

“The Day of the Lord Will Come Like a Thief”

The Sixth in a Series of Sermons on 2 Peter

Texts: 2 Peter 3:1-13; Psalm 90:1-17

Peter has lambasted those false teachers and prophets who were secretly introducing destructive heresies into the churches, and then leading people away from Christ so as to indulge the lusts of the flesh. As Peter has told his readers, the chief heresy being taught by these false teachers and prophets is the denial of our Lord’s bodily return at the end of the age, to judge the world, raise the dead, and to make all things new. If, as the false teachers were contending, Jesus is not going to return, then there will be no final judgment. And if there is no final judgment, then, as the false teachers were apparently arguing, there is no reason to restrain the lusts of the flesh. But Peter was with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. The Apostle was given a glimpse of Jesus’s glory which will be fully manifest when Jesus returns at the end of the age. Peter was also present with Jesus on the Mount of Olives (the Olivet Discourse) on that fateful night when Jesus spoke of his second coming as sudden—like a thief, who comes at an hour when you least expect him. The denial of something so clearly taught by Jesus and his apostles lies at the basis for the great irony spelled out by Peter in his second epistle—that these men who despise authority, and who are enslaved to the passions of the flesh, will find themselves facing the very same Savior on the day of judgment whose coming they deny, and in a final judgment in which they do not believe.

We return this morning to our series on 2 Peter, and we have reached the third chapter of this brief epistle wherein both the tone and content of Peter’s epistle changes dramatically. In the previous chapter, while describing the methods and consequences of the false teachers and prophets then plaguing the churches just as Jesus warned that they would, Peter’s temper flashes as he speaks of these men as blots and blemishes (v. 13), who behave like wild animals (v. 12). All the while denying the master who bought them (2:1), Peter says the false teachers speak blasphemies against both God and the “glories” because they are ignorant of the power of the angelic beings which they are blaspheming. These men live to gratify the lusts of the flesh, and they are constantly on the prowl for gullible Christians whom they may deceive and then exploit. Peter says of them, better to have *“never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them”* (2:21).

In chapter 3, Peter speaks much differently than in the previous chapter, and affectionately addresses his readers and hearers as “beloved.” If God’s judgment is reserved for false teachers, then those believers in Jesus Christ who must face these people and deal with them, need to be reminded of the certainty of the Lord’s return, and the inevitable fate these false teachers and prophets will face. Christ is both the Lord of his church and the protector and vindicator of his people. As Peter will tell us, the doctrine of the second coming of Jesus Christ grounds the Christian life (and Christian ethics) in a final judgment. This will be that climatic moment at the end of human history, in which all wrongs will be righted, and when at long last God’s people receive their heavenly inheritance and then enter their eternal Sabbath rest. There is indeed coming a day when all things will be made new, and old wrongs set right.

Unlike the false prophets and teachers who spread myths and lies, Peter has first-hand knowledge of Jesus’ promise that he will return a second time. Peter has also heard Jesus’ explanation as to how his return was foretold in the prophetic word (Scripture) made more certain. The Apostle knows that these prophecies were fulfilled in the doing and dying of Jesus. Since Peter has seen Jesus’ glory, and is a witness to Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven, then the Apostle knows that Jesus will

keep his promise to return to usher in a new heaven and earth in which righteousness dwells—that is, where every hint, trace, and stain of human sin will be removed.

As we turn to our text this morning (2 Peter 3:1-13), not only is Peter’s tone much different, the Apostle addresses head on the doctrine of Jesus’ second advent, which the false teachers were denying. In verse 1 Peter writes, *“this is now the second letter that I am writing to you, beloved.”* In the Greek text, “beloved” stands at the front of the sentence to indicate a sharp contrast with what has gone before. And just as he did in his previous letter (1 Peter 1:13—*“Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ”*) so here too the Apostle seeks to jostle his readers and awaken them from their spiritual lethargy so that they take action. *“In both of them I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder.”* Then, as now, many Christians seek to avoid conflict—which is generally a good thing, except in cases like this one, where great spiritual danger is present and Christians foolishly act with apathy or indifference in the face of a serious threat.

Specifically, Peter wants to stir up in his reader’s confidence in the prophetic word (the Scriptures). He exhorts them in verse 2, *“that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles.”* The holy prophets are Israel’s prophets, while “the apostles” are a reference to the twelve specifically chosen by Jesus to be witnesses of his messianic ministry from the beginning. These are the same two sources of authority mentioned in 2 Peter 1:16-21, when the Apostle spoke of the God-given nature and the authority of Scripture in contrast to the mythology of the false teachers.¹ It is the apostles who have brought the commandment (i.e., the collective teaching) of Jesus to the churches through their preaching.² Peter now pits the false words and false prophecies of those doing harm to God’s people against the sure and certain word of God (Scripture). In effect, Peter is saying “wake up.” These false teachers have lulled you to sleep with their deceptive ways and heresies. Wake up and judge what they are teaching in the light of that prophetic word breathed forth by the Holy Spirit!

In verses 3-4, Peter specifically identifies the reason why his readers and hearers should awaken from their slumber and recall the words of Scripture. *“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.’”* The phrase “last days” (*eschatōn tōn hēmerōn*) is an important one—pointing ahead to the coming of Israel’s Messiah and the completion of his work—and appears in both the Old and New Testaments. There are a number of texts in the prophets where the phrase is used. Isaiah (Isa 2:2), Jeremiah (Jer 23:20; 25:19; 37:24), Ezekiel (38:16); Daniel (2:28), Hosea (3:5), Micah (Mic 4:1).

In Acts 2:17, Peter himself identifies the events of Pentecost (the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit) as ushering in “the last days.” In 2 Timothy 3:1, Paul describes the unpleasant characteristics of the last days, warning Timothy, *“but understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the*

¹ Davids, The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude, Logos, on 3:2

² Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, Logos on 3:2.

appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people.” The author of Hebrews (Heb 1:2), and the two brothers of our Lord, James the Just (Jas 5:3) and Jude (18) use the same phrase.

The phrase “last days” as used by the New Testament writers, is an important time indicator signifying that when Jesus died on the cross as a payment for sin (and defeated Satan), and then rose victoriously from the grave, a new (and final) era in redemptive history (the “last days”) was thereby ushered in.³ It is an age in which the Spirit of God indwells all believers. What awaits God’s people is not a millennial golden age upon the earth (as in either “pre” or “post” millennialism), but the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment, and the removal of every hint, trace, and stain of sin through the creation of a new heaven and earth— Peter’s focus is upon the latter, the restoration of all things. Once Jesus has come, died for sin, and is then raised from the dead, the last days began. We have been in the last days, the final period of redemptive history, ever since. Since this teaching was so prominent in Israel’s prophets, and in the teaching and preaching of Jesus himself, this explains why Peter can exhort his readers and hearers to simply recall what they have already been taught. To summarize Peter, “we are in the last days, and since the last days have come, so will all kinds of false teachers, false prophets, and scoffers.”

Jesus was very clear that this will be the case. In Matthew 24:11, Jesus told the twelve (Peter among them, of course), “*And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray.*” As recounted in Acts 20:29-30, Paul told the Ephesian elders upon his departure from them, “*I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert.*” So too, John, wrote in his first epistle, “*Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us*” (1 John 2:18–19).

When Peter warns his readers to be alert to the fact that scoffers will come, he is echoing a prominent theme found throughout apostolic teaching—the true gospel will be counterfeited, opposed, and even denied by false teachers until Jesus returns. According to Peter, scoffers have already come and following their own desires (as described throughout the second chapter), they scoff at the apostolic doctrine of our Lord’s return as Peter now warns. If there is no final judgment, then there is no reason to restrain the lusts of the flesh. Such men will not only deny the doctrine that Jesus will return, they will mock those who cling to it. They will use this heresy to deceive others and take advantage of them.

We should point out that the redemptive-historical circumstances of Peter’s day lends itself to this error. The disciples had been preaching about Jesus’ death, resurrection, and second coming from the very beginning, yet Jesus still had not returned—in fact, a whole generation had nearly gone by since Jesus’ ascension. Peter describes the scoffers as mocking “*where is the promise of his coming?*” The apostles had been preaching that Jesus was coming back, but it hadn’t happened—yet. The scoffers pounced on this delay in our Lord’s *parousia* (his appearing) and were then able to argue that since Jesus is not coming back, this means there will be no final judgment. So why not indulge the flesh?

Then, cynically, the false teachers picked up the notion that the patriarchs of the Old Testament may have

³ Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, Logos on 3:3.

been looking for a Messiah, but they never taught that the world would end.⁴ So the false teachers would mock, “*for ever since the fathers [the Patriarchs] fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.*” The assumption here is that given the way God has created all things, they are destined to go on forever and ever—a view, which, by the way fits with Aristotle’s notion that matter was eternal. The apostles were preaching that Jesus was returning at any moment—he hadn’t yet. So, the false teachers argued, the world will go on and on as the Old Testament patriarchs supposedly taught.

Yet this is not what Jesus and the apostles taught, and knowing that his own life is soon coming to an end, Peter seeks to stir up his readers and hearers not to let such a distortion of the Scriptures go unchallenged. The scoffers must be quickly exposed as the false teachers they were. To make this case, Peter returns in verses 5-6 to two pivotal events in redemptive history which he raised earlier (chapter 2)—the creation and the flood. “*For they [the false teachers] 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.*” The false teachers deliberately overlook the fact that God made the world from nothing and pronounced it as good, before he destroyed the world that was with the great flood.

When Peter appealed to the flood story earlier, he did so to make the point that God’s judgments are such that the same element which God used to judge the world (the waters of the flood) is the very same element which God used to deliver his people (Noah and his family) from his wrath and from their enemies.⁵ Like the false teachers of our own day and age, the scoffers mentioned by Peter are very selective in their use of Scripture. They forget that the same God who made the world, used an element of that world (water) to bring about his altogether righteous judgment. The false teachers are not being honest when they claim the patriarchs for support of view that the earth will not come to an end, and they are being deceptive when they fail to mention that the same God who created the world, used an element of the world (water) to bring about swift and final judgment.

Not only do they deliberately forget about Noah and the flood, they forget that the same all-powerful word of judgment spoken by God to bring about the flood can also bring about the destruction of the heaven and earth. As Peter puts it in verse 7, “*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.*” God has already shown his people that he can bring about complete destruction of the earth and its inhabitants with but a word, and there is coming a day when he will do so again. Only this time, he will destroy the current heaven and earth by fire, with his wrath being kept (restrained) until the day of his choosing. In the beginning, God created the world by his creative word (Genesis 1). At some point, when humanity’s sin grew great, he destroyed the world with a flood. And he is going to destroy it yet again by fire, before ushering a new heaven and earth.

In Genesis 8:20-22, God promised Noah that he would never destroy the world again by such a flood (the promise typified in the rainbow). But YHWH never said anything to Noah about destroying the earth by fire and then recreating it! Israel’s prophets are filled with imagery of fire consuming God’s enemies. For example, in Isaiah 66:15–16, we read, “*for behold, the LORD will come in fire, and his chariots like*

⁴ Davids, The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude, Logos, on 3:4; Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, Logos on 3:4.; contra Bauckham, Jude, 2 Peter, 290 ff.

⁵ Beale and Carson, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament, 1058.

the whirlwind, to render his anger in fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. For by fire will the LORD enter into judgment, and by his sword, with all flesh; and those slain by the LORD shall be many.” In Zephaniah 1:18, the prophet declares, “*neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them on the day of the wrath of the LORD. In the fire of his jealousy, all the earth shall be consumed; for a full and sudden end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.*” And then we read in Malachi 4:1, “*For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.*” The fire of God’s wrath will purge all traces of sin from the earth.

Notice too that in all of these biblical prophetic texts, it is the specifically evil-doers who are consumed by fire, not the earth itself. But by Peter’s day, a number of extra-biblical writings (including the Sibylline Oracles) associated the fire of final judgment with the earth’s physical destruction, a point with which Peter agrees. The logic of Peter’s argument is that if Jesus is returning, then there will be a final judgment.⁶ And that final judgment must be such that the cosmos itself will be cleansed from every hint and trace of human sin. The great and terrifying day of the Lord—that day of judgment and wrath foretold by the prophets—will also be that day when the present heaven and earth are destroyed by fire, and a new heaven and earth are created to take their place.

It ought to be noted that the destruction of the present heaven and earth by fire occurs when Jesus returns—as Peter clearly teaches in these verses. Here, we have what amounts to a huge problem for our premillennial friends. Folks who are premillennial believe that Jesus returns to establish his kingdom on the earth for a thousand years, and only once that one thousand years has run its course, do we have the final judgment, followed by the creation of a new heaven and earth. Yet, as we will see in what follows, Peter clearly assigns the judgment and the creation of a new heaven and earth to the time of our Lord’s return (the day of the Lord), not a thousand years after Christ’s return, after Jesus has, supposedly, been reigning over the earth from Jerusalem. For Peter, the destruction of the heaven and earth, and the creation of a new heavens and earth are directly tied to our Lord’s return (his second advent).

In verse 8, Peter again speaks affectionately to his readers. “*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.*” Peter’s words here resound with a loud echo from Psalm 90:4 (part of our Old Testament lesson). Moses had written, “*for a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night.*” It is important for all Christians longing for the Lord’s return to consider the fact that the eternal purposes of God cannot be compared to the short lives of humans who are born, live their lives, and then, because of the curse, die and return to dust. God’s time is his time, not ours. He does not count the days and hours as do we. Because the Lord has not yet returned does not mean that he *will* not.

Peter points out that there is an important reason for this delay in the Lord’s return. In verse 9, he writes, “*the Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.*” The delay in the Lord’s return is deliberate and includes this present age in which the gospel goes out to the ends of the earth. As Jesus once told Peter in Matthew 24:14, one of the signs of the end of the age is that “*this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.*” God will fulfill his promise, and Jesus will return when the gospel has been preached to all nations, and when, as Paul says in Romans 11, the fullness of the Gentiles has come in and the salvation

⁶ Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, Logos on 3:7.

of all Israel finally comes to pass. A pronounced tension is found in the New Testament between those signs which precede the coming of the Lord, and the fact that the events associated with the Lord's return can begin to unfold at any time. This tension between signs and suddenness both prevents us from setting dates for the Lord's return, as well as keeps us from being idle until he does.

I would be remiss, if I did not briefly address the argument raised by many from 2 Peter 3:9, to the effect that God desires (or even intends) the salvation of all—supposedly refuting the Reformed notion of particular redemption—that God's saving intentions are directed to specific individuals (the elect), and not to the entire world generically. That God desires "*that all should reach repentance*" cannot mean that God decrees the salvation of all, since not all will be saved. Some make a distinction between God's decreed will and his desired will—God decrees the salvation of the elect, but desires the salvation of all.⁷ But this would mean that God has two wills which conflict with one another. The best view is to take the verse as written—God desires that all repent—all of those whom Peter has urged to awaken, and who have been taken in by the false teachers. This fits with the context of Peter's letter, and assumes that in this verse Peter is not addressing matters of God's larger salvific purposes, or the nature of his decree. Rather, Peter is merely telling his readers that God wants all of them to repent, and not to perish, and that they do not allow themselves to be taken in by the false teachers.⁸

In verse 10, Peter's words—"*the day of the Lord will come like a thief*"—virtually echo those of Jesus in Matthew 24:42–44. "*Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.*" Paul speaks the same way in 1 Thessalonians 5:2, "*for you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.*" Not only will the Lord return when people least expect it (like a thief), but his second advent disrupts the entire cosmos, bring about the final consummation of all things.

Peter says that when Jesus comes back, "*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.*" This present heaven and earth will be completely destroyed by fire—down to the very *stoicheia* (the elements), for the purpose of exposing and removing human sin. This was the purpose of the flood. This is also the purpose for the destruction of the present heaven and earth by fire. But in the midst of judgment, God brings the salvation of his people.

From this declaration (as well as from what follows) we learn that either this present heaven and earth will be so completely purged from every hint and trace of human sin, it will be *as though* the earth was new (i.e., completely and totally purified), or else God will completely and totally destroy the existing heaven and earth (down to its basic elements) and replace them. It is not quite clear which Peter means, but either way this occurs when Jesus returns and has the effect of purifying both heaven and earth, so that every trace of human sin will be gone. As Peter says in verses 11–13. "*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*

0. Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, Logos on 3:9.

⁸ Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, Logos on 3:9.

for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.”

Once again, Peter pushes us to consider the purpose of the final judgment—every hint and trace of sin will be removed. Righteousness will reign and sin will be no more. Knowledge of this fact should cause all those reading and hearing this letter to wake up, and carefully consider what the final judgment means for lives lived in the present. In light of the fact there will be a final judgment in which human sin will be purged and the earth purified, how ought Christians live their lives while patiently waiting for the Lord’s return? Do we spend our time indulging the flesh as the false teachers do, when such things will be purged and burnt up in the end? Or ought we live lives of godliness and holiness, reflecting the glory of God because Jesus has died for our sins and provided us with a justifying righteousness? What sort of people are we to be? Godly people.

Because the Lord’s coming is delayed while the gospel goes out to the ends of the earth, we must wait with patience for a new heaven and earth, purged of every trace of Adam’s fall, and that place where righteousness dwells. But as we long for the new heaven and earth (our eternal home), let us be about the business the Lord has ordained for us until his return—preaching Christ and sharing the gospel with all who will listen. Beloved, it is time to awake from our slumber and be about the business God has assigned to us.