

Peter's Dying Declaration

By Daryl Wingerd



In the legal world, a “dying declaration” is the one form of “hearsay” evidence that is admissible in court. This assumes, of course, that the dying person knows he or she is about to die when the statement is made, along with several other factors. The reasons for allowing this kind of second-hand testimony are simple: First, the person who said these words, being dead when the trial takes place, cannot testify personally.

Second, it is widely held that the last words a person utters before his or her impending death will not be intentional fabrications. Third, it is understood that the dying person assigned a high degree of importance to his or her last words being heard, believed, and acted upon.

Peter's second letter was much like a dying declaration. He said so himself. After his initial exhortations to his readers, he wrote, “I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up by way of reminder, since I know that the putting off of my body will be soon, as our Lord Jesus Christ made clear to me. And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things” (1:13-15). Peter really wanted his readers to hear, understand, recall, and act on what he wrote.

So what did Peter write? What was his dying declaration?

First, he identified his readers as believers — “those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (1:1). He assures them that the instruction they have received from him (and the other apostles) in the gospel — God's “precious and very great promises” — will be instrumental in making them more and more Christ-like and increasingly separated from “the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire” (1:4).

Then he gave his main charge — the primary thing he wanted them to do in response to reading this letter: “For this reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection,

and brotherly affection with love” (1:5-7). Peter wanted his readers to exert diligent effort in moving forward and upward in their walk as Christians. He wanted them to establish a trajectory aimed toward heaven and away from the world. He wanted them to gain traction and momentum in their difficult escape from the pull of the world's corruption and toward the righteousness of the new heavens and the new earth (3:13). He explained in 1:8-11 that diligently, intentionally increasing in these Christian characteristics and practices was the only way to make their “calling and election sure”—that is, the only way to ensure that they would “never fall” (in this case meaning fall away from the faith).

Next, Peter explained *why* this upward trajectory is necessary. False teachers will bring subtle perversions of the truth — messages that closely resemble the gospel, but appeal to “the sensual passions of the flesh” (2:18). Through their lies, false teachers “entice unsteady souls” (2:14), luring them back toward the life they left behind to become Christians. The false teachers will appeal, Peter warned, to “those who are barely escaping from those who live in error. They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved” (2:18-19).

Peter's warning to these “unsteady souls” — professing Christians who are foolishly toying around with sin and worldliness — is one of the most sobering in the Bible: “For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are once again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first” (2:20). Peter then compared such people to a dog returning to its own vomit and a freshly washed pig returning to wallow in the mire (2:22). His words bring to my mind the image of a rocket leaving the launch pad, struggling mightily to overcome the downward pull of gravity. Will it succeed and escape the reach of Earth's gravitational pull? Or will it fail and fall and meet its end in a cataclysmic blast?

After further exhortations and instructions in chapter 3, Peter ends the letter with his final exhortation, which succinctly summarizes his overall message: “Therefore, beloved, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (3:17-18).

If you are not *growing* in grace, you risk falling from it.

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