

CONQUERING THROUGH CONFLICT

A Study of 2 Peter

STUDY SEVEN

Which Is Worse? What Is Best?

2 Peter 2:20–3:2

It is better to have never known the truth than to have known it intellectually and defected from it.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

FALSE teachers are not ignorant. Often, they are the most educated people you might meet. The string of letters following their names display impressive credentials. Elite institutions drape them in accolades and invite them to speak at conferences. Their writings become bestsellers.

In public, they present themselves as trustworthy authorities. Anyone would be impressed by their sophisticated speech, smooth elocution, and winsome demeanor. In the ivory tower of academia, they live on the top floor . . . but they are not what they seem.

False teachers can seem profound and real, but they are empty and misleading. They appear to have answers and hope, but their words are little more than mist. They flaunt a freewheeling lifestyle, but their immoral deeds chain them to sin. “They promise freedom,” Peter wrote, “but they themselves are slaves of sin and corruption. For you are a slave to whatever controls you” (2 Peter 2:19).

With all their intelligence and education, these teachers should know better. They are familiar with the truth, but in their pride, they believe what’s false, and they are spiritually worse off than the ignorant. That’s the tragedy of their condition . . . and the warning to those who live in their shadow.



Which Is Worse? What Is Best?

2 Peter 2:20–3:2



PREPARE YOUR HEART

As you open the Word, open your heart to the One who is Truth. You may wish to pray like this:

Father, help me understand Your truth from this passage of Scripture. The words on the page are words of life to me because they come from Your heart. They reveal Your nature and Your ways, and I long to walk in them. In Jesus' name, amen.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

Peter began his letter by shoring up the doctrinal foundation the false teachers had undermined. The cornerstone of faith is Jesus Christ. Through Christ, God has given the believers His power and promises, which enable us to live godly lives (2 Peter 1:1–3), exhibited by Christlike virtues (1:4–11).

Peter urged his first-century readers to rely on the solid teaching they had already heard—the message of the apostles and prophets—and not let the false teachers sidetrack them into heresy and sin. In our passage for this *Searching the Scriptures* study, Peter brought them to a decision point. He closed his case against the false teachers by showing his readers *what's worse* in 2:20–22, *what's best* in 3:1–2, and then invited them to choose.



Observation: Which Is Worse? What Is Best?

A good rule of thumb in observing a text is to understand its *context*. Review [2 Peter 2:1–19](#). In these verses, Peter painted a raw and realistic portrait of the false teachers with words such as “evil teaching,” “shameful immorality,” and “greed” (2 Peter 2:2–3). What other descriptions of the false teachers stand out to you?



Which Is Worse? What Is Best?

2 Peter 2:20–3:2

Although these false teachers claimed to be Christians, they were not true believers. Which of Peter's statements indicated their spiritual condition?

The way of the false teachers led them and their followers to what end, according to 2 Peter 2:20?

What does the metaphor *tangled up* reveal about the “wickedness of the world” (2 Peter 2:20)?



Which Is Worse? What Is Best?

2 Peter 2:20–3:2

Having listed the false teachers' sins and consequences, Peter then addressed a question: Which is worse, *ignorance* of the truth or *defection* from the truth? What was Peter's answer in 2 Peter 2:21?

Earlier, Peter said these scoffers were “like unthinking animals” (2 Peter 2:12). In 2:22, he echoed his accusation with a proverb. What proverb did Peter quote? What was he saying about the nature of counterfeiters?

The pig's nature is to go back to the mire, and so it is with false teachers. They may dress up and play the part, but they have the nature of an unbeliever. The externals do not tell the truth about the internal. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

As we turn the page to chapter 3, Peter restated his purpose for writing his letter, which was what in 3:1?



Which Is Worse? What Is Best?

2 Peter 2:20–3:2

In contrast to the way of the false teachers, on what did Peter want his readers to build their lives, according to 2 Peter 3:2? Write down Peter's three solid sources of truth in this verse.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

We need to be reminded of what we already know more than we need to be given new information. More information is not that helpful. We need orthodox truth, and we need to act upon what was written. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Interpretation: Ignorance Is Better Than Rejection

Peter pronounced a gravely serious charge against the false teachers:

It would be better if they had never known the way of righteousness than to know it and then to reject the command they were given to live a holy life. (2 Peter 2:21)

What did Peter mean? Remember, Peter was talking about people who claimed to be Christians but were fakes. They denied “the Master who bought them” (2:1). Jesus’ sacrifice paid the debt “for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2), including their debt. However, the false teachers refused to accept Christ’s atonement, so they remained in their sin. They knew *of Christ*, but they had no faith *in Christ*.

With this in mind, what did Peter mean when he said that it would have been better if they “had never known” (2 Peter 2:21)? Why is ignorance of Christ better than rejection? For help with the answer, consult Pastor Chuck Swindoll’s commentary, *Insights on James, 1 & 2 Peter*. An online resource is *Constable’s Notes* at netbible.org.



Which Is Worse? What Is Best?

2 Peter 2:20–3:2

Another label for these rejectors is *apostates*. They aren't true believers who struggle with doubts or slide into carnality. Apostates deliberately defect, and then, with defiance in their hearts, they purposely oppose the mainstream teaching of the Christian faith and plant seeds of division and dissension in believing communities. Their bad fruit indicates they were never believers in the first place.

Why might an apostate “enslaved by sin again” be “worse off” (2 Peter 2:20) than when they had no knowledge of Christ?

Let's take a step further and explore the eternal side of the issue, based on a parable of Jesus recorded in Luke.



Correlation: Degrees of Judgment

Judgment awaits all those without Christ, but Jesus hinted that there may be degrees of judgment. Read Jesus' parable about the faithful and unfaithful servant in [Luke 12:42–48](#). What did Jesus say about the consequences of those who knew God's truth but turned away versus those who never knew?



Which Is Worse? What Is Best?

2 Peter 2:20–3:2

What principle was Jesus teaching about God? What warning was He giving to His listeners?

Peter rang a similar warning bell to wake up the Christians who had fallen under the false teachers' spell. Peter's purpose wasn't to rebuke the believers as much as to remind them of the truth and to stir them to stay faithful. If we listen closely, we can still hear his encouragement ringing.

Peter wrote his letter to stimulate wholesome thinking. Having given an entire chapter to the false teachers, he looked at his readers and addressed them as "Beloved" (2 Peter 3:1 NASB). —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Application: Encouraging Words to Christ's Beloved

Let's close with three encouragements. First, *put into action what you know*. With knowledge comes responsibility. Is there a response to God's Word that you have been avoiding? What step can you take to act on what you've heard?



Which Is Worse? What Is Best?

2 Peter 2:20–3:2

Second, *be accountable for that which you are responsible*. Peter hinted at accountability in the Greek word for “wholesome” in 2 Peter 3:1—*eilikrines*. The word means, “that which being viewed in the sunshine is found clear and pure.”¹ Peter intended us to have a wholesome, “sun-judged,” walk with Christ—no cracks or impurities when examined in the light. Is there someone to whom you can reveal your soul? What steps might you take to build accountability into your life?

Third, *return often to orthodox truth*. Rather than looking to visions and dreams for direction or relying on the latest self-help fad, keep on studying God’s Word—which you are doing! You’re doing what Peter hoped his readers would do. Be encouraged! Now, find someone with whom you can share what you’re learning so you both can grow in the Light.



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, thank You for protecting me from false teachers in the church who try to choke the life out of those who truly believe in Christ. Give me eyes to see the tares among the wheat, and help me walk faithfully in integrity and truth. In Jesus’ name, amen.

ENDNOTE

1. William D. Mounce, “eilikrines,” billmounce.com/greek-dictionary/eilikrines.

