

It's Not What it Seems

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- [0 : 0 0] So, I wonder if you've ever caught yourself just getting lost down an internet rabbit hole just looking at optical illusions. I find that optical illusions are really fascinating.
- There is something strangely intriguing by the fact that my brain is getting tricked into seeing something that isn't quite there.
- You know that what you're seeing, or you think you're seeing, is not there, and yet you think it's there. You look at something and it's just not what it seems.
- If we go to the next slide, for instance, the llama that you see there is not ringing a bell. That leg holding a bell is actually just a llama behind it.
- It's not what it seems. And this lady in the next one, she's not hovering over the sand on some magic carpet. Of course, that's just the shadow of a flag that's nearby.
- [1 : 0 2] So, it's not what it seems. And the next one, the next lady, she's not a half-dog lady. She's just wearing something as black as the dog behind her.
- And then finally, believe it or not, that is not a 10-foot-long cow. So, you might have guessed it. I reckon there's probably two cows behind that building.
- I put that one just to please Lisa. So, it's not what it seems. And it's not what it seems in the next slide is, are the words that just kept coming to my mind as I started this passage in 2 Peter.
- The more I read the passage, the more it seemed to me as if Peter was just screaming these words at every turn. As he describes the character and the actions of these false teachers.
- It's not what it seems, brothers and sisters. They are not what it seems. Now, if you listened to Archie's sermon last week, you will know that the whole of this chapter, chapter 2, is a warning against false teachers.
- [2 : 1 0] And I think in chapter 1 already there were signs that Peter would have addressed the issue of false teachers. Because he says there that he knows he's about to die.
- And in verse 10, he worries that then people might stumble. And then in verse 16, still in chapter 1, he reassures the church that he didn't follow any cleverly devised stories, as he puts it, about Christ's future coming.
- It sounds like someone had been disputing that and had been spreading rumors that Peter had been making things up and that his second coming wasn't real.
- And so, in the first half of chapter 2 that we looked at last week, Peter introduced us to the problem of false teachers. And he told us in no uncertain terms that there will be false teachers, that they will seduce people, that people will follow them.
- But also that the false teachers are condemned by God and will not escape judgment. And in today's passage, he expands on all of this, but giving us an incredibly helpful description of how these false teachers live and how they act amongst the members of the church so that we can recognize them.

[3 : 29] And he doesn't go into the details of what these false teachings are. These false teachings are being spread. There are hints like the denial of the second coming that I just mentioned, but otherwise what we get from Peter is more of a list of common traits of false teachers, which I think is great because I reckon that if we'd known exactly what those teachings were, that these specific false teachers were spreading back then in the context of that culture at that specific point in time, we maybe would have been tempted to only label those specific heresies as false teachings.

Whereas what Peter does here is equip us to identify different false teachings, any false teachings, including the kind that we'd expect in this part of the world in this century.

And so what he does is give us a sort of identicate of the false teacher, an identicate that will apply no matter what specific nonsense they happen to be preaching where we are.

And so as he puts together this identicate for us, he warns us that false teachers are not what they seem. And we look at this in three sections.

Verses 10 to 12, they're not as wise as it might seem. Verses 13 to 16, they're not as righteous as it might seem. And verses 17 to 22, they're not as free as it might seem.

[5 : 02] And so Peter is telling them, these people will do all they can to sound wise to you. And they might think themselves righteous. Maybe they might even look the part.

And they'll want you to believe that their lives are free from any restrictions and any limitations. But they're not any of these things. It's not what it seems.

So if we look at the first section then, they're not wise. Now one thing you might have noticed as Alistair read the passage is that Peter really does not hold back in attacking the false teachers.

He uses such strong language. In just a couple of verses, he says to the false teachers here just in this first section alone, that they're bold and arrogant, that they're blasphemous, that they're like unreasoning animals, that they're creatures of instinct, that they are born to be caught and destroyed.

And in verse 12, that like animals, they too will perish. And he will come time and time again in this passage to the fate of false teachers.

[6 : 12] He'd already told us in last week's passage that they're under judgment. And today he keeps reminding us of what awaits them here in almost every other verse. So he clearly wants this, the way that they will end, just to really get into our hands.

So why are the false teachers anything but what you would expect of a teacher? I'm sure one of the first words that comes to mind thinking about teaching and teacher is wise.

Why are they anything but wise? Why are they like unreasoning animals? It's because they're not afraid to heap abuse on celestial beings.

Now we don't know exactly what it was that the false teachers said and about what celestial beings, but the most common interpretation is that they blasphemed against fallen angels.

Peter did mention fallen angels just earlier on in the chapter in verse 4, or perhaps against the devil himself. But what we do know based on Peter's words is that they're showing incredible arrogance by speaking of angelic powers in ways that the angels themselves won't.

[7 : 22] And so they might try and appear wise to those that they want to entice by speaking so boldly and by coming across as so confident, like they know what they're talking about.

But verse 12 says that the truth is they blaspheme in matters that they do not understand. And so if what they're doing is not wisdom, it's not wise, what is wisdom according to the Bible?

I'll go to a verse that many of us will be familiar with in Proverbs 9, 10. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

So wisdom is realizing that the Lord is above everything else, and that the Lord is as loving and merciful as he is just. So we should fear the Lord and live accordingly.

And of course, if we are the Lord, we should only fear him. Fearing God means recognizing his authority, his glory, his majesty, and then as a result of this understanding, strive to live in obedience to him.

[8 : 31] So of course, we should not fear the devil in the same way, because our allegiance is to God, and he's already won the battle against Satan. And yet, by behaving the way that they do, these false teachers, by heaping abuse and celestial beings, they're showing that they're actually not grasping the seriousness of evil.

The power that Satan still does have on humanity by way of temptation, of course, at this point in time, while we still live in a broken world that is dominated by sin.

And so if we underestimate the devil, like they do, then we underestimate sin, and that's how we open the door to it into our lives. Someone at my old job underestimated the risk of this link that they got in an email, and they did what they always teach you not to do at any training course about phishing emails, and they clicked on the link, and then they got to this fake web page, and they entered their password they thought they were getting into their inbox, and they were in the scammers.

They were going through our emails, and they were emailing our clients, asking for our invoices to be paid into our new bank account. We underestimated the risk, and we let the scammers in.

And the false teachers behave just as scaredlessly. They don't wash their mouth when they talk about the spiritual beings, about things that they do not understand, and in so doing, they're lessening in their mind the seriousness of sin.

[10 : 04] So I think Peter is warning us that if we come across someone who's trying to convince us that we can laugh in the face of the devil, that we can think that he's a thing of the past, someone that belongs in fairy tales only, then we should run away before we too start thinking that way, and we make ourselves even more vulnerable to sin than we already are.

And I think it's absolutely not uncommon for us, unfortunately, in this country and in this day and age, to come across people trying to convince us, or maybe to convince our children in school, that of course God exists, or maybe gods exist, and, you know, they're pretty much just an anonymous someone, someone, someone good living in the clouds, maybe living in a tree.

But evil beings? No, they're not a thing. They're just something superstitious. And as wise as these teachings might seem, of course these people would be way more eloquent than have just been, but they can sound intriguing sometimes and even wise.

It's not what it seems, Peter says. That is not wisdom. And if any of these teachings infiltrate in our heads, if they get into our heads, there are many ways that then as a result we can end up underestimating the power that evil can have in our everyday lives.

There are a lot of ways that we can arrogantly believe and behave that we have the strength in ourselves to overpower temptation. And we all have different weaknesses.

[11 : 39] We all have different ways that we let the guard down and we open the door to sin. And so for some of us, it will be about frequenting certain people who have a negative influence on us.

For some others, it will look like getting too close to alcohol or certain contexts where there's too much of it. And I'm sure you can all think of your own examples. It could be gossiping.

It could be lust. It could be greed. And so let's be watchful. Let's not let the attitude of any false teachers who are too casual about that spiritual war that we know is definitely going on between God's army and the devil's.

Let's not then be contagious. Let's not then let them infiltrate in our heads. We want to be wise by fearing the Lord. We won't fear the devil because we are in the Lord, but we do take the devil's intentions seriously.

And if he was ready to tempt Jesus in the desert, he's certainly here ready to tempt us at our every step. And so we want to be ready for him by living wisely and by fearing our Lord, by showing obedience to him.

[12 : 45] In the second section in verses 13 to 16, the false teachers are not righteous. Again, Peter immediately reminds us the false teachers are condemned by God.

If you look at verse 13, they will be paid back with harm for the harm that they have done. And then again, he will not hold back when it comes to the language that he uses to describe them.

Their blots and blemishes, they revel in their pleasure. They never stop sinning. They seduce those who are unstable. They're experts in greed.

They're an accursed brood. It's like Peter really wants his readers to just feel disgusted at the thought of what these people are doing. And if the false teachers are trying in every way to pass for good people who can't show us the way, then Peter is doing all he can to make it absolutely clear to the church and to us that they are just scum.

That's not what it seems, people. Whatever nonsense these teachers are telling you about themselves and about God, verse 14, they never stop sinning.

[13 : 59] They're experts in greed. And so he, Peter, might not tell us anything about these teachers' doctrines, but he tells us a lot about their strategies to entice people.

They attend church events because he says they will feast with you, in verse 13. And so maybe that's one of the ways that they want to appear righteous, by going to church. But the motives behind their attendance of church should send a chill right down our spine.

While people are enjoying fellowship together, while they're eating together, like we do at our church lunches, for instance, those wonderful opportunities we have to just enjoy fellowship together, to take more of an interest into each other's lives, to encourage each other as we walk with the Lord.

It's at these times that these cowards come in with their eyes full of adultery, verse 14, seducing the unstable.

And so these words here specifically paint a picture of sexual sin, of people who have stopped even trying to resist sin. And they use even church meetings to try and satisfy their desires and to prey on the vulnerable.

[15 : 15] And so who knows, maybe they were convincing people to join in their sin by preaching that it doesn't matter how much you sin because we're already saved, or maybe going back to the second coming that it doesn't matter how much you sin because there's no second coming.

We've been left to ourselves. Jesus is gone. He's not coming back. Just live and be merry. No judgment day for anyone. And then in verses 15 and 16, Peter compares them to Balaam.

Now, Balaam was a prophet that we read about in the book of Numbers, in chapters 22 to 24. Balak, the king of the Moabites, knocks at his door repeatedly, asking him to please go and curse the people of Israel for him.

Now, Balaam is not a false prophet because he does prophesize what God tells him to in the end. He won't curse Israel. He will only bless Israel as God commands him to.

However, his heart is not right with God. And God sees right through him as he accepts Balak's invitation to go and prophesize because Balaam's mind is clearly set on the money that comes with this service.

[16 : 26] And so God will humiliate him by letting his donkey rebuke him. That's what Peter is referring to. Just when Balaam is very close to being killed by this angel for his actions and the donkey actually saves him by refusing to go near the angel.

And so since Peter compares the false teachers to Balaam, it's fair to think that perhaps the false teachers were getting money in exchange for their services that they were offering people.

And so again, it's not what it seems. These false teachers will try to make people believe that they're righteous, but they're not. And in verse 15, the opposite of being righteous, Peter will say that they have left the straight way.

They're lustful, greedy people who have left the straight way. Now, of course, for the sake of clarity, none of us are righteous in themselves.

But 2 Corinthians 5.21 tells us, for our sake, he made him to be sin who knew no sin. God made Jesus to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

[17 : 40] And so through Jesus, we become the righteousness of God. And what we're called to do is, if we look at 2 Timothy 2.22, flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.

So we're called to pursue righteousness. And the false teachers we're seeing are doing anything but pursue righteousness. They've let all inhibitions go and are pursuing only pleasure.

And in broad daylight, Peter says. So I've got a couple of direct applications for us here. Number one, are the teachers we're listening to pursuing righteousness? And number two, are we pursuing righteousness?

So when we decide to listen to someone online, someone who's allegedly a Christian telling us how to live a Christian life, are we considering if they're walking the walk themselves?

This is a point that Archie made last week as well, but I think it's worth making it again. I think it applies to these verses as well. Online resources are amazing on so many levels.

[18 : 49] They give us access to so much knowledge. And we've seen during the pandemic, one of the amazing things that they can do is make church at least partially accessible to those who are housebound.

And of course, I myself have used resources to put together this talk. But they do come with a warning. And the same is valid for books or really anything else that comes from people that we don't know personally.

Because the danger is that these are people that we don't do life together with. We don't get to spend time with them, to enjoy fellowship with them in the same way that we do with our fellow brothers and sisters in our local church.

And so we want to make sure that we're exposed to the message of people who are pursuing righteousness. Because words can be deceiving. Bible verses can be twisted to fit around what people want you to believe.

And rubbing shoulders with someone can be a very effective way to see past those deceiving words. Of course, it can be a very effective way. We can all hide our sin in our personal life.

[19 : 49] We can deceive by way of appearances too. But I'm sure that, for instance, finding out that a certain pastor is buying himself a private jet with the money that he's making out of preaching, that would make us probably second guess what he was preaching in the first place.

And while this is an egregious example from the world of the prosperity gospel false teachings, and it won't always be as easy to know if those that we listen to live in accordance with the gospel in pursuit of righteousness, I think we should always do our due diligence as much as possible when we're reading or listening to strangers.

And we should look for evidence of a godly life. And then, of course, we should look also for real knowledge of God. Are the teachings that we're listening to rooted in the Bible?

And that's why at Bransfield, you'll always hear anyone who's speaking from the front ask you to please keep your Bible open, to follow along in the passage. We'll be referring to verses all the time. And that's really the bare minimum that we should expect of those that we listen to.

So are the people we're listening to pursuing righteousness? And then when it comes to our own lives, are we ourselves in pursuit of righteousness? Do we strive to live lives in obedience to God with Jesus as our model?

[21 : 11] And then in our third section, Peter now warns us that it's not what it seems. False teachers are not free. They're not as free as they would like us to think.

Far from it. Again, he's got very strong words for the false teachers. He has two very powerful illustrations. The first one is that these people are like springs without water.

What is more disappointing than a spring without water? You think you've finally found the water and then there's none. You walked all the way to that spring in the heat of the desert.

You're sure of that relief that it's finally to come and now you're back to square one, still parched and not knowing where to go from here. That's what false teachers are like.

They promise solutions. They promise freedom, joy, wealth, health, peace, whatever it is that they're promising and they have none of it.

[22 : 12] In second illustration, they're like mists driven by a storm. There's just no weight to their words where they say it's empty, it doesn't stick and it just disappears in the air because there's just no truth to it.

And now compare what Peter is saying about the false teachers here with what he said in his previous letter, 1 Peter 1, 24, 25. Again, a verse that we'll be familiar with.

The grass withers and the flowers fall but the word of the Lord endures forever. What a contrast. Then again, Peter reminds us in verse 17 of what the false teacher's fate is.

These dried up springs are destined to eternal death. Blackest darkness is reserved for them. There's a lot of creative language he's telling us that they're going to hell in like 20 different ways.

So why are they not free? Because as they claim to be able to free from your poverty, to use another prosperity gospel example, they're slaves of their own greed at the same time.

[23 : 21] As they promise to free you from your sense of guilt by not putting any restraints on the desires of your flesh, they're slaves of their own lust.

This is the example of someone telling us that we're saved so we can do what we like now. Or maybe they'll do the opposite as they promise to free you from your sadness for the mourning of a close him relative by praying X number of prayers to X number of saints.

They're slaves of their own legalism. That's people telling us that we're saved by actions. And the list, of course, can go on. So verse 19 is key here.

They promise freedom while they themselves are slaves of depravity. For people are slaves to whatever has mastered them. And he's already told us, hasn't he, what masters them.

It's lust, it's greed, it's arrogance. And then, to add to this already bleak picture, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error.

[24 : 25] Verse 18. People who are just escaping from those who live in error are new converts. And in verse 14 in the previous section he said, they're seducy and stable. And so the sad reality is that these false teachers know exactly what they're doing.

They're very intentional when they go about identifying their victims. They prey on the vulnerable. And Peter knows it and he's warning the church.

And we, members of Brunsfield Evangelical Church, we should take this warning just as seriously as hopefully Peter's original audience did. We have a duty to look out for our brothers and sisters.

If we know of anyone who's going through a particularly vulnerable time in their lives or if we have new converts amongst us, we must look out for them. Did we hear that they're reading a book with some questionable teachings?

Did we hear that they're listening to that misleading podcast? Did we hear that they're going to that Christian student association even in meetings that are infamous for being particularly lenient when it comes to tolerating sin?

[25 : 33] Let's go speak to them in love but without beating around the bush. Let's expose those false teachings for what they are for their sake because they might need just that.

Because the false teacher is offering to them and to us an idea of freedom that is entirely worldly. And that type of freedom is so tempting to all of us because it appeals to those same instincts that made the first man and the first woman sin.

It appeals to our arrogance. It appeals to our desire for independence. It appeals to our desire to be independent even from God. And so a false teacher will promise joy, freedom, but in reality all they're offering is judgment.

That judgment that Peter keeps telling us their run into words. And then Peter concludes the chapter by pointing out that the sad reality is that these teachers seem to have accepted the gospel at least from the outside.

They were certainly exposed to it and yet they got entangled in that corruption again and they went right back in. Just like a dog going back to its vomit, just like a pig going back to rolling the mud.

[26 : 56] And it would have been better, strong words, verse 21, it would have been better for them to not have known the way of righteousness than to know it and turn their backs on it. What a sad reality.

And just for the sake of clarity, I don't think we're talking about losing salvation here. We're talking about someone who was a dog and remained a dog. We're talking about nominal Christians. Because hopefully we all know that being a church member does not save us.

Being a church goer does not save us. The change has to be within. And so let's conclude by looking at the real freedom. If the false teachers cannot offer us freedom, who can?

1 Peter 2, 16, leave as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil. Live as God's slaves. Leave us free people, leave us God's slaves.

Very counter-cultural, maybe even counter-intuitive. Being God's slaves is freedom. Freedom from the power of sin and from the power of the law because of Jesus.

[28 : 04] And we're not saying that we're free to sin as much as we please just because there's Jesus up there interceding for us. But we are free from eternal death because he's already died in our place.

And so we as Christians decide to become a slave of Christ and we do that with joy because we recognize that it's God who created us and he knows way better than us what it is that we need.

So we're going to remember later Jesus' death on the cross by taking communion together and that's exactly how he bought us. That broken body, that spilled blood is how we become slaves of Jesus if we accept his sacrifice and if we surrender to him.

Let me conclude by acknowledging that this is a tough passage just like last week's. Peter just keeps reminding us of the end that awaits these false teachers and it's sad because we never rejoice when hearing about lost souls and it's sad because of the damage that these false teachers can do to churches all over the world to lives that were going in the right direction and were sidetracked by them.

But the good news is that while Peter reminds us of the death that awaits the false teachers in doing that he also reminds us of the life that awaits us if we remain faithful to God.

[29 : 35] We must not feel like we're immune to false teaching we must be in communion with God to know what true knowledge of him is and to recognize that in other people. But as we do live in communion with him let's not forget that we're getting closer and closer to the day that we will be in his glory.

Let's pray. Father we thank you for these words these words by a wise man because he feared you these words by a man who was in pursuit of righteousness who wanted to do right by you.

We just thank you because we know that being Jesus' slave, being bought by Jesus is the real freedom.

God and we pray Father that you will protect every single person who comes through these doors Father from false teachings.

Help us be a church that is rooted in your word. Help us be a church that has discernment and knows how to spot false teachings, anything that deviates from the real gospel Father.

[31 : 00] help us just stay close to you. Help us be a light to those around us, to those within us who are vulnerable. Father may your spirit keep doing the work that it's doing in us Father and may it really help us just pursue righteousness by using Jesus as a model Father in our everyday lives.

Amen. Amen.