

2 Peter 2:21

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them.

Analysis

Chapter 2, verse 21 - Comprehensive theological analysis. Peter continues his urgent apostolic warning about the dangers facing the church. This verse contributes crucial insights to understanding false teachers' characteristics, God's judgment patterns, and believers' proper response. The Greek terminology reveals theological precision in Peter's argument, emphasizing both divine sovereignty in salvation and human responsibility in sanctification.

The immediate context connects to Peter's broader argument about maintaining doctrinal purity and moral integrity while awaiting Christ's return. Greek word studies illuminate the specific nature of the threats Peter identifies and the resources God provides for perseverance. This passage resonates with Old Testament prophetic warnings, Jesus' teaching about false prophets, and Paul's pastoral instructions, demonstrating biblical theology's consistency across testaments and authors.

Christ-centered interpretation reveals how this verse ultimately points to Jesus as the standard for truth, the source of power for godly living, and the coming Judge who will vindicate the faithful and condemn the wicked. The eschatological dimension reminds believers that present struggles occur within the larger framework of redemptive history culminating in Christ's glorious return and the establishment of the new heavens and new earth.

Historical Context

The first-century church faced unique challenges from both pagan Greco-Roman culture and Jewish opposition, while also contending with internal threats from false teachers who distorted apostolic doctrine. Peter writes in the shadow of Nero's persecution (AD 64-68) and his own approaching martyrdom, making this letter his urgent final testament to the churches. Early Gnostic influences promoting secret knowledge, antinomian ethics, and denial of Christ's physical return created the specific heresies Peter addresses.

Understanding the social, religious, and philosophical context of the Roman Empire illuminates Peter's concerns and arguments. The delay of Christ's parousia created pastoral challenges as expectations of imminent return gave way to questions about timing and certainty. Jewish apocalyptic literature, Greco-Roman moral philosophy, and mystery religions all influenced how different groups understood salvation, ethics, and eschatology, requiring apostolic clarification to maintain orthodox Christianity.

Related Passages

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Study Questions

1. How does this verse challenge compromises you might be tempted to make for cultural acceptance or personal comfort?
2. What practices would help you grow in discernment to recognize and resist false teaching in its contemporary forms?
3. How should the certainty of Christ's return and judgment shape your priorities, relationships, and use of time and resources?

Interlinear Text

κρεῖττον	γὰρ	ἢν	αὐτοῖς	μὴ	ἐπιγνοῦσιν	τὴν
better	For	it had been	for them	not	after they have known	G3588
G2909	G1063	G2258	G846	G3361	G1921	
όδὸν	τῆς	δικαιοσύνης	ἢ	ἐπιγνοῦσιν	ἐπιστρέψαι	
the way	G3588	of righteousness	than	after they have known	it to turn	
G3598		G1343	G2228	G1921		G1994
ἐκ	τῆς	παραδοθείσης	αὐτοῖς	ἀγίας	ἐντολῆς	
from	G3588	delivered	for them	the holy	commandment	
G1537		G3860	G846	G40	G1785	

Additional Cross-References

Ezekiel 18:24 (Righteousness): But when the righteous turneth away from his righteousness, and committeth iniquity, and doeth according to all the abominations that the wicked man doeth, shall he live? All his righteousness that he hath done shall not be mentioned: in his trespass that he hath trespassed, and in his sin that he hath sinned, in them shall he die.

James 4:17 (Parallel theme): Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.

Ezekiel 3:20 (Righteousness): Again, When a righteous man doth turn from his righteousness, and commit iniquity, and I lay a stumblingblock before him, he shall die: because thou hast not given him warning, he shall die in his sin, and his righteousness which he hath done shall not be remembered; but his blood will I require at thine hand.

Luke 12:47 (Parallel theme): And that servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes.

John 15:22 (Parallel theme): If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin: but now they have no cloke for their sin.

John 9:41 (Parallel theme): Jesus said unto them, If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth.

1 Thessalonians 4:2 (Word): For ye know what commandments we gave you by the Lord Jesus.

Zephaniah 1:6 (Parallel theme): And them that are turned back from the LORD; and those that have not sought the LORD, nor enquired for him.

Proverbs 16:31 (Righteousness): The hoary head is a crown of glory, if it be found in the way of righteousness.

Matthew 21:32 (Righteousness): For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not: but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him.