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2 Peter 1:16–21, ESV

¹⁶ For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. ¹⁷ For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” ¹⁸ we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. ¹⁹ And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, ²⁰ knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. ²¹ For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Almost pseudepigraphic.

Let’s start with that word: pseudepigrapha (su də'pɪg rə fə). It means “false writings” and it is a plural word; the singular form is apocryphon (su də'pɪg rə fon). The adjective ends in “ic”; one book that is well known and is certainly not biblical is the Gospel of Peter; we would say that the Gospel of Peter is pseudepigraphic (su də'pɪg rə fic). So, pseudepigrapha (su də'pɪg rə fə) refers to a large class of books that propret to be biblical but are actually fake. Now, to be clear, there are no books in our Bible that are actually considered to be pseudepigrapha (su də'pɪg rə fə). This term is generally reserved for books that

are truly fraudulent. Interestingly, in the early church, in particular, in the generations just after the lives of the Apostles, in the second century, there were many pseudepigrapha (su də'pɪg rə fə). People were churning out books, largely claiming to be written by the Apostles. They have names like The Acts of Peter, The Preaching of Peter, the Gospel of Philip, the Book of Judas, and the Gospel of Thomas. Paul had to deal with false writings attributed to him during his lifetime. In 2nd Thessalonians, verses 1 and 2, we read: *Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, ² not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.* When he refers to a “letter seeming to be from us”, he’s talking about false teachings contained in fake letters that have been attributed to him and are being passed around. One thing about the books that are truly pseudepigraphic (su də'pɪg rə fic) is that they are, from a faith perspective, dangerous. They tend to teach things that are very unchristian, that do not reflect the teachings of Christ. Many of them fall into the category of being gnostic, in that they argue that Christians who are particularly gifted are able to obtain a state of intellectual enlightenment that lifts them up above other people, and that there is some sort of special, almost scientific knowledge that you need to obtain in order to be fully

saved. There are, by the way, many Old Testament era books that are pseudepigraphic (su də'pɪg rə fic), including the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, the Testament of Job, the Testament of Moses, the Vision of Ezra, the Apocalypse of Adam, and many more. But, as it turns out, the people who put the canon, the official Bible, together did a good job. They picked books that reflect true Jewish and Christian thought. Note that we shouldn't confuse pseudepigraphic (su də'pɪg rə fic) books with the Apocrypha, which are anonymous works, mostly written during the four centuries between the Old and the New Testament. Some Christians include the Apocrypha in their Bibles, and they are not considered fraudulent or spiritually bizarre.

What about the books of the New Testament that are not considered false, that are indeed part of the Christian canon, but are considered by some people to be pseudepigraphic (su də'pɪg rə fic). I often say that certain books of the Bible probably were not written by the people to whom they have traditionally been attributed. Of the thirteen letters of Paul in the New Testament, many scholars think he only wrote seven of them. These seven are: Galatians, 1st Corinthians, 2nd Corinthians, Romans, Philemon, Philippians, and 1st Thessalonians. Notice that I just quoted 2nd Thessalonians; it contains a remark that says that fake letters of Paul are floating around – but many people believe that 2nd Thessalonians itself

was not actually written by Paul. But the arguments that say that Paul did not write some of the letters attributed to him are not ironclad. It is a subjective decision in each case. Scholars argue that some of the letters contain very different sentence structures and vocabularies compared to most of Paul's letters, or that some of the letters focus on theological issues that are very different than those in the bulk of his letters. We don't have original copies of any of the books of the Bible. We just have copies of copies of copies. This is true with almost all ancient writings. We can only trust that they were handed down to us properly, that ancient people knew how to recognize true works from fraudulent ones.

Let's look at one critical issue – what I consider to be the only truly important consideration when deciding whether a book of the New Testament is something we should trust. Our quote from today is from 2nd Peter, a letter that virtually no one thinks Peter the Apostle actually wrote, even though the author claims to be Peter. In our quote, the author refers to the Transfiguration of Christ, something witnessed by some of the Apostles. In Matthew, it is described this way: *And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. ² And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.* Then, a bit later in the Gospel, we hear God say from a cloud: “*This*

is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” In our passage from 2nd Peter, the author is using the fact that he, Peter, witnessed the transfiguration to reinforce his legitimacy. But did Peter truly write this letter? Consider the word that he uses: “eyewitness”, in the line *“¹⁶ For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty”*. The Greek word in 2nd Peter is *epoptai*, and it means observer or spectator – and it appears nowhere else in the entire New Testament. It is actually a word that was used in Greek pagan religions to describe people who were advanced members of a Greek religious cult. Many scholars consider it totally bizarre that Peter, a Jew from Jerusalem, would have used this word – or would have even known the word.

When I was in graduate school, I was living in the beach area of southern California. Each day I drove or biked into downtown Los Angeles, which was a distance of about fifteen miles, to get to USC. I could bike faster than I could drive, which says a lot about southern Californian traffic. One day when I was biking in, I was detoured through a neighborhood because there was a major accident on the boulevard I usually took; there were several smashed cars, a few ambulances, and I don’t know how many cop cars. As I was detouring through this neighborhood I came across a church. They were having a Bible Camp for

adults. This was near the end of my graduate studies, and I was feeling a lot less pressure. So, I stopped and went in. Just as I was sitting down, a speaker stood up on the stage. He started out by describing himself as a failure. He said that he had flunked out of a seminary and had tried for over ten years to get a job at a church. He tried to be a pastor, an assistant pastor, an adult Sunday School teacher. He was willing to do any job that would allow him to teach the Word, to help others deepen their faith by more fully understanding the contents of the Bible. But no one would hire him. The best he could do, he said, was volunteer for this Bible Camp. He said all of this with humor in his voice and he generated a good round of friendly laughter. He then went on to talk about his topic for the day: 2nd Peter – the letter where our quote comes from and which is believed to have been falsely attributed to the Apostle Peter, probably to give the letter more authority – which is why the author describes the Transfiguration of Christ.

This man, whose name I never knew, said that 2nd Peter tells us that the promises of Christ are true. Jesus will indeed come again. If we are faithful, if we maintain our trust in God, we will enter the Kingdom of God forever. The letter goes on, this man said, to tell us that there are false prophets spreading lies and trying to use their authority to lead people into immoral behavior. The author is worried that the corrupt world which surrounds us will lead us away from our

faith, from the true teachings of Jesus. Finally, he said, the author of 2nd Peter tells us that one day all people, living and dead, will be judged. An entirely new universe will be created. But, he said, we must be patient and let God act when God knows it is right. The author of 2nd Peter, this adult Bible Camp teacher said, tells us that until that day happens, we are all to simply give glory to God. If we do that - and this is a very simple thing - we will be just fine.

After this man gave his talk, I went up to him. I asked him why he kept referring to Peter as “the author of the letter”, why he never actually called him Peter. Back then, I still naively thought that all of the books of the New Testament were indeed written by the people whom we traditionally thought were their authors. This man said that many believe that the letter was probably written long after the death of Peter, maybe even a hundred years after Peter died. He told me that major church leaders, dating all the way back to the year 200, and a famous theologian named Origen, did not believe that Peter wrote this letter. Some ancient Christian churches refused to put this letter in their Bible. I asked him if he thought that Peter wrote it. Then he said something to me that influenced me greatly, many years later when I retired early and went to the seminary. This man, who by the way, was about fifty years old, said that it didn’t matter. We have the Gospels to use as references. If we ever wonder whether

any writing, any person reflects the teachings of Jesus Christ, we can figure this out. Too many people, he told me, get emotional about the authenticity of the books of the Bible. Pastors and traditional biblical scholars get their backs up against the wall when confronted by secular scholars who tell them that their Bible is part fake. He said that what matters is whether a book of the Bible lifts us up, deepens our faith, helps us reflect the life of Jesus. Do we love God? Do we love all humans equally? Do we truly forgive someone who has wronged us and then walk away and allow that person to be renewed in our hearts? Do we turn to God for forgiveness when we do wrong? Do we let God judge people? Do we anticipate the coming of a new eternal world? Do we live in the Kingdom of God, accepting the presence of the Holy Spirit within us? Do we accept the freely given grace of God and pass that grace on to others, even to people who do not like us? Any book, any person who helps us do these things is the real thing. That's what matters. So, for him, 2nd Peter is as biblical as it could possibly be. Who cares if someone else wrote it and attributed to Peter? People at the time did not consider that to be fraudulent. Only modern people, because we are fixated on making sure that we get full credit for the things we do, care about this.

I told this man that I was sorry that he hadn't succeeded at getting a job as a pastor. He confided in me that he had never been a good student, that it was a

burden that God chose to place on his shoulders. He spent seven years getting his undergraduate degree, he told me, and not because he was a part time student. He kept failing courses. Only determination got him through. But when he got to the seminary, they were not that patient with him. He was forced to leave. I told him that just as we shouldn't be concerned with exactly who wrote what Book of the Bible, we shouldn't be worried about a person's official degrees. I said that he had inspired me, that for years I had been immersed in something very technical, unrelated to faith, and that his talk had reenergized my faith. He thanked me and asked if he could hug me. I said yes, of course. Then I told him that I had actually snuck into the Bible Camp without paying. He laughed. I left, got back on my bike, and rode into USC. Please pray with me.

God, we don't care if 2nd Peter is almost pseudepigraphic (su də'pɪg rə fic). We don't care if Paul wrote seven or thirteen of the Epistles of Paul. We thank you for seeing that the books of the Bible were written, for inspiring their authors. We thank you for preserving these handwritten documents and seeing that copies of them survived. We thank you for the people who chose them for the official canon, for the beautiful job they did in constructing our Bible. Most of all, we ask that you help us guide other people in their faith journey so that others read your Word - and as a result become true followers of Christ. Amen.