



WHEN GOD SEEMS LATE

Pastor Al Detter II Peter 3:1-10 English Standard Version
5:30, 9:30 & 11:00am Grace Church March 1-2, 2008

I have my wife's permission to talk about this. That's very important, you know. You don't last too long in the preaching ministry if you talk about your wife without her permission. My wife, Marie, tends to be late.

When we were dating, I didn't notice it so much. But almost from the get-go after marriage, she's tended to be a tad late in getting ready to go places. And she tends to be a tad later in coming back home than when she said.

We've had our go-rounds about this, but since this isn't a sermon about improving your marriage, here's the connecting point with this story. Marie is like Jesus in that it seems like Jesus is a tad late in coming back as well. No one in former centuries would have ever guessed that the return of Jesus Christ wouldn't have happened by now. And that's the issue Peter comes to in chapter 3 of his little letter called II Peter.

Do you remember the issues Peter addressed so far?

***Issue #1—How do you grow in your faith?—I Peter 1:1-11**

***Issue #2—How did the Scriptures get here?—I Peter 1:12-22**

***Issue #3—What are false teachers in the church like?—I Peter 2:1-22**

Now we come to **Issue #4—Why hasn't Jesus come back yet?—II Peter 3:1-10**. In Peter's day, everyone thought that Jesus was coming back before many in the early church died. Now Peter is writing this letter over 30 years after the ascension of Christ and he's telling his readers that even he is going to die before the return of Christ (I Pet. 1:14-15). And here we are, nearly 2000 years later and incredibly, still no return of Christ.

I grew up in the church and some of my earliest memories are pastors and evangelists preaching on the 2nd coming. Most Christians in the 1960's thought Jesus would have returned by now. A generation earlier, with the rise of Hitler and the Jewish holocaust, many Christians were convinced that Hitler was the antichrist and that the return of Christ would happen in that era.

Our youth Pastor Jason Pauli, his wife Diane, Marie, and I went on a pastors' retreat earlier this week. Clerks gave me senior discounts without asking. Kind of bugged me, actually. But I never thought I'd live to be this old without seeing the return of Christ. Sometimes you have to wonder, "What's going on? Is Jesus ever going to return?"

Americans in general believe in the 2nd coming of Christ. A poll by the Associated Press (1997) says that 24% of Americans expect to be alive at Christ's return. In a poll by Newsweek magazine, 52% of all Americans believe that Jesus will return in this millennium. So let's see where Peter's heads with this in I Peter 3:1-10.

The main point Peter makes in this section is—Jesus isn't going to break His promise about returning to earth. Don't mistake what appears to be a delay as a change in plans! And don't let anyone tell you otherwise!

Peter's readers were familiar with the subject of the 2nd coming of Christ. They'd been taught about it by true teachers in the church. But sometimes we tend to forget the important things of the faith and we need to have our memories refreshed. So in verse 1, Peter talks about stirring up their minds concerning the 2nd coming of Christ.

(Fortunately, Peter senses that his readers haven't been corrupted by the false teachers when he says that these believers have "sincere minds {eilikrine dianoian}". Their minds haven't been tainted by the teaching of the false teachers and their sinful lifestyles.)

As Peter reminds believers about the return of Christ, he gives them 4 strong reasons to believe that Jesus is coming again.

I. The predictions of the 2nd coming haven't been rescinded (I Pet. 3:2).

In verse 2, Peter tells his readers to go back to the prophecies of the Old Testament and to the prophecies of Christ and the apostles. He tells the church to "remember the predictions".

Peter made the assumption that his readers knew the prophecies about the 2nd coming. I'd like to make that assumption about you, too. I hope you know the Old Testament teachings about the coming of Christ. And the teaching of Jesus Himself. And the teaching of the apostles. These are teachings we need to learn and live by as Christians.

(Prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Micah, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi all prophesy the coming of the Lord to rule the earth {the book of Psalms is also full of 2nd coming prophecies!}). The Old Testament prophets often use the term—"the day of the Lord" to refer to the coming of Messiah and the final judgment. As we'll see in verse 10, Peter picks up that term as he describes part of that day.

The "day of the Lord" is a special phrase in the Old Testament referring to the time at the end of the world when Christ returns to earth and the world is destroyed by God in judgment. It's not really a single 24-hour day at all. It's a period of time during which these things happen.

In the New Testament, you find Jesus prophesying about the end times and His 2nd coming (Mt. 24, Acts 1). You also find apostles like Peter, Paul, and John dealing explicitly with the return of Christ (I Thes. 4:13-18) and the final judgments (II Thes. 2:1-12; especially the book of the Revelation). These are all teachings we need to know and believe. They're foundational to our faith.

Never once are we given the slightest doubt that these prophecies won't happen. Nowhere does the Bible rescind them. If the end-time prophecies have changed, we're all in big trouble. If the end of the world doesn't culminate in the 2nd coming of Christ, our future is bleak at best and the Word of God is a lie. It's lost its moral authority about all spiritual matters and the commandments become a joke.

As Peter teaches about the 2nd coming of Christ in chapter 3, he calls his readers "beloved friends" 4 times (vss. 1, 8, 14, 17). So I say to you—beloved friends, the prophetic clock is still ticking! Nothing has changed.

Peter now addresses the reason he has to talk about the 2nd coming—the scoffers. Perhaps they were the false teachers in chapter 2. Maybe there were some pagan unbelievers around them saying how incredibly stupid it was to believe that Jesus would come back to earth out of heaven. So Peter counters the ridicule of the scoffers with reason #2 for believing in the 2nd coming of Christ.

II. Scoffers deliberately disregard the evidence for Christ's return (II Peter 3:3-7).

Beloved friends, as Peter develops this reason we can't get any more relevant to what's going on in our day. In verse 3, Peter says that when it comes to the subject of the return of Christ, there's something "foremost in importance" that we should know—scoffers (empaiktai) will show up in the last days. So let's define some terms.

The 1st term is "scoffers". Scoffers are mockers. Scoffers have existed since Peter to this very day. Here's "the skinny" on scoffers. They make light of the return of Christ. They undermine key teachings in the Bible with arguments that seem plausible. And they paint people who believe the Bible to be a little lame mentally.

The 2nd term is “the last days”. Interesting phrase. The last days in the Bible (Acts 2:17; II Tim. 3:1ff; Heb. 1:2; Jas. 5:3; Jude 18) refer to the period of time from the 1st coming of Messiah to His 2nd coming including the final judgment of the earth. The apostles said they were in the last days in the 1st century. They also saw the last days as some-thing future. The signs of the last days would intensify as the return of Christ nears. By the way, we’re now 2000 years into the last days and the way things are going, I can’t imagine things going for hundreds more years!

Peter tells us why scoffers mock in verse 3. They love their sinful desires (epithumias). If they truly believed in the 2nd coming, they’d have to deal with their sin. And that’s the last thing they want to do. So when they mock the promise of Christ’s coming, they’re also betting that judgment for sin won’t come either. And that gives them their out for continuing on in their sinful ways.

Here’s the teaching of scoffers—all things continue as they were from creation, verse 4. They argue that the world is ordered by natural processes. It’s a stable, unchanging, closed system. God doesn’t intervene in the affairs of this world by miracles. So they say, “Where’s the promise of His coming? It’s not going to happen because things like that don’t happen in the real world.”

Does anything like this sound remotely familiar today? It’s the teaching of our age in many educational institutions. The world is run by natural laws. It’s a closed system. Miracles don’t fit the system. People may mean well if they believe and teach that. But it’s actually the spirit of scoffing.

I want you to see Peter’s response in verses 5 through 7.

In verse 5, Peter says that scoffers choose to disregard (thelontas—wish or will not to believe) an important fact—the world was created by a special act of God. Peter says that the “heavens existed long ago”. He doesn’t tell us how long they existed prior to the creation of the earth.

Reflecting the teaching from Genesis 1:2-10, Peter then tells us that God gave a verbal command and the earth was formed (cf. Heb. 11:3) out of water and by water. I find it interesting that even today, 70% of the earth is covered by water.

The Bible isn’t a science book. But neither is the Bible in conflict with science. I have no clue how the earth was formed out of water by the word of God, but I believe it to my core. And I would expect that science would see a definite correlation between the forming of the earth and water.

This is what Peter wants us to see. Scoffers don’t believe in biblical creation. They “overlook” that “fact” in order to dismiss all dealings of God with humanity after creation. So they try to make the biblical account of creation look stupid. But Peter says that the correct view of origins is that God, by a special act, created the earth.

In verse 6, Peter moves to the flood. He says, “Not only did God use water to create the earth, He used water to destroy the earth”—that is, the inhabitants on the face of the ancient world. The flood was another special act of God, this time an act of judgment. But guess what? Scoffers also disregard the flood.

What do we have today? Theologians and archeologists and scientists saying that there wasn’t a universal flood. They ignore the intervention of God for a world run by natural laws. So they deem it either a myth or a localized flood. And to extent that they hold the position that God doesn’t intervene in the affairs of the world and that the people who hold this view are silly, to that extent is the spirit of a scoffer.

Peter keeps building his case against skepticism. Look at verse 7. Peter says, “By the same word, the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up (tethesaurismenoi—being stored up like a treasure) for fire, being kept (teroumenoi—guarded or held) until the day of judgment.” The word spoken by God to create the earth out of water is the same powerful word that’s holding the present earth and the ungodly for a fiery destruction. (The destruction of the ungodly does not mean that they will be annihilated. In the Bible, the destruction of the lost means that they will spend eternity away from the presence of God in a place of eternal torment called hell.)

Peter's argument is simply this. The biblical revelation about creation is the foundation for believing in the judgment of God. The same power that created the world will end it. Yet the scoffer, using the scientific method, disregards biblical creation and thinks it folly. And in doing so he laughs at the notion of judgment.

(The teaching that Peter wants us to believe as actual and historical is that the world was created by God's command, that it was judged by God for ungodliness, and that it will be judged again for ungodliness. This time the world will be destroyed by fire instead of by water because of God's promise never to again destroy the world by water—Genesis 9:11. It's a sealed fate.)

Ungodliness is very serious business to God. Scoffers don't want to believe the biblical accounts about these things because they don't want to believe that God will judge their ungodly ways. So they ridicule the teaching of the Bible and those who believe it. Once more I say, does any of this stuff sound familiar?

I really need to say this. There are lots of good people who have sincere questions about the origins of the universe. There are many who've been taught and who teach something other than biblical creation. My hope is that all born again Christians would believe what the Bible teaches about creation and the supernatural interventions of God in our world.

But a person who isn't there yet and who's really seeking after God is not a scoffer. A scoffer is someone in rebellion to God who ridicules the facts of the Bible in order to dodge his or her moral accountability to God.

Now on to Peter's 3rd reason to believe in Christ's 2nd coming:

III. God's patience is the most important factor concerning the timing of Christ's return (II Pet. 3:8-9).

Peter turns to his 2nd "fact" in this passage. The 1st fact was how God created the earth in verse 5. The 2nd fact is in verse 8—how God reckons time. His clock is different from our clock. Here and in Psalm 90:4 it says that 1 day in God's time is like 1000 years to us and 1000 years to God is like 1 day to us. Einstein wasn't the 1st person to discover relativity.

Time is vastly different to God. What seems so long to us is but minutes to the God of eternity. When we hold God to our clock, we feel impatient. How could God wait 2000 years to send Christ back to earth? But it's not the same kind of 2000 years to God!

Then Peter says something so wonderful! It's not God's time that drives the 2nd coming of Christ anyway. It's His patience, verse 9. God is incredibly patient with sinners (Rom. 2:4; II Pet. 3:15) to the point that He looks slow (*bradunei*—hesitate, linger, delay) in fulfilling His promise. He's not. God isn't counting years; He's counting how many people are coming to repentance. He's counting how many will escape judgment day. So He waits.

Beloved friends, God wants everyone to repent. He doesn't want (*me boulomenos*) anyone to go to hell (Ezek. 18:23; I Tim. 2:4). So on our clock, we become impatient as we see the years multiply. We're not good at waiting. God doesn't even look at the clock. He's giving more time for people to come to Him.

God is so incredible. If we could see the ungodliness He sees in just one 24 hour period all over the world, I'm sure we'd say, "OK Jesus, enough. Get down there and end this thing right now." But God waits, while the sins of humanity multiply, wanting the number of saved to multiply as well.

Verse 9 talks about all coming to repentance. It's true that Jesus died for the whole world and the whole world could potentially be saved. That's how potent the sacrifice of Jesus was. But God knows and so did the apostles and so do we that not everyone will be saved. So let me give you my take on this.

You have to go to Revelation to put this together. The Apostle John gets a glimpse into the last days. He writes about people being from every tribe and tongue and people and nation (Rev. 5:9; 7:9), standing before the throne and Christ because of their salvation. The patience of God is about the gospel going to the entire world until someone from every people group in the world believes. And then Christ will come.

There's something very obvious to me here. God's patience is connected with the mission of the church—to reach lost people, to reach people heading for destruction, to do all we can to get the word out not just in Erie, but to the ends of the earth. People can be forgiven of their sins. They don't have to face the judgment of God! That's the good news of the gospel and the major mission of the church. We all have relatives and friends that need to be rescued. God is giving them more time to find Him and for us to be part of that process.

So whenever you think, "Look how long it's been since Christ has been gone. How many more years can it be till He comes back?", don't let it be a cause of doubt for you. Remind yourself that God doesn't operate on earthly time. God is waiting for more people to be delivered from the coming catastrophe.

Peter talks about 1 more reason to believe in the return of Christ:

IV. Judgment day is an unavoidable reality (II Pet. 3:10).

Look at verse 10. Peter doesn't say that the day of the Lord might come. He says, "It will come." God's patience has an ending point. When God's patience is over, Jesus will come like a thief. That's consistent with the teaching of Jesus (Mt. 24:42-44) and of Paul (I Thes. 5:2) about the 2nd coming of Christ. Christ will come suddenly and by surprise.

Then Peter says that the day of the Lord will climax with the destruction of the heavens and earth. He gives us no time indicators between the coming of Christ and that judgment. But it's to that judgment that Peter now turns. In language somewhat vague to us, he delineates the extent of the destruction of the heavens and earth with 3 descriptions.

1st, Peter says that the heavens will pass away with a roar. I believe in the "big bang". And here's where it's taught in the Bible. The big bang has nothing to do with the origin of the universe. The big bang has everything to do with the end of the universe when, with the loudest noise any human has ever heard, the heavens will explode into oblivion.

2nd, Peter talks about the destruction of the elements (stoicheia). He's talking about the elemental substances of the earth, the materials that compose the world upon which we live. Peter says the elements will catch fire and melt away. The magnitude of something like this happening was completely unthinkable in the history of the world until the last century when we discovered the destructive nature of nuclear fission.

Finally, Peter talks about the earth and all the works on it being exposed (heurethesetai). (Some Greek manuscripts use a word meaning "to consume by fire {katakaesetai}"). So instead of being exposed, it will be burned. Our more recent Bible versions go with the 1st word—"to be exposed or laid bare.") The sense I get is that when God's judgment comes, all the works of humanity, although wonderful in our sight, will be nothing compared to the works of God. The best we have to offer will be shown to be deficient compared to His. What's more, all the works of humanity will be destroyed.

Think of it—every skyscraper, every piece of art, every piece of jewelry, every collector car, every antique, every mansion, every precious metal—everything we deem important will not survive the inferno. Beloved friends, this is the future reality of planet Earth. It's all headed towards one final conflagration.

I realize that it's not popular to talk about the judgment of God these days. But it's a very biblical message we need to proclaim. The nature of salvation isn't just about having our sins forgiven. It's about the reality that terrible judgment awaits the unforgiven. Salvation is all about God delivering us from the final judgment and hell!

Conclusion

This is phenomenal teaching from Peter. He says that the prophecies of the Bible will come to pass concerning the return of Christ. He says that people won't take the coming of Christ and the judgment seriously because they love to live in opposition to the rules of God. He says that God is patient concerning the coming of Christ and doesn't want anyone to go through the Day of Judgment. And he says that when it comes, the day of the Lord will be the complete end of the world as we now know it.

Peter puts the finishing touches on this teaching in the rest of chapter 3 and next weekend, so will I. But in the meantime, I want to challenge you with 4 things.

- 1) Learn as much as you can about the coming of Christ and believe it as totally true.**
- 2) Don't let the spirit of a scoffer capture you. Don't dismiss the teachings of the Bible about origins, supernaturalism, and the end of the world on the basis of this world's knowledge and morality. That would be a huge mistake.**
- 3) Join in on the grand rescue with God. During the time of God's patience, let's do all we can to help people escape the coming judgment of God, just like Noah did (cf. 1 Pet. 3:20).**
- 4) Don't let the reality of the terrible end of the world scare you. There's nothing to be frightened about. The saved, the delivered, the repentant won't be here.**

Earlier I told you that we need to be sensitive to God's patience. While He waits, we need to pray for people who need to be rescued from the coming judgment. We need to be sharing our faith. Perhaps there's someone you're concerned about. If Jesus would come today, they wouldn't be safe from the judgment to come. You have a burden for that person. You want God to reach them, perhaps through you.

I'm inviting you to put their name in your Bible. Pray for that person often and trust God to use you to somehow reach them. God, in His patience, is waiting for them before Christ returns. Be encouraged.