



A Hopeful People

November 29, 2009

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:

2 PETER 3

PRINTED TEXT:

2 PETER 3:1-13

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

—2 Peter 3:9

Opening Song

Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; the third day He arose from the dead, He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Church Universal, the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting

Opening Prayer

2 PETER 3:1-13 (NIV)

¹Dear friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both of them as reminders to stimulate you to wholesome thinking. ²I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles. ³First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. ⁴They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." ⁵But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. ⁶By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. ⁷By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. ⁸But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. ⁹The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. ¹⁰But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. ¹¹Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives ¹²as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. ¹³But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.

INTRODUCTION**A. KILLING TIME**

Have you ever considered how much of our lives are devoted to waiting? We wait for elevators. We wait for traffic lights. We wait for the next available teller. We wait for the check to come in the mail. We wait for the rain to stop. We have special facilities devoted to waiting: they are called waiting rooms.

We also have special terminologies for waiting. We refer to being in a *holding pattern*, drawn from the language of air travel. We might refer to waiting as *time out*, originally a sports term. We push this sports analogy to say we are *playing a waiting game*, as if there is a competition when it comes to delays.

One of the most telling expressions of waiting is *killing time*. This is an odd figure of speech, for time is not ordinarily understood to be subject to death or life. Perhaps a more apt way of saying this is the sister expression *wasting time*. Unproductive waiting is truly a waste of something dear.

But is there such a thing as “productive waiting”? Something more productive than, say, reading a six-month-old news magazine in the dentist’s waiting room? Today, many people fill waiting periods with chatter on cell phones. I suspect, however, that this is just a rather comfortable way to kill time, and it may have the disadvantage of wasting someone else’s time.

The writers of the Bible knew a lot about waiting. Many times in the Old Testament, their advice to a suffering people was to wait on or for the Lord (Psalm 27:14). But this is not waiting in the sense of futile time-killing. Waiting for God is an expectant waiting, a waiting full of hope (Isaiah 8:17).

The two go together. We hope, therefore we wait. We wait, consequently we hope. Hopeful waiting is not wasting time, even if we are sitting on a dock beside some bay. Today’s Scripture, more than any other place in the Bible, teaches us that waiting can be a joyous time if we are hoping for the glorious coming of the Lord.

B. LESSON BACKGROUND

A cardinal doctrine for the church is that of the second coming of Christ. This future event is sometimes called, in technical language, *the parousia*. This Greek word means “coming” or “presence”; it is used by the New Testament writers as shorthand for Christ’s return (see 1 Corinthians 15:23; 1 John 2:28).

Some references to the second coming of Christ are very dramatic, such as these words of Jesus: “For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man” (Matthew 24:27). Other references are more subtle as part of a larger discussion: “Each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him” (1 Corinthians 15:23, as part of Paul’s discussion of resurrection). The New Testament presents the second coming of Christ in the context of hope and the need for patient waiting (see Titus 2:13; James 5:7).

The first generation of Christians apparently believed that Christ would return very soon. This is why Paul taught his people to pray *Maranatha*, an Aramaic expression that means “Come, Lord!” (1 Corinthians 16:22; compare Revelation 22:20). Paul was an example of one who entertained the possibility (even the expectation) of being alive to meet the Lord when he returned (see 1 Thessalonians 4:17).

Although Jesus promised to come again, he said that he was not privy to the information regarding *when* (Mark 13:32). As time went on, the church began to understand that this return

might not occur as soon as people hoped or expected. Christians came to realize that the second coming of Jesus was delayed, although this “delay” is only from a human perspective. God knows exactly when he will act in this mighty way. Even so, the earliest church needed a way to defend itself from those who would ridicule the Christian hope of the second coming. That’s where Peter comes in.

I. HISTORY OF HOPE (2 PETER 3:1, 2)

A. REFRESHED MEMORIES (V. 1)

1. Dear friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both of them as reminders to stimulate you to wholesome thinking.

Peter understands that he can talk about the church’s past like very few others in his generation. This puts him in an important position to be able to ground his readers in the timeless truths of the faith. Peter’s readers are his *dear friends*, the cherished ones of his ministry. He does not say exactly what causes him to write a *second letter*, but both letters have a similar goal: calling his readers to remember.

When times are tough, we are apt to fall into a type of mental numbness. We may stumble from one day to the next like religious zombies, our spirits seeming to be more like the undead than the truly living. It is during such periods that we must remember the great blessings of the past and the powerful promises we have for the future.

B. CONTINUOUS MESSAGE (V. 2)

2. I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles.

This is an important verse for our understanding of the connection between the Old and New Testaments. For Peter, the *apostles* are carrying on some of the same functions as the *prophets* of old. Both groups communicate the authoritative Word of God. Both groups are messengers of

hope, promising the comfort of God for the faithful.

Just as ancient Israel faced its various crises, so in Peter’s day does the church. The message of hope is unchanged: God is in control and has not forsaken you. He hears you when you cry out (Psalm 18:6).

II. RIDICULE OF HOPE (2 PETER 3:3–7)

A. CONTEMPORARY SCOFFERS (VV. 3, 4)

3. First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires.

Mockery is an oft used way of attacking another person. While it may be physically nonviolent, heartless ridicule can crush the spirit. The church of Peter’s day is not in any position of social power or respectability. First-century Christians are able to endure their tormenters, at least in part, because of their hope that Christ will return for them. Peter understands that when the critics of the church begin to mock this core belief, they can send the believers into despair. Rather than ignore this problem, Peter confronts it head-on.

The last days for Peter is not some fuzzy future era. Those days are his own days and ours—the era of the church. Earlier, Peter had talked about “these last times” (1 Peter 1:20). John affirms that “this is the last hour” (1 John 2:18). The writer of Hebrews speaks of “these last days” (Hebrews 1:2).

A characteristic of this time is the presence of *scoffers* (compare Jude 18). There is a reason behind their mocking: they are *following their own evil desires*. In other words, they are completely irreligious, have

no respect for the sacred, and ridicule the faith of others. This mean-spirited disrespect has caused them to attack the core beliefs of Peter's Christian readers.

4. They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation."

Peter offers us two hints as to the identity of these scoffers: (1) they have a sense of the *fathers*, meaning the ancestors of past generations, and (2) they have a tradition about *creation*. We cannot be certain, but this seems to point to the Jewish background of these opponents. The Roman church of Peter's day has many Christians from a Jewish background. This common heritage makes mocking attacks by non-Christian Jews all the more painful.

The basic charge of the opponents seems very contemporary: *everything goes on as it has*. The teaching of modern atheistic materialists is similar. Those folks claim that the universe's processes can be explained by physical matter and energy interacting without reference to any outside (spiritual or supernatural) influence. These mainstream scientists seem to take pleasure in ridiculing anyone who would believe in a divine act of creation.

Yet Peter knows that belief in Christ's second coming in glory requires the expectation that everything will change radically in a cataclysmic way. To assume that things will pretty much stay the same from now on is to deny the possibility of Jesus' second coming.

B. UNINFORMED EXPERTS (VV. 5-7)

5-7, 6. But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed.

The Jewish identity of the mockers becomes clearer now, because Peter argues with their use of Scripture. He reminds them

of two momentous events: the creation of the dry *earth* from the watery void (Genesis 1:2, 9) and the flood of Noah's day (Genesis 7:17-22). In both cases, these were acts of God, accomplished simply *by God's word*. When God acts, there need be no other explanation.

7. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.

Peter goes even further to teach that the current state of the universe (*the present heavens and earth*) is sustained by the *word* of God (compare Hebrews 1:3). There is nothing necessarily permanent or eternal about the current state of the universe. The current heavens and earth will exist only until the final *judgment*. This fate of the universe results from sin, from the need to judge the *ungodly*. Their judgment will be that of *destruction*. Although Peter does not make a direct connection, he surely has the scoffing deriders of the faith in mind here.

III. FULFILLMENT OF HOPE (2 PETER 3:8-13)

A. TIMELESS GOD (VV. 8, 9)

8. But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.

Having assailed the scoffers of Christ's coming, Peter now comforts his readers by reminding them of the great promises they have. He begins by discussing the nature of God himself. Point one: God is not subject to time in the sense that we are. The God of the Bible is not "immortal" like the pagan gods. The Greeks and Romans believed all their gods had a birth or point of origin, but were not subject to death (immortal). Our God, rather, is "eternal." This means that he completely transcends time in every way.

From our perspective, this makes God infinitely patient, for he is not subject to time in a way that causes him to "wait." He

sits in control of time, including all the events of the future (compare Ecclesiastes 3:11).

9. *The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*

Point two: God always keeps his promises (compare 2 Peter 1:4). *The Lord* is most specifically the risen Christ, who will return in glory for judgment (see 2 Timothy 4:8), but there is no sharp separation here between God the Father and God the Son.

Peter offers an important doctrinal reason for the seeming delay of Christ's return: it is, ironically, because of God's love for the scoffers! In the timing of God, there is no need to rush to judgment, for this will be a judging with no appeals. It will be absolute and final. Therefore, the God who loves sinners (Romans 5:8) desires everyone to come to repentance.

B. UNEXPECTED RETURN (v. 10)

10a. *But the day of the Lord will come like a thief.*

The Lord will return with no advance alarm, no two-minute warning. He will come *like a thief* whose success depends on stealth and surprise (see 1 Thessalonians 5:2; Revelation 3:3; 16:15). For Peter, this is tied to those who need to repent. The time to repent is now, because there is no way to predict how much time remains.

10b. *The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.*

God promised Noah that he would never again destroy the earth by water (Genesis 9:11). This time *the heavens* and *earth* will be *destroyed by fire*. This is utter, complete destruction, with no recovery by simply drying out. Peter pictures this as a mighty, supernatural event as characterized by a *roar*

or a great noise. The purpose of this destruction is the same as the flood, though: to destroy the ungodly. There will be no escape for them (Revelation 6:17).

C. EXPECTANT LIVING (vv. 11–13)

11–13. *Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives*

Peter's conclusion, then, is to advise his readers how to live. Their manner of life must be governed by a desire for godliness. Peter says, "Quit messing around. You know what kind of person you *ought* to be, so go ahead and *be* that kind of person!"

12.... *as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat.*

In addition, Peter's readers are to live expectantly. This is not to be a joyous anticipation of the judgmental destruction of the world, but for what will happen after that: the renewal of creation. God will not merely burn everything up and be done with it like some sort of cosmic firebug. See the next verse.

13. *But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.*

After the destruction, God will follow up by creating *a new heaven and a new earth*. These will have no place for ungodliness. It will be the home of *righteousness*. This is a snapshot version of the marvelous picture we find in Revelation 21 and 22, where the glorious city of God is presented. As Peter's friend John portrays it, "the first heaven and the first earth had passed away" (Revelation 21:1). The ungodly will be excluded (21:8; 22:15). The scoffers of the faith will be no more, and we will be with God forever. This is our final, ultimate hope.

CONCLUSION**A. CAUTION**

For two millennia now, Christians have been exposed to theories about the second coming of Christ. Most theories agree that it will involve a general resurrection of all the dead and a final judgment of all men and women. It will be the final “day of the Lord,” where all injustice is reversed and sin and death are conquered. As to the timing and sequence of events involved in Christ’s return, there have been many competing schemes proposed.

In trying to come to grips with this important issue, we should recognize a certain tension of ideas. On the one hand, the second coming is *imminent*, meaning “could happen at any time.” It has been so for nearly 2,000 years. On the other hand, Christ might not return for another 2,000 years or more.

That second idea should cause us to be careful! Think about all the wrong guesses there have been so far to predict the date of Christ’s return. Some reading this will remember the booklet *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988*. It was wrong. But undoubtedly there are more theories yet to come. We are reasonably certain that the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ took place in AD 30. Surely, then, there will be those who predict that his second coming will be in AD 2030, just a few years away. We can already imagine the proposals of the importance of a “double millennium”!

We must realize that Christ may come this evening or not for another 10,000 years. It should not matter to us, for our future is secured by our faith in him. Our hope in the Lord is not futile.

B. EXPECTATIONS

There is an old joke that tells of a pessimist who was in a bad accident. When the police looked in his wallet for identification, they found a card that said, “In case of accident, I’m not surprised.” Many people are like this, expecting the worst.

As Christians, we should not live this way. Yes, life is hard and can be very cruel. Yes, we may have to deal with friends and relatives who ridicule us for our faith. But we have a hope that can overcome all of this pain. We look forward to our final destiny: our home in Heaven with the Lord. Christ may or may not return in our lifetimes; it doesn’t matter. In the future, “so we will be with the Lord forever” (1 Thessalonians 4:17).

WILLINGLY IGNORANT

At the Battle of Shiloh in 1862, pickets of the Union army heard the sounds of an approaching Confederate army. They sent back the alarm, but General Sherman refused to believe it. He even told one colonel, “If your men are that nervous, they should go back to Ohio!” Within half an hour thousands of Confederate soldiers were pushing their way through an unprepared federal defense. Sherman recovered, steadied his men, and fought an organized delaying action as his men retreated across the fields.

To be caught by surprise was bad enough; to ignore the warning compounded the guilt. Sherman willingly chose to ignore information that would have changed the course of that first day’s fighting. It was the worst mistake Sherman made during the war. But he became a better leader because of it. He learned from his mistake.

It is one thing to be ignorant. It is something else again to be willingly ignorant. All of us are ignorant about many things. Even the most intelligent person on earth doesn’t know everything

about everything. Even that person has gaps in his or her knowledge. But it is a rather different situation to have the means of knowing something but then choose not to know it.

Peter chastises those who are willingly ignorant of the message that God's power can create the world as well as bring judgment on it in cataclysmic disaster. God has given us all the information we need in this regard. There is *no excuse* for being willingly ignorant of these facts.

A THIEF IN THE NIGHT

Night seems to be a prime occasion for crime. The chances of being "successful" in certain types of crime improve at night because the cover of darkness allows more chances for a stealthy approach and a hidden getaway. In one of the cities where my wife and I once lived, we were burglarized twice—both times at night.

A recent news report noted that robberies on Friday and Saturday nights in Washington, D.C., can average five per hour. Sometimes the crime involves no more than the unseen approach of a weaponless robber who grabs a purse and runs. Nighttime also favors the criminal because the darkness makes it harder for the victim to see clearly and identify the criminal if he is caught.

The stealth aspect of the word picture *a thief in the night* is an easily formed image. This image transfers quite readily from the first century to the twenty-first. It is an image of complete surprise. It is how the Bible describes Jesus' second coming. But the hidden-identity aspect doesn't work if we try to draw a parallel between the methods of thieves and those of Jesus. When Jesus returns, he will make no attempt to conceal his identity—quite the opposite! This calls for discernment (Matthew 24:23, 24).

Those who are watchful will welcome Jesus gladly at his return; the unrepentant, who do not expect him, will react in terror (Revelation 6:15–17). So we watch in hopeful expectation.

LET'S TALK IT OVER

- 1. What things stir you up in your faith as you remember them?**

- 2. What methods do modern scoffers use to ridicule Christian faith? How do Christians unwittingly give the scoffers more ammunition to do this? How can we do better in this regard?**

- 3. What responses can Christians offer to those who question the second coming of Christ?**

- 4. How should the knowledge of a coming day of judgment affect how you live your life today?**

5. What's the best way to prepare for a thief who comes in the night? What does this say about how we should expect the return of Jesus?

LET'S TALK IT OVER

1. What things stir you up in your faith as you remember them?

This question can be answered on at least two levels: on the basis of how God has worked in our lives individually and on the basis of how God is shown to work in the pages of Scripture. In the first area, some will recall sermons or lessons that challenged them to a deeper walk with the Lord. In the second area, some find their faith gaining strength as they recall the promise of God to never leave or forsake His people (Hebrews 13:5).

2. What methods do modern scoffers use to ridicule Christian faith? How do Christians unwittingly give the scoffers more ammunition to do this? How can we do better in this regard?

Sometimes the ridicule is seen subtly, as in the unbeliever who rolls his eyes when someone makes a statement of faith. At other times, the ridicule is overt, as in the boisterous voice, the poisonous pen, or the arrogant TV show that taunts Christianity openly.

The portrayal of Christians as ignorant and/or mean-spirited is another method. The fact that some Christians *really are* ignorant and/or mean-spirited doesn't help our cause! Christians must be careful to be neither of those. The cure to ignorance is more Bible study as well as interaction with Christian intellectuals (for example, see www.reasons.org). Meditating on the example of Jesus can melt away an attitude of mean-spiritedness.

3. What responses can Christians offer to those who question the second coming of Christ?

The tendency for many Christians is to answer the questions or attacks with what the skeptic sees as circular reasoning. "The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it" may be adequate for the Christian, but for the unbeliever that statement assumes what must first be proved.

Knowing how to use evidence that is internal and external to the Bible is important. Bible colleges teach courses to equip people to do just that. But the use of precise, logical arguments may not be the best way to respond at first. The first response is simply to be Christian. Kindness can knock down walls that the best logical arguments cannot dent.

At the right time, the Christian can ask questions of the scoffer to get him or her to think. Find a point of agreement, then build on that. You could say, "Assuming that all things are as they have been from the beginning, doesn't this point to the idea that there is a master hand guiding the creation?" Keep in mind that those who don't believe in Christ's first coming certainly won't believe in His second! In those cases, you will have to talk about the first coming first.

4. How should the knowledge of a coming day of judgment affect how you live your life today?

Many Christians voice their belief that Christ is returning. But the way they live their lives contradicts what they say they believe. Removing that contradiction thus should be a priority.

The first thing we must do in this regard is to make sure that we do not neglect “the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is” since this command is specifically connected to seeing “the day [of judgment] approaching” (Hebrews 10:25). Our witness to nonbelievers that judgment is coming won’t have much impact if they see in us an apathetic attitude in this regard. The quality and quantity of our Christian works, also an important witness, find their launching point in our interaction with fellow believers.

5. What’s the best way to prepare for a thief who comes in the night? What does this say about how we should expect the return of Jesus?

There are two extremes to avoid. On the one hand, some people spend a lot of time fretting about the possibility of a burglary. So they go overboard with all the latest anti-crime electronic gadgets that carry unproven claims of effectiveness. On the other hand, some think that although thieves do come, one will not come to their place. So they take no precautions at all.

PRAYER

Eternal God, we are befuddled by the constraints of time. When we doubt, may you both forgive and strengthen us. May we live with joy at the prospect of the return of your Son. May our waiting for that event be an expectant, hopeful waiting. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.
