors” (3:4) in a way that seems to refer to the apostles, and the endorsement of a collection of Paul’s letters as scripture (3:15b-16). Peter probably died about 64 C.E., and Paul’s letters were unlikely to have been considered “scripture” before sometime in the second century. A third reason is that 2 Peter is clearly dependent on the book of Jude, which was almost certainly written late in the first century.

Yet another clue can be found in that the author “predicts” that scoffers would arise, as if Peter was anticipating what was to come (2:1-3a, 3:3-4), but then speaks of the skeptics in the present tense (2:10-16, 3:5), clearly describing a current situation.

It was not unusual for writers of the period to write in the name of famous apostles, and none were better known than Peter. Other pseudonymous books attributed to Peter didn’t make it into the Bible. These include works with names like the Acts of Peter, the Gospel of Peter, the

## Digging Deeper *continued*

Preaching of Peter, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Coptic Apocalypse of Peter, the epistle of Peter to Phillip, and the Judgment of Peter.

For a recent comprehensive and accessible discussion of these matters in more detail, see Richard Vinson, “1 Peter” and Richard Wilson, “2 Peter,” in *1 & 2 Peter, Jude*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentaries (Smyth & Helwys, 2010), 1-26, 261-76.

**Big words**—My suggestion that “eschatological skepticism led to moral libertinism” is adapted from Richard J. Bauckham, who wrote: “The two features of the opponents’ teaching that dominate the author’s debate with them are eschatological skepticism (i.e., skepticism about things expected to occur at “the end”) and moral libertinism” (“2 Peter,” in *Harper’s Bible Commentary* (Harper & Row, 1988), 1286.

**Parousia**—The Greek term commonly associated with the return of Christ is *parousía*, which means “arrival” or “appearance.”

**The “Elements”**—The author wrote that “the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire . . .” (3:10). What does he mean by this? The statement is not to be understood as a prophetic preview of modern science’s prediction that six billion years from now the sun will morph into a red giant and engulf the earth within its fiery shell.

Like others of his age, the writer thought of the earth as being covered by a solid dome alternately called the “firmament” or “the heavens.” The sun, moon, and stars (“the elements”) were thought to follow fixed tracks within the dome. Although the author never doubted that God had the ability to perceive human activity despite its presence, his image of the heavens and the elements exploding and dissolving in fire emphasizes a day when nothing will stand between God and earth, so that “everything that is done on it will be disclosed.”

The author of 2 Peter is the only biblical writer to describe the end times in this way, and we should not presume this is exactly how it will be: he speaks in the language of metaphor.

**How should we live?**—In 3:11, the author poses an important question: since judgment is coming, “What sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness . . .?”

The author’s idea of what goes into a godly life can be found in 1:5-8, where he lists a chain of virtues that contribute to an effective Christian witness:

*“For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

## Digging Deeper *continued*

**Here's a story**—Today's text is difficult enough to study, and even more difficult as a sermon text. In searching for a creative way to approach the text, I once keyed on the phrase "Where righteousness is at home." That led me to write a short story about a young woman who learned from her grandparents to love God, but strayed for a time before hearing a sermon based on 2 Peter 3:8-15 and turning back to God. It was later published as the first chapter in my book *Telling Stories: Tall Tales and Deep Truths* (Smyth & Helwys, 2008), pp. 9-18. It is entitled, appropriately enough, "The House Where Goodness Dwells." If you're interested and it's not in your church library, it can be ordered from [helwys.com](http://helwys.com).

# The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartledge

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## Who were the “scoffers” in 2 Peter?

The purpose of 2 Peter is mainly to counter the arguments of certain “false teachers” (2:1) or “scoffers” (3:3) who the author considered to be a major threat to the church. But who were these people?

Evidence is limited: all we know about them is what the writer says about them. They were not critics from outside the church, but a force from within: the author “predicts” that “there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive opinions. They will even deny the Master who bought them – bringing swift destruction on themselves” (2:1). The writer describes them as being licentious people who malign the way of truth, greedily exploiting others with deceptive words (2:2-3).

It is obvious that such people were already present in the church, or the author would have had no need to condemn them, but he does so with great wrath, looking forward to their destruction. They “indulge their flesh in depraved lust” and “despise authority,” even as they “slander the glorious ones,” he says (2:10). Their presence got the writer so worked up that he described them as being “like irrational animals, mere creatures of instinct, born to be caught and killed” (2:12). As willful persons who “revel in the daytime,” they are “blots and blemishes, reveling in their dissipation while they feast with you. They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin” (2:13-14a).

The greatest danger, though, is that “they entice unsteady souls” (2:14b), leading others to follow them in straying from the narrow road. Like waterless springs, they “speak bombastic nonsense, and with licentious desires of the flesh they entice people who have just escaped from those who live in error. They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption; for people are slaves to whatever masters them” (2:17-19).

Sadly, the false teachers had come to know Christ, but had become entangled again with “the defilements of the world” and as such their last state had become worse than the first (2:20).

We can probably assume that these are the same people the author confronts in 3:3, calling them “scoffers” who indulge in their own lust and who insist that the world will go on forever as it is without any fear of judgment.

Writers in the past often thought of these false teachers as adherents of a libertine form of Gnosticism. Gnostics taught that the only true life was in the spirit, and claimed to have secret knowledge of how one might ascend through various spiritual realms to become like God. In their view, the flesh was only a temporary home and basically evil, so it didn’t matter what one did with the body. There is evidence that some people taught

## The Hardest Question *continued*

a Christianized form of Gnosticism, arguing that Christ had come to lead people to new spiritual heights that were unconnected from the body.

More recently, as Richard Wilson notes, writers have tended to favor Jerome H. Neyrey's conclusion that 2 Peter's rhetorical style matches other critics of the Epicurean philosophy. Epicurus was a Greek philosopher who was long dead (he lived from 341-270 B.C.E.), but his teachings remained popular, for obvious reasons. Epicurus' philosophy acknowledged the existence of gods but held that they had no interest in human life. Since death was the end, humans should be self-sufficient and find pleasure among friends while on earth. Living without fear of God or eternal retribution, people were free to indulge without restraint in a "no worries" lifestyle of pleasure.

Other opponents of Epicurianism, notably Lactantius (fourth century B.C.E.) and Plutarch (second century B.C.E), argued against the pleasure-based philosophy with the same sort of arguments that we find in 2 Peter. (For more on this, see Richard Wilson, "2 Peter," in *1 & 2 Peter, Jude* [Smyth & Helwys, 2010], 277-79).

One doesn't have to be a formal Epicurean, however, to be skeptical of religious matters and desirous of pleasure. Persons in every age have laughed at those who espouse religious ideals and anticipate an afterlife characterized by punishment or reward. It's quite possible to have no belief in God and still hold to moral virtues as a human good, but many follow the path of self-indulgence, whether they've ever heard of Epicurus or not.

It's worth asking ourselves if we practice self-restraint and moral uprightness only because we fear damnation if we don't. If so, our values are still topsy-turvy. True goodness and godliness do not grow from fear, but from love.