

## 2 Peter: Everything Needed for Life *by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle*

### Prayer of Illumination

One: Open our eyes, O God:

**All: that we may behold wondrous things out of your law.**

One: Open our ears, O God:

**All: that we may hear what you will speak to those who turn to you in their hearts.**

One: Open our minds, O God:

**All: that we may understand what it means to revere you and to learn of your ways.**

One: Open our hearts, O God:

**All: that we may grasp the treasures of wisdom and knowledge hidden in Christ.**

One: Open our mouths, O God:

**All: that we may proclaim the mystery of the gospel and speak of it boldly.**

### Background

The majority of scholars think that 2 Peter is the last book to be written in the New Testament. Second Peter was also the last book to be received into the Christian canon—thus completing the New Testament.

A fascinating tidbit is that Paul's collected letters are mentioned in 2nd Peter as a part of Scripture and the author confesses that there are "some things in Paul's writings that are hard to understand."

2 Peter appears to be an ancient genre of literature called a farewell letter which presents the final words of a heroic figure as a deathbed soliloquy, where they address important matters of the day and summarize their key teachings so that they will be fresh and alive for the next generation to follow.

The goal of Peter's second letter is to keep believers faithful to the apostle's teaching and to resist false teachers who were saying Christ would not be returning. In other words they were teaching that there will be no judgment and ethics are unimportant for the believer. Peter begs to differ.

The particular passage we're reading this morning is very influential in shaping the theology of the Orthodox Church, highlighting a distinction from both Roman Catholics and Protestants. In this letter, Peter convincingly shows us the close connection between knowing and doing. Orthodoxy (right belief) and Orthopraxy (right action) are interrelated. You must have both.

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Let's hear now our reading from the first chapter, that crackles and pops with almost every word.

### **Scripture: 2 Peter 1: 3-11 "The Christian's Call and Election"**

His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature. 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. For anyone who lacks these things is shortsighted and blind, and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins. Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this, you will never stumble. For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.*

### **SERMON – 2 Peter: Everything Needed for Life**

Social Psychologist Jonathan Haidt in his book *The Happiness Hypothesis* talks about different ways we human beings over the ages have understood the interplay between the Rational part of us and the Emotional part of our lives.

Plato used a metaphor where the self is a chariot and the calm and collect rational part of the mind holds the reins. The charioteer holds the reins to two horses, which symbolized desire and emotion:

- The horse on the right is noble, with a high neck and regal nose—this horse loves honor, self-control, and needs no whips—the good horse needs only verbal commands to obey.
- The horse on the left, however, is wily and erratic, unkempt, uncouth, and stubborn as a mule.

The goal was for the charioteer to be the Horse Whisperer of the good horse and the bad horse of one's life.

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Centuries later, Freud adapted Plato by saying the human mind is divided into three parts:

- The ego (the conscious, rational self)
- The superego (the conscience—often times rigid & oppressive)
- The id (the desire to indulge in impulsive and primal pleasures)

Haidt adds his own 21<sup>st</sup> century picture that is very influential today: A rider atop an elephant. The rider (our rational selves), sits high to help the elephant (our emotional selves) make better choices and see farther into the future. The rational rider can communicate with other riders for valuable information or interpreting maps together. But the rider can't order the elephant around against its will.

- Basically, the rider—our rational minds—is more like an advisor or servant who holds the reins—rather than a king, president, or charioteer firmly in command.
- The elephant is everything else in our lives—our gut feelings, visceral reactions, emotions, intuitions, and impulses.

Both the rider and the elephant have their own intelligences. Things go well when they work together. But as we know all too well, the elephant and rider are often at odds with one another.

The Apostle Paul describes this inner wrestling between the rider and elephant in Romans 7:

I do not understand my own behavior, I do not do what I want to do, but I do the thing I hate. So it is no longer myself acting, but the sin that lives in me.

Peter has some good news for our human quandary: The Good Shepherd has not left his sheep to their own devices. "God's divine power," says Peter, "has given us everything needed for life and godliness through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness." In other words, we've been given a divine starter kit. We have a divine helping hand that holds and steadies the reins of our lives. In fact, by the grace of God, our elephant and rider nature can be transformed by Christ. Jesus is both our Elephant Whisperer and the Rider Whisperer.

While still being human and fully ourselves, we can be partakers in the divine nature. Christ can be formed and fashioned in us more and more. We can escape the rat race of corruption and selfish desire and become participants in the life of God. By the grace of God we'll receive a rich welcome into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Peter reminds us of our living hope—in our present and our future. In the present we've been fully and generously equipped to live godly and humane lives. We have hope for the future because of God's precious and majestic promises that are fulfilled in Christ Jesus. Or as another passage in the New Testament says, "the promises of God find their YES in Christ Jesus our Lord."

It's all grace, yet God enables and expects our participation. "Confirm," says Peter, "your call and election."

Whenever there's grace, gratitude must follow. God has baked it into the divine system. To be grounded in grace means we gratefully and diligently pursue God's character. Be who you are in Christ Jesus. Remember who you are. You're made in the *imago dei*—the image of God.

Don't have spiritual amnesia. Avoid a stale, unproductive, ineffective, rusty, and flabby faith. Refuse to settle for the status quo, the same old same old. Let God diagnose your spiritual myopia. Open up your eyes to the truth. Wake up!

A godly and growing life is an indicator that God's call and election is at work in us. One way to think about the interplay of grace and gratitude is a full-ride scholarship. The scholarship is a gift—it pays your tuition and your books. Your education would not be possible without it. You couldn't have afforded it. Couldn't have gone to college. But there's a responsibility that comes with the scholarship:

- You still have to show up to class.
- You still have to study.
- You still need to take the tests and write the reports.

So it is in the life of faith for the Christian:

- Grace AND gratitude.
- Gift AND grit.
- Calling AND collaboration.
- Equipment AND exertion.

Crossing the Jordan River to the Celestial City is a gift from God. We could never earn our way into the pearly gates. However, how we arrive is up to us.

- Will we arrive to the other side of the Jordan River like a sailor washed ashore after a shipwreck, barely alive?
- Or will we row our boat ashore?
- Or will we sail in triumphantly, with the wind at our back?

By God's grace, the choice is ours.

In our passage, Peter's "ladder" helps us choose the "latter." Peter in our passage talks about a spiritual ladder that will take us, rung by rung, to spiritually majestic places. The only way to descend and ascend to the heights and the depths is God's Eight-Rung Ladder of Virtue. Note that it's not a ladder of Success, it's a ladder of Virtue.

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Support your faith by living into these eight virtues that are found in the person of Christ, rung by rung:

- Faithfulness
- Goodness
- Knowledge
- Self-mastery
- Endurance
- Practical godliness
- Family kindness
- Love

Peter is saying that our daily lives ought to support our faith rather than undercut or contradict it.

Christ became like us,  
so that we might become like him.

Allow me to give a ladder illustration. One of my favorite places I've been in Arizona is Havasupai Falls. Our family and a number of friends went hiking and camping there a few years ago. When you get to the falls after about a ten-mile hike, it feels more like Hawaii than Arizona.

There are further falls that you can hike out to. One of those is Moonie Falls. I loved Moonie Falls, but I will never forget the rickety ladder that was hammered into the cliffs. It was by this ladder that my family, friends, and I would descend and ascend the magnificent cliffs. This ladder was not only rickety, it was arduous. You had to pay attention—and work for the view.

As I was climbing down the ladder with my family, I thought to myself: *what the heaven am I doing here?* Is this ladder going to hold? Will my family and I live to tell of this adventure? Well, we made it down and we made it back up the ladder alive. And the view was worth it. I'm glad I took the risk.

So it is with Peter's **Eight-Rung Ladder of Spiritual Growth**.

The first rung is the **Rung of Faith**. Our first rung must always be faith. Faith in God is always the first step in our journey of faith.

From The Rung of Faith we ascend to the **Rung of Goodness**. Another way to translate the word goodness is *excellence*. Excellence refers to the proper fulfillment of anything we undertake. The excellence of a knife is to cut. The excellence of a horse is to run. The excellence of a man or woman is to follow Christ wherever he bids us to go.

From the Rung of Goodness we climb to the **Rung of Knowledge**. This isn't just head knowledge. This is experiential knowledge of Christ, the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ our Lord. This kind of knowledge is practical and down to earth. It's the wisdom to distinguish right from wrong.

From the Rung of Knowledge we reach for the **Rung of Self-Control**. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we are Spirit-led and Spirit-controlled people. By God's grace we control our passions. Our passions and selfish desires don't control us.

From the Rung of Self-Control we grip the **Rung of Endurance**. We don't give up, even when our palms are sweaty, and we look down and are afraid of the heights. God suffuses and steadies us with staying power. We calmly trust God, even when we feel like we're losing our balance or our grip.

From the Rung of Endurance we extend for the **Rung of Godliness**. Godliness is reverence, not self-righteousness. Reverence for God and respect for our fellow human beings.

From the Rung of Godliness we scale to the **Rung of Mutual Affection**. The Greek word is *philadelphia*—brotherly love. We fulfill Christ's royal law of love by loving our brothers and sisters as ourselves. Resisting spiritual sibling rivalry. We seek unity and affection, while we resist prejudice, tattle-telling, and hate.

From the Rung of Mutual Affection we reach for the **Rung of Love**. The Greek word Peter uses for love here is *agape*. Paul tells us that faith, hope, and love remain. But the greatest of these is *love*. Love desires the highest good for all. *Agape* love is evoked in us, not by who we are, but by *who God is ...* and God is love. And his love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

Peter's ladder begins with Faith and ends with Love. Each rung builds upon the other and leads you to the next one. On our spiritual ladder, there are ups and there are downs, ascents and descents, and there are certainly plateaus in life, too. Sometimes we lose our footing on the ladder, but Christ is always with us, steadying our faltering steps.

Ultimately, our life in Christ should be moving forward and upward—*further up and further in*, as C.S. Lewis puts it in *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

Good Christians, never stop growing, be ever climbing. Peter reminds us, no matter how we're feeling:

- God's divine power is upon us,
- Christ's glory and goodness are in us, and
- His precious and great promises are given to us.

And the great hope of Christ's eternal kingdom awaits us.

**Amen.**

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