

# **Let Earth Receive Her King: PEACE**

*2 Peter 3:8-15*

1. Promise and hope.

2. Already/not yet.

3. Living while waiting.

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## **Let Earth Receive Her King<sup>1</sup>: Peace** ***2 Peter 3:8-15***

The Scripture passage from 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter that Andrew Hilyard read just a few minutes ago might seem like a strange text choice for this week of Advent devoted to peace. This is not a Christmas text that evokes images of snow-covered, Christmas-lit houses and fireplaces, or a Gospel image of shepherds watching over sheep, or even Jesus's Sermon on the Mount. Instead we get an image of the day of the Lord arriving like a thief. What comes to mind with that phrase usually brings images that cause people to feel fear, not joy—and for sure, *not* peace. But the theme for this Week in Advent *is* peace.

I think that sometimes we can get so caught up in the glow of the season and the warm fuzzies, that we forget that, even though we *are* celebrating Christ coming to earth as a baby in Bethlehem, at the very same time we *are also* looking ahead to Christ's eventual return – his second Advent. We are living in this in-between time, between the Advents, looking back at the kingdom that came with the arrival of Christ, and forward to the kingdom that is still yet to come.

Last summer, we had a sermon series in Peter's letters – 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter, and some of you may remember that I shared how I recalled, when I became a Christian in the 1970s, I had read Hal Lindsey's book on end-times predictions called *The Late Great Planet Earth*. It was a very popular book, but I was a young Christian and didn't know better that it was actually a lot of speculation and false teaching. Still, it got a lot of people worked up. I also remember seeing cheesy Christian end-times movies, like *A Thief in the Night* that frightened an entire generations of Christians into thinking they wouldn't get "raptured." I've heard from friends who said that, when they were young, they'd come home from school, and if one or both of their parents were not at home, they were afraid they'd been left behind. And speaking of "Left Behind," In the 1990s, there was an entire marketing scheme of fictional books, merchandise, and movies, all based on a couple of obscure, Scriptures.

Nowadays, I've seen more than a few posts on social media of people who look at what's going on in the world today and wonder if now is the time for Jesus to return. Peter uses some pretty explicit terms to describe it: he says the very elements will melt, and it will happen with a crackling *roar*. For us today, with the resolve of rogue nations and dictators like those in North Korea and Iran building a nuclear arsenal, it's much easier for *us* to envision the end than it was for Peter's readers.

But when it comes to the Second Coming, there are two dangers: one is to get caught up in watching signs and picking dates. That's been an enticement that

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people have been prone to want to waste time on during different eras throughout the Church's history. If you look back, you'll see that usually around the turn of a century, and especially the turn of a millennia, there is a surge of interest in end-times speculations. That also happens during significant cataclysmic events like world wars and pandemics.

In the fifth century, Augustine predicted that the world would end 7,000 years after it was created, and he used the generations listed in Genesis as the timeline. So on that prediction, Christopher Columbus thought that his discoveries of the so-called "new world" were part of God's plan for the end times, which by the calculations, in Columbus' time meant that there were only 155 years left in the history of this world. Of course, that was over 500 years ago...so....do the math.

So the first problem with focusing on end-times stuff is one extreme of being obsessed with timelines and predictions, wasting time trying to assign events to end-times scenarios. After Jesus' resurrection from the dead and before he ascended into heaven, he himself said in Acts 1:7, "Only the Father knows the times and dates set by his own authority," which implies that there are some things about Jesus' return that even Jesus doesn't know. So what makes us think we will figure it out?

The second problem is the other extreme: to presume that since it's taking so long, it must mean that Jesus isn't *ever* coming back at all. Peter first wrote this letter sometime in the 60s AD, and believe it or not, for the first-century Christians that Peter wrote this letter to, *they* were shocked that Jesus hadn't returned yet, and they were beginning to wonder if it would happen at all. Like we are today, *they* are in the in-between time too, but it was *more* surprising for them, because they expected Christ's return to come more quickly. In fact, they aren't sure why it hasn't happened yet, and in their confusion they begin to question what is causing the delay. They wonder, what are they supposed to do while they wait? Peter gives them an answer: *live in peace*. So let's see what that means.

First, please see that this is a passage of...

## **1. Promise and hope.**

*Usually when we read this passage we feel fear, but it is not meant to be read that way. This is a text of promise and hope.*

The people Peter's writing to are beginning to be concerned about whether Christ is going to return at all, so he reminds them of something they should already know. He says, "do not forget," and this means a couple of things. He already used this word "forget" earlier when he was talking about the false teachers who had deliberately "forgotten" truths – so that they could justify their sin. But the word doesn't just mean choosing to forget something; it also means to forget something through negligence; to just stop thinking about it. So whether they are choosing to forget, or they have been negligent and lazy in clinging to truth, Peter is reminding them: the slowness of God is *not* because God has forgotten his promise, or because

the promise of Christ's return isn't trustworthy. The truth that they should remember is this: the delay in Christ's second Advent is because God is patient with humankind, because God waits for all of humanity to turn toward God in repentance. The delay is not because God has forgotten; he isn't negligent. It is out of mercy! Because God knows that if Jesus came back right now, there would be some of us who would be destined to be forever separated from God in a place called Hell. God wants as many people as possible to receive new life *now* and eternal life in heaven *later*. So God is patient.

Then, did you catch that statement in verse 8 that said, to God time is different than it is to us? That's an important one. "Peter is arguing here that God's perception of time is vastly different from our own. For us, this present age of waiting seems (so very) long—so long, in fact, that we find ourselves tempted to doubt that Jesus will ever return at all. Peter helps us by showing the contrast between our temporal existence (here on earth) and God's eternal nature.<sup>2</sup> God is the creator of everything, including time. So he exists outside of and independent of creation and of time. But, he can step into and out of time, at any time. In essence, he reminds us that our perspective on time is very limited and is different than God's. And that reminds us that, though sometimes our struggles in this life seem endless, they are not. God sees the bigger picture – he sees an even longer view than this life.

There's the story of an economist who read this passage was amazed and talked to God about it. "Lord, is it true that a thousand years for us is like one minute to you?"

The Lord said yes.

The economist said, "Then a million dollars to us must be like one penny to you."

The Lord said, "Well, yes."

The economist said, "Will you give me one of those pennies?"

The Lord said, "All right, I will. Just wait here a minute."

God has a sense of humor! But he's not making a joke here; his delayed return is intentional and purposeful; he is patient, waiting for as many of us as possible to turn to him. His patience is not negligence; his patience is mercy and kindness.

Then, the images in verse 10 of fire often make us think of judgment, but in *this* context it has more to do with *being refined*. Refining fires are mentioned in other scriptures also, to show that our lives can be in a purifying process: just as precious metals must be refined (with fire) in order to be purified, so must creation be subjected to a perfecting and purifying process. That includes your life and mine. Just as chaff (what is bad) is burned up, while the wheat (what is good) remains, so too shall the world be.

*This passage is a hopeful promise that the painful and sinful places of the world will be removed, while what is good remains.*

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<sup>2</sup> David R. Helm, [1 & 2 Peter and Jude: Sharing Christ's Sufferings](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 254–255.

Verse 10 sometimes gets mistakenly interpreted as the destruction of the world (since the NIV even uses the word “destroyed,” which may not be the best translation). But the real point of this verse is when it talks about being “laid bare;” *this verse is actually about a great disclosure*. There will be a judgment, and that means the hidden will be revealed: *this is about purification and redemption, not destruction*.

I want you to see, too, that this is about the...

## **2. Already/not yet.**

*The heart of this text is the already/not-yet kingdom of God.*

Christ brought the kingdom of God to earth through the incarnation – when he was made flesh. On the day that Christ was born, the “day of the Lord” was finally realized in many ways: the blind saw, freedom was declared for the captive, the lame walked, lepers were healed, justice, peace, hope, and love were preached, and we could see first-hand what the Day of the Lord, or the Kingdom of God, looked like.

But the kingdom of God is not yet fully actualized until Christ’s return; though the incarnation was *the beginning* of the coming of the kingdom, it is not the end: there is still sin and disorder in our world, we still see many in need of healing from disease, we still see high rates of slavery and wrongful imprisonment globally, we still see acts of injustice, war, and hatred.

Because we live between the Advents, we are Advent people, and that means that, while we live in this great in-between time, we are both celebrating the birth of Christ *while* awaiting his final return. And since we do not know the time of Christ’s return, *we must live as people who are always ready*.

We see a great example of the already/not-yet kingdom in the story of Stephen in Acts chapters 6 and 7. It’s a longer passage, but I encourage you to read it today. Stephen has been telling people about Jesus, and the Jewish mob grab him and take him out to stone him to death. The Scriptures tell us that Saul – who would later convert to Christianity and renamed Paul – Saul had stirred the Jews up and was even holding their coats for them while they stoned Stephen.

And as he is being stoned, Stephen declares that he sees heaven open and the Son of Man (Jesus) standing at the right hand of God the Father. This moment clearly illustrates the inbreaking of the kingdom of God actualizing in front of them even while they wait—yet the people refuse to look at this vision of the kingdom of God, and Stephen is still stoned.

In response to the people’s refusal, Stephen prays a prayer of forgiveness for them. He is demonstrating what it looks like to live in God’s Kingdom. Many theologians and biblical scholars think this moment plants the seed that the Lord will later harvest into Paul’s conversion. It is here at this event that Paul’s heart begins to turn toward Christ.

In between the Advents, we can become facilitators of the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God. So we're instructed that we must be...

### **3. *Living while waiting.***

Peter instructs the early church on how to live as people waiting for Christ's return. While Peter doesn't go into great detail, he does mention living at peace, which is an important idea for us today, as we live while we wait.

We can do this because we know that Jesus is the Prince of Peace. There is an overarching message throughout Scripture about God's desire to bring peace (shalom), which is a *huge* concept in Scripture. Shalom (peace) doesn't mean that things are calm and there's no stress or conflicts; it means wholeness, and completeness to God's people in our relationship with him and in our very lives, and, ultimately, to the world.

With the advent of Christ's first arrival, the message of Christmas declares peace on earth. And we see in the Gospels that, as an adult, Jesus also preached peace during his time on earth. So much so, that in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus tells us how to live in the in-between, Jesus calls the peacemakers *blessed*.

If the message of the *first* coming is peace, then so is the message of the second coming: we know that Christ's return will make all things right and whole. In the meantime, we live at peace.

So the message for those living in the kingdom of God *now*—in the in-between—is *also* a message of peace.

This declaration Peter makes about peace is joined with the idea of being blameless or having purity – which lines it up with the biblical concept of holiness. It is God's desire for us to be holy – to be like Christ, and not have to keep struggling with sin, but to be able to live freely for Christ. So if *holiness* has victory over sin and death, then it is possible to live a blameless life.

Peter is saying something about the response of the people of God while we wait: the people of God are to work toward living blameless lives, which will lead to peace.

*Righteousness* (also known as justice, or doing the right things for the right reasons) is also part of peace. Righteousness, or right-living, means we will seek justice for others. And loving God and loving others is at the heart of living in peace.

Peace is not about sitting still, being calm, and avoiding conflict. It is about *actively* living for Christ, loving God and loving others. When Jesus tells us to be at peace, he's saying get busy living for the Kingdom! So realize that this is not a message about passivity—as peace can sometimes be mistaken for—but rather a lesson about patience.

If God is patient with God's people, then we are also called to be patient with people, and to long with God for the redemption of humanity. There is an active element to

peace: in verse 14 it says to “make every effort” – that indicates that it is something to work toward, even if we may not always accomplish it perfectly.

So we realize that...

#### 4. The ***Kingdom is now.***

*As people who still await the return of Christ, we are to live as kingdom people now.* We look ahead in hope to Christ’s return, but we do not wait passively. We partner with the work of the Holy Spirit to live as citizens of the kingdom of God now.

- 1) This could look like Stephen: being persecuted for standing up in ways that God calls us to, and/or speaking words of radical *forgiveness*.
- 2) It will look like *patience* toward others, with the patience of God in our desire that all people – everyone – will learn to know that they are loved, and it is our desire that no one would die without knowing Christ.
- 3) It looks like *holiness*: learning to align our entire lives with the Holy Spirit, seeking goodness in our homes, neighborhoods, cities, and world.
- 4) It looks like *peace*: finding contentment and wholeness in our own lives, in our homes, and in our communities.
  - a. In *our lives* it looks like this: we bring our holistic selves before the Lord—physical health, mental health, spiritual health.
  - b. In *our homes* it looks like this: we will work to break cycles of violence and abuse, helping our children, nieces, nephews, and others to see and know their belovedness.
  - c. In *our communities* it will look like this: asking “what is best for my neighbor?” and finding ways that God is at work, and joining that work by creating systems that break cycles of poverty, caring for creation, feeding the hungry, advocating for the “widow and orphan” (and anyone who doesn’t have a voice), and loving the “unlovable.”

Christ is going to return. It’s a promise. We don’t know when, but we know it will happen. Until then, we are to live as citizens of the coming kingdom of God *now*. We aren’t called to passively wait for his return but to actively live as though the kingdom has already been fulfilled by living holy and peaceful lives in this world.

December is a natural time of year to do that. People tend to want to find ways to share out of their wealth when the season is right—but the people of God are called to live this way *every day*. This calling is not about a season or time of year when things “feel” right—it is about a way of being, all day, every day. This is the way we are called to live—with an eye toward the kingdom yet to come in its fullness. We are to live as though that kingdom is fully here now, embracing others and loving well so that, when Christ returns, he might find us blameless and living at peace.

*Prayer*

All the way back in the days of Moses, when Aaron and his sons were beginning their work in the temple, Moses told them to bless the people with peace:

**“The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.” (Numbers 6:24-26, niv)**