SESSION OBJECTIVE: 2 PETER 3:14-18
To understand how the New Testament writings were already beginning to be equated with the Old Testament Scriptures during the New Testament age.

Where It All Began

I have been leading the Bible study ministry in my church longer than I have been writing curriculum for it. One of the men that mentored and discipled me led this ministry for a long time, and when he retired, I was next up. For some time I wrote notes for the curriculum that we purchased, and all in all, it was a fine study. However, during one quarter of the year, we studied 1 Peter, 2 Peter, and Jude, and I was so looking forward to our classes covering 2 Peter 3:16. In my mind, it's the most significant passage in the entire New Testament when it comes to the formation of New Testament Scripture. And to my shock, the curriculum we were utilizing at the time didn't even mention the passage. I was so dismayed that I immediately began to look for better curriculum. I had growing problems with the material already, and the lack of acknowledgement of this verse was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. I called my old mentor and began to talk it over with him, and true to who he was, he replied: "Why don't you stop complaining about it and just write your own already?" Those were not the words I wanted to hear, but alas, they were the words I needed to hear. It's what made him so special.

Today we will finish a study in 2 Peter for the second time, but we will cover 2 Peter 3:16 for only the first. It may not seem like much, but in the discussion of the formation of the Bible, it's paramount that we read it and understand it. And who knows, maybe it will inspire you to do something you know you should be doing, but haven't taken that step in faith yet.

Which Things?

Verse 14 begins with, “Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things.” Cheesy as it may be, whenever you see the word *therefore* in the Scripture, it’s always helpful to ask the question: “What’s the *therefore* there for?” It points back to something that has previously been said (usually the immediately preceding context). The reference to, "these things” is also tied to what has previously been said. What is it that believers are to be looking for? Verse 13 tells: “But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells.” The coming of the new heavens and the new earth are a sign of God's final redemptive work. In Revelation 21, John details what this new creation will look like: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” (Revelation 21:1-4) This new future reality is the hope that we have as followers of Jesus in this present, evil age. In light of that reality, we are to be found by God, “in holy conduct and godliness,” (2 Pet. 3:11) and, “in peace, spotless and blameless” (2 Pet. 3:14). The future kingdom, void of sin and death, is a motivator of sorts that orients us towards obedience.

Paul’s Writings

Verse 15 begins by harkening back to last week’s session regarding the patience of the Lord. Peter writes, “Regard the patience of our Lord as salvation” (2 Pet. 3:15). Living with the final judgment and the new heavens and earth in mind, believers should never fall into the trap of thinking that they can do whatever their flesh desires because the end has not yet come, but on the other hand, God’s patience is also to be seen as more opportunity for the Gospel to reach the lost. All of these things are then given a second appeal, though not on the basis of what Peter has written, but rather what Paul has written: "Just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you.”

This kicks off a separate line of thought regarding Paul's work. It’s intriguing that Paul is even mentioned, and it becomes a very important detail for at least a couple of reasons.

PETER AFFIRMS THE EXISTENCE OF PAUL’S WORK

For one, the fact that Peter mentions Paul and his writings confirms that Peter and Paul were in fact contemporaries of one another. It's one thing to read the book of Acts and see Peter and Paul working together, but it’s an entirely different thing to read the firsthand accounts of Peter and Paul mentioning one another. It verifies to an even further extent that they were not only aware of one another, but personally regarded by one another. Paul does the same, albeit in less gratifying terms. When Peter had begun to ignore the Gentile believers that he had become close with in Antioch when the Jews sent by James arrived, Paul took exception with his hypocritical behavior and publicly chastised him for it (Gal. 2:11-14). Still, Paul acknowledges a relationship with Peter. Peter, likewise, in this passage references Paul and the work he has been responsible for, and is apparently well-versed enough in Paul’s writings to be able to confidently say that Paul agrees with what he has written. It seems like a small detail, but it’s important when discussing the validity of the New Testament from a critical perspective.

PETER AFFIRMS THE DEPTH OF PAUL'S WORK

Not only does Peter acknowledge Paul's writings, he acknowledges that Paul is difficult to read. He says in the first part of verse 16: "As also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things *hard to understand*." There is a bit of humor here for at least the modern reader, although I imagine the ancient audience would have felt the same. Paul's work is not easy to comprehend. Apart from the lofty theological concepts that Paul unfolds, his grammatical style carries on and on without break. He deals with themes like predestination (Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1:11), the sovereignty of God (Rom. 9:19-24), the mystery of Christ's incarnation (1 Tim. 3:16), the indwelling Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16), the church (1 Cor. 11:18; 12:28; 14:12), marriage (Eph. 5:22-33; Col. 3:12), the family (Eph. 6:1; Col. 3:20), slavery (Philemon 10-16), and a myriad of other challenging and even sometimes controversial topics. It can be frustrating reading the Scriptures, and it is impossible to understand them without the aid of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:14). For Peter to acknowledge this difficulty should give some semblance of hope that if Peter can acknowledge it, so can we.

PETER AFFIRMS THE AUTHORITY OF PAUL'S WORK

Beyond acknowledging the existence and complexity of Paul's work, he affirms the authority of it as well. Peter does not merely look at Paul's work as instructive letters, but as inspired by God and as authoritative as the Old Testament. The word for Scripture in Greek is γραφή (graphē), and every single time is used it is a reference to the Old Testament. Understanding this helps frame the significance of Peter's words in verse 16: "Which the untaught and unstable distort, *as they do also the rest of the Scriptures*, to their own destruction." In placing Paul's letters, "with the rest of Scripture," he is identifying Paul's letters as inspired and holding the same authority as the Old Testament.

This is a monumental claim. Up to this point, the Bible as you know it today was not yet formed. Church history tells us how this process unfolded, whereby the churches simply recognized specific letters and documents (e.g. the Gospels) as sacred Scripture. However, this passage indicates that the process of recognizing New Testament letters as divinely inspired started to happen while the New Testament was still being written. This shouldn't be too surprising, given Peter's insistence that it's both the words of the prophets and the apostles that are binding and authoritative (2 Pet. 3:1-2). However, determining how the Bible came to be has been a major topic of discussion for many years, and 2 Peter 3:16 is critical to determining an early date for at least the Pauline body of work.

How to Fight Off False Teaching

This letter ends with a final command in verses 17 and 18: "You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, be on your guard so that you are not carried away by the error of unprincipled men and fall from your own steadfastness, but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory, both now and to the day of eternity. Amen." When false teaching arises, and it has, we are not to be hostile or offensive nor annoyingly provocative in calling out false teachers. Rather, Peter says, "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." How do you fight off false teaching? By learning the truth of God. Christians are quick to point fingers at anyone they believe is in error, but much slower to actually learn from a pure source. May we always seek to grow in grace to His glory, "both now and to the day of eternity" (2 Pet. 3:18).

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read 2 Peter 3:14. What does the word therefore point us back to?

2. Read 2 Peter 3:14. What things are we to be diligent to be found by Him in?

Day Two

1. Read 2 Peter 3:15. What do we regard the patience of the Lord as? What other major biblical figure is mentioned in this verse?

2. Read 2 Peter 3:15: According to the notes, what is the first thing that Peter acknowledges regarding Paul?

Day Three

1. Read 2 Peter 3:16. According to the notes, what is the second thing that Peter acknowledges regarding Paul?

2. Read 2 Peter 3:16. According to the notes, what is the third thing that Peter acknowledges regarding Paul?

Day Four

1. Read 2 Peter 3:17. What are we to do in light of what Peter said in the preceding verses? Who are we to guard ourselves from?

2. Read 2 Peter 3:18. What two things are we to grow in? How does Peter close out this letter? How do we fight against false teaching?

Week 9 Discussion: The Bible is Hard!

In 2 Peter 3:16, Peter acknowledges the difficulty of understanding Paul's words. Bible study in general can be a challenging endeavor! There are many places, names, and concepts that sound very foreign to us, because they are. The Bible presents theological ideas that not only challenge us culturally, but morally as well. We are all imperfect and guided by our flesh apart from Christ, and so the truths of Scripture almost always run contrary to our instincts. How then are we to really understand this stuff? Talk as a group about the difficulty of Bible study, and what tools or resources have made your study of Scripture a little easier.

1. Icebreaker: Do you think understanding Scripture is hard? Be honest. Why or why not?
2. What is the most helpful Bible study tool you have? Why is it so helpful?
3. What about this class has been the most helpful in understanding the Bible?
4. Do you think anyone can learn God's Word, or only people gifted in understanding it?
5. What do you need to do to be a better student of Scripture? How can this class help you with that?
6. How can the church be more effective at teaching people God's Word?

Takeaways:

1. Paul was known by Peter as someone difficult to understand and being used by God to reveal eternal, divinely inspired truth.
2. The way we fight against false teaching in the church today is by developing a command of Scripture.

PRAYER REQUESTS: