

2 Peter 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] 2 Peter chapter 3. This is now the second letter that I am writing to you, beloved. In both of them I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Saviour through your apostles, knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation. For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly. But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfil his promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn? But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures. You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people, and lose your own stability, but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

In 2 Peter chapter 3, the final chapter of the epistle, Peter underlines the importance of the coming of Christ in judgment. This is his second letter to the people to whom he is writing, and he wants to stir them up by way of reminder. The earliest church's expectation of Christ's imminent return has long been a source of theological discomfort and apologetic embarrassment for many Christians. The apparent failure of New Testament prophecy throws the reliability of Christ himself as a prophet into serious question. Christ and the apostles who bore witness to him declared firmly that he was coming soon. Yet here we are, almost 2,000 years later. Passages such as 2 Peter chapter 3 seem to accentuate the problem. Peter is writing to Christians, reminding them of the prophetic witness of Christ and the apostles against the background of disbelieving and scoffing false teachers.

Even at the time of the epistle, people are starting to ridicule or reject the prophetic testimony of Christ and the apostles. Early in the letter, Peter declared his intent to write to remind his readers of what had been promised, knowing that he was going to die soon. He assured his readers that in their testimony concerning the coming of Jesus Christ, they weren't following cunningly devised fables. He presents what he witnessed with James and John on the Mount of Transfiguration as evidence that the word concerning Christ's coming was certain. Christ's kingly glory was a reality and just waited to be revealed at the appropriate time. Yet Jesus had declared a period of time within which his prophecies would be fulfilled, and everyone could see that the time was swiftly running out. In addition to saying that he was coming soon and that the time was near, Jesus had given more specific details concerning the time within which the prophecies would be fulfilled, and he seemed to be on an increasingly tight schedule. He had assured his hearers that his promise coming would occur before they had finished going through the towns of Israel, in Matthew chapter 10 verse 23. He had promised that it would occur while some of the apostolic witnesses were still alive, in Matthew chapter 16 verse 28. That generation would not pass away until all of the Olivet Discourse prophecy would come to pass, in Matthew chapter 24 verse 34. It was this that represented the biggest challenge for the readers of 2 Peter. The apostles and the witnesses of Christ, who are described as the fathers in verse 4, were dying, and Peter by his own admission was near death.

But the awaited coming of Jesus still had not materialised. And at this point it might look as if he was going to be a no-show. This throws everything into question. Against the scoffing of the false teachers, Peter reminds his readers of the example of the flood. He also challenges some of his contemporaries' understanding of apocalyptic timetables. The Lord, Peter wants us to appreciate, never finds himself on a tight schedule. He is the Lord of the ages, and he is never racing against the clock. The vast scale of a millennium, a thousand years, doesn't weaken his memory of his promise, nor do the exigencies and time pressures of a day leave him in danger of overshooting his deadline.

[5 : 42] He preserved the old creation prior to the flood, a world symbolically formed by holding the chaos of the waters at bay, and then destroyed that in the flood. And now he's holding the present order, and he can bring that down too. Peter goes on to explain that the Lord's apparent slackness concerning his promised return is not a manifestation of his failure to keep his scheduled appointments, as if Christ struggled with punctuality. No, it is his mercy and patience that leads him to tarry.

Christ's apparent delay is his gift of time to his people, enabling them to prepare themselves for his return. Peter returns to a familiar image from Christ's own teaching in the Gospels, where Christ compares his return to the coming of a thief. Peter's teaching in this passage, with its references to the flood and an unexpected thief, strongly recalls Jesus' own teaching in the Olivet Discourse, in Matthew chapter 24, verses 27 to 51. The day of the Lord is a day for which many will be unprepared. Jesus warns both of a feverish climate of misguided predictions, and excited expectations, and of the cynicism of those who dismiss his return entirely, pointing to the fact that things continue as they have always done.

When the day of the Lord does arrive, it will have dramatic and devastating effect. The heavens will pass away and be dissolved. The elements will melt with fervent heat, the elements here being the same term as Paul uses in Galatians 4, and the earth and the works within it will be exposed. Considering the coming dissolution of the present world order, Peter charges his readers to be people distinguished by their holy conduct and godliness in verse 11, rather than by the insobriety and licentiousness that marks the false teachers.

Their conduct is to be different from others, revealing the fact that they are people driven by hope in a promise concerning a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells, both anticipating it and praying for its soon arrival. Stirring as Peter's message to his readers may seem when read in its original context. I am sure that many Christians who have followed the train of his argument will find themselves disheartened by it. Peter doubled down on the promises of Jesus, and yet they still fail to come to pass. If the reliability of Jesus as a teacher depends so much upon the accuracy of his prophetic predictions, where does that leave us? Unless, perhaps, all of these things did come to pass. In addressing this question, it is important to pay attention to two particular things. The first thing to do is to attend to the specifics of the New Testament teaching concerning the last things. In the Olivet Discourse and the chapter that precedes it, the last days are focused upon the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. There is a judgment on the near horizon, and it will particularly relate to the Jewish people and their city Jerusalem.

I believe that the book of Revelation also most immediately refers to these events. In the Olivet Discourse, there are several references and allusions to the prophecies of Daniel, which concern the end of days of the Jewish people, during which time the Messiah will come, followed by destruction and the tearing up of the world order. We see this in chapter 9 verses 24 to 27.

[8 : 51] The decisive apocalyptic events there, associated with the work of the Messiah in bringing an end to sacrifice and offering, are the destruction of the city and the sanctuary. These events, while focusing upon the Jewish people in Jerusalem, are of cosmic and epochal significance. In Matthew chapter 23, verses 35 to 36, Jesus speaks of all the righteous blood that's been shed on the earth, from the blood of Abel to Zechariah, coming upon the Jews of his generation. The destruction of Jerusalem and its temple would mark the conclusion and the judgment of an entire era of human history, and the collapse of an entire world order. The second thing to attend to is that the dramatic language of conflagration of the heavens and earth that Peter employs here, resembles Old Testament imagery of epochal and cosmic judgment. We find such language in Isaiah chapter 13, 34, 51 and 65.

It's also like the language used by the author of Hebrews, who speaks of God currently shaking and removing certain temporary realities of the heavens and the earth, so that the enduring thing should remain. In chapter 12, verses 26 to 29. This does not refer to the annihilation of the physical order, but to the destruction of the divine world order. For Peter, the destruction of the temple would have closed a window of time in which the old covenant and the new covenant orders overlapped. It changes the way that God relates to humanity in general. With the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70, that route of access to God is completely closed off. It leaves nothing but judgment for those who continue to rely upon it. This is the melting of the firmament and the elements. The temple was the model of heaven. It was the means by which you had access to God. And that has been destroyed. It's removed a protective cover that the temple afforded the people of the land and their works, revealing their works, which are then burned up. With the decisive destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, the entire theopolitical firmament is brought crashing down to the ground. After the destruction of the temple, the status of Israel changed. There was no longer a nation with a special means of access to

God. All the nations ordered relative to it. The rule of the Messiah, the King of Israel, has been declared, and all of the nations are now redefined relative to him. The kingdoms of this earth belong to our Lord, and all rulers are but stewards, responsible to administer justice and submission to him until his kingdom is consummated. After AD 70, Israel no longer enjoyed the unique status of a holy nation, and no sacred polity has taken its place. All humanity and every ruler is now called to prepare themselves for the consummation of the kingdom of the Christ, for which the church serves as an anticipatory sign and witness. After AD 70, a new heavens and a new earth is established.

God deals with people on different terms. A world order structured around the temple in Jerusalem, marked for condemnation in Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection, is finally to be torn down, and a new world order structured around the new Jerusalem and the coming kingdom, where there is no longer Jew nor Gentile, is established in its place. This is one that will eventually grow to fill the entire earth, as Daniel foretold. 2 Peter, like so much of the New Testament, is written in the shadow of the imminent day of the Lord, anticipating the near coming of Christ in judgment. Considering the imminent coming of their Lord in judgment, the recipients of the letter are charged to ensure that, when the time comes, they will be found holy, without impurity, moral spot or blemish, and at peace with God and each other. The day of the Lord will be a day when the true character of things and persons are exposed, and we are called to live our lives as those readied for a great unveiling. As Peter declares in verse 10, the earth and the works that are done in it will be exposed. The patience of the

Lord, his delay in bringing judgment upon the world, is an act of salvation. It ensures that all of his people can be gathered in. Peter has already spoken of this patience in verse 9. God is patient towards us. He does not wish any to perish, but that all should repent. God's intent in delay is salvation.

[13 : 04] Peter claims that his teaching on this point is also supported by the witness of Paul's writings, by the wisdom given to him by the Lord. Perhaps he has in mind passages of Paul's letters, such as Romans chapter 2, verses 3 to 4. Do you suppose, O man, you who judge those who practice such things, and yet do them yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? Peter's concern in this passage is helping the people to whom he is writing to understand the approaching day of the Lord. However, much of the significance of this passage is found in material that is mostly tangential to Peter's driving point here, in his remarks concerning Paul. The first thing we ought to notice is the way that he speaks of Paul as our beloved brother.

Who is the R here? Richard Borkham argues that it is very unlikely to mean my. The most likely possibility is that the R refers to Peter's fellow apostles. The we, in verses 16 to 18 of chapter 1, referred to the very core apostles, Peter, James and John. As James had died by that time, one could perhaps even make a case that the we refers to Peter and John. Paul is the beloved brother and fellow witness of these apostles, presumably two of the few remaining apostles who had not yet died. Paul is the beloved brother and fellow witness of these apostles. In Galatians chapter 2, Peter and Paul had a great confrontation in Antioch. But here, at the end of his life, Peter expresses his union with Paul and appeals to him as a fellow witness. Peter was the one entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised, and Paul with the gospel to the uncircumcised.

Paul presents the fact of this mutual recognition in Galatians, and here Peter also expresses such a recognition of Paul. The second thing that we ought to notice is that Paul's works seem to have been widely known to Peter. The leaders and teachers of the early church recognised and supported each other's ministries, seeing themselves as standing in unity in their presentation of the gospel.

Paul's letters clearly were shared widely in the early church, beyond the churches and persons to whom they were first directly addressed. The early church was tightly networked with lots of movement around. Paul's employment of letters was not accidental. It was a practice with much to commend it over the writing of mere abstract theological treatises. As letters, these formed personal bonds and exchanges between churches, especially as churches were expected to pass them on to other churches. As the letters were passed around, servants of the churches would travel around with them, sharing news, encouragement, gifts and ministry, strengthening the unity of the church. Also, as the direct recipients of the letters shared them, they were ministering their particular gifts to others and presenting themselves as examples from which other Christians and churches could learn.

By this point, it is not unlikely that collections of Paul's letters may have already been circulating among churches. The third and the most startling thing here, however, is the way that Peter speaks of Paul's writings. He talks of how they are difficult to understand and how many twist them to their own destruction as they do the other scriptures. The implication is that Peter considered Paul's writings to be alongside the scriptures of the Old Testament. He mentions the wisdom given to Paul. This expression is similar to that that Paul uses to refer to the ministry with which he was commissioned and for which he was equipped in places such as Romans 12 verse 3, Romans chapter 15 verses 15 to 17, and Galatians chapter 2 verses 7 to 9, where he describes the grace given to him as something that was recognised by Peter and the other apostles. Peter remarks on the fact that there are things in Paul's letters that are hard to understand and that these elements have been twisted by the uninstructed and unstable to their own destruction. This is most likely referring primarily not to followers of false teachers, but to false teachers themselves. Theirs is a culpable lack of instruction and ignorance. They have not desired to grow in their understanding of the truth, so have not properly instructed themselves in the faith. The condemned persons are also unstable. They are not rooted in a love for the truth, in moral integrity and consistency of life, and as a result they are unstable persons.

[17 : 23] Their interpretation is not guided by a careful commitment to discovering the truth, but by ungoverned passions, by their desire to justify their sins, by the anger of those whose minds are not at peace, by the rebellion of those who do not want to submit to the clear instruction of the Lord, and by the sectarianism of those who wish merely to win arguments against others.

It is crucial that we recognise that, for Peter, interpretation is a moral activity as much as an intellectual one. People who have not mastered their spirits, subdued their vices, learned to live at peace with their neighbour, developed a love of the truth, people whose minds are not guarded by the peace of Christ, and who are in rebellion against God, will not think clearly. Rather, they will constantly twist the truth to their own destruction. Indeed, the cleverer they are, the better they will be at twisting the truth, and rationalising their sins. There is a spirit of lawlessness and hatred for the truth at work in the world, and the recipients of Peter's epistle must be on guard against it.

They have been warned in advance, so that they might be firmly grounded and secure, in contrast to the instability of the false teachers and their followers. The alternative to the instability of the false teachers and their followers, and the way that Peter's recipients will be prepared for the coming day that he has described, is by growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, it is in looking to him that they will put down the roots that will hold them firm and secure when all others are overthrown. Ultimately, all of the glory belongs to him. A question to consider, what are some of the ways in which moral and spiritual instability can compound people's errors and misunderstanding of the truth?