

West Valley Church
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07/12/20

On This Rock Part Thirteen *2 Peter 3, pt. 1*

I can recall when I became a Christian in the 70s reading Hal Lindsey's book of false teachings on end-times predictions called *The Late Great Planet Earth*. I remember seeing cheesy Christian end-times movies, like *A Thief in the Night* that apparently frightened an entire generations of Christians into thinking they'd be left behind. And speaking of "Left Behind," that was an entire industry in the 90s of books, merch, and movies based on a couple of obscure, questionable 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.

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 people have been prone to waste time on at different times throughout the Church's history.

In the fifth century, Augustine predicted that the world would end 7,000 years after it was created, and counted the generations listed in Genesis as the timeline. So on that prediction, Christopher Columbus thought that his discoveries 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 history. Of course, that was over 500 years ago.

So the first problem is the extreme of being obsessed with timelines and predictions, wasting time trying to assign events to end-times scenarios. 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. Believe it or not, *that* was what Peter was dealing with in the first century with the false teachers.

Today we are going to begin looking at chapter three of Second Peter, as part of our series, "On This Rock; Peter and the Church". Let me read the first 13 verses to you, and then we'll see what was going on:

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

Above all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens came into being and the earth was formed out of water and by water. By

these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.

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

But 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 done in it will be laid bare.

Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives 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. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.”
(2 Peter 3:1-13, niv)

We’re in the home stretch of Peter’s two letters, but let’s not race into the barn just yet – as usual, there’s a lot here and we need to take a little time to make sure we don’t miss the main points.

The first thing we need to see is the...

1. Scoffers (vs. 1-7)

You might remember that a couple weeks ago I said that, while Peter is warning against false teachers, he doesn’t go into detail about *what* the false teachers were teaching. So we can’t say specifically what the false teaching was – if it was epicureanism, or Gnosticism, or something else. Peter focused more instead on the character of the false teachers, because there are bad behaviors that sooner or later are evident in their actions. They were living incredibly sinful lives, and whatever their false teaching was, it was excusing that sin. But that doesn’t mean that Peter doesn’t deal with the content of their teaching, and in this chapter quickly refutes the biggest issue: scoffing at the return of Christ.

The term “scoffer” is a derogatory term for someone who despises and ignores religion and morality, and mocks the faith in general. These people did this with both their teaching *and* their actions. They would publicly and smugly say, “Where is this “coming” that Jesus promised?”, as if the three decades that had passed since Jesus ascended into heaven were plenty long enough to question whether the promise was ever going to happen at all!

Listen, if people scoffed at the promise after only three decades, should we be surprised that there are scoffers today, almost two thousand years later? Today, we hear it when people say, “If God really is a God of love, how can he let this pandemic happen?” If you think about it, it’s really just a way of saying, “Jesus hasn’t come back yet, he hasn’t rescued us, he doesn’t care. He’s ‘forgotten about us.’”

But this isn't a new attitude; this has been the standard rhetoric of the enemies of God's people who cynically scoff at God. This same sentiment is found in Psalm 42 (3, 10), Psalm 79 (10), Joel (2:17), and Micah (7:10) among others. "Where is your God?" As if to smugly say, "This God that you people foolishly put your faith in doesn't exist, and if he does, he doesn't care."

Peter's scoffers say, "The world and the universe has been unchanged from the beginning. The only thing we can count on is that nothing has changed."

Peter reminds them that Jesus predicted that this was going to happen and that believers shouldn't be surprised when it does (Matthew 7:15, 24:5, 10-11, 24; Mark 13:22). In fact, those who sound false statements are themselves a sign that we are in the birth pains of a long, historic event that will take us to the end.

Peter responds by reminding his readers that the scoffers are wrong and they have forgotten the truth; we do not live in a stable, closed universe; creation has changed cataclysmically more than once. Of course Peter knew nothing of black holes and burned out stars and big bangs, but he did know enough to remind them that creation shifted when the flood occurred, and it occurred to bring judgment on the scoffers of *that* era. Peter reminds them that the same thing will happen again, but not with water; with fire (we'll come back to that).

But the second argument of the scoffers was worse than even the first; they were saying that, since Christ hadn't come back yet, that meant that the Savior was a...

2. Slacker (vs. 8-9)

Peter quotes the false teachers as saying that Jesus is "slow in keeping his promises." The word "slow" that he quotes them as using actually means that God has "slacked off," he's "disinterested," and he's deleterious; he's lazy and he is procrastinating. That might describe some high school and college students, but it doesn't hold water when it comes to Jesus. Peter emphatically states that there is indeed a...

3. Second Coming (vs. 10)

Peter doesn't mince any words when reminding them that the Second Coming will indeed take place. He reminds his readers and us that the Old Testament spoke clearly of the first destruction – the flood – and speaks clearly of the next one: by fire. Some scholars say that this isn't a literal fire, because fire is always associated with judgment and purification, and others say it is a physical description. We can be sure that *however* it happens, it most definitely WILL involve judgment and purification. But 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 easier for us today to envision the end than it was for Peter's readers.

There was a pastor friend of mine – Pastor Ed Wallace – who has passed away, but he served in World War Two and was on the crew of one of the US Navy ships that served as

government guinea pigs as they witnessed the testing of the atomic bomb on the Enewetak Atoll. He said that they were told to shut their eyes, and place their hands or arms over their faces. He said that after the blast was detonated, there was blinding light – so bright that he could see right through his skin and the bones in his hands were like looking at an x-ray. What Peter describes is *more* fiery than *that*. So whether Peter is being literal or using extreme hyperbole, the point is the same: Jesus WILL return, and it's going to be devastating for those who don't know Christ. And it will be so thorough that the end result will be a renewed or restored heaven and earth. But Peter isn't intending to give a precise geological or ecological explanation; instead he is giving an incredibly thorough theological explanation, which is as real and as certain as any other explanation.

Okay, so I think we've gained some insight into these scoffers and their accusations of a slacker savior that are so wrong, and that the reality is there WILL be a Second Coming of Christ.

But all that begs the question...

4. So what? (vs. 11-13)

What does all this really mean to you and me and the world we live in – what difference does this make?

Whether you witness the Second Coming or not, the truth is that one day God *will* break into time and space again. When Peter talks about “the Day of the Lord,” there's a kind of double intention; Peter implies that the Day of the Lord has already begun since Christ came, died, and rose again: the Kingdom of God already has arrived. But he also means that it is a reality that just hasn't happened yet. Theologians like to call it “the now and the not yet.” It's real now, and it will be consummated at the end.

By all of that, Peter means that if God did it before with Christ's first advent, and will do it again at his return, then God will also break into *every* life when we die. Your life is going to be interrupted at death and you will face a cataclysmic judgment. But: God longs to break into people's lives through the love and grace of Christ; that people will put their faith in Christ so that death won't be the judgment that awaits them, but rather *life*. In other words, there *will* be a second coming in *every* life – either when a person accepts Christ and puts their faith and life in him, or in judgment after death.

But here's the cool thing: the delay in Christ's return doesn't show that he is *lazy* – it shows he is *loving*! The reason Jesus didn't come sooner is because he wants to give every single person every single opportunity to be saved by coming to faith in Christ. So even if God *did* set a certain number of days, we all know that God dwells in and deals with eternity. So one day for him could mean a thousand years for us. It's not the days and dates that matter; it's the interruption that counts.

It is literally because Jesus loves people that he hasn't returned yet, because he knows good and well that once he comes back, there is no other opportunity.

I for one am very glad that God waited! If God had decided to pull up the weeds years ago, I would have been in the weed bundle. All of us are objects of God's grace.

That's great news for you: if you are watching this and you don't know Christ, the meter is running on your life; you still have time to accept God's love for you in Christ. It may be that he hasn't returned is because of *you*; he loves you so much that he would make the whole world wait so you don't miss out, and so that you don't have to face judgment. Why are you waiting?

Or, if you are like me and you've already accepted Christ, then this means something else for us:

Everything in this life is temporary. You might get upset about people these days wanting to tear down statues, but let me tell you, *every* monument to man will be dissolved in the heat of Christ's return. The only thing that is NOT temporary is people.

That's why, for the first century Christians, eschatology dictated ethics. An understanding of Christ's return results in holy living. Therefore, living in radical obedience to the Lord brings the only lasting dividend. Over and over again, Peter has been talking about living holy lives. Everything in our lives; our jobs, our homes, our neighborhoods – all of these are merely opportunities to serve the Lord for the sake of others. Since you know the time is short, make the most of the time you have: make EVERYTHING about Jesus, and don't waste any time. We're not on borrowed time; we are on *mercy* time – and that makes it even more urgent; we don't know when it will end. That means live fully for Jesus and do everything you can to introduce people to him. Jesus hasn't come back yet because your neighbor doesn't know him; your family member, your coworker or teammate or school friend.

In fact, Peter indicates that we not only should be looking forward to that new heaven and earth, we can actually help it arrive sooner. This isn't a new idea; it had long been a part of Jewish thought that if Jews would repent, the Messiah would come sooner. And Jesus himself said:

“And the Good News about the Kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, so that all nations will hear it, *and then, finally, the end will come.*”
(Matthew 24:14, tlb, *italics added*)

It's mercy time; don't strain the mercy of God. Make the most of it. Accept Jesus and introduce others to him.

Pray