

## 2 PETER 3: THE PROMISE OF HIS COMING

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The doctrine of the Second Coming has been the happy hunting ground of cranks. I'm reminded of a cartoon showing a man with a placard announcing: 'THE WORLD ENDS TOMORROW'. Beside him is a policeman who says, "If it doesn't, I'm pinching you under the Trades Description Act"

Down through the centuries there have been a host of crystal ball gazers who have pretended to know when and where the Lord would come again

- Montanus, a so-called Christian 'heretic' in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century proclaimed that the New Jerusalem was about to descend from heaven to Pepuza in Asia Minor
- Melchior Hoffmann, the 16<sup>th</sup> century German Anabaptist theologian, said that the Lord would come to Strasbourg in 1533
- John Napier, the inventor of logarithms, used his new-found mathematical techniques to compute the date of Christ's return – somewhere between 1688 and 1700. His commentary on the Book of Revelation went through 23 editions and several translations before 1700. After that it was not so popular!
- There is the wonderful story of a RC priest who wrote a book predicting the world would come to an end in 1847. On seeking the church's permission to publish the book, he was granted permission to publish it in 1848.
- CT Russell, the founder of the JW's, asserted that the Lord had come invisibly in 1874 and his Kingdom would arrive in 1914. The Lord didn't arrive, and so the JW's said he would return in 1915, then 1976 – I don't know what their present prediction is

But Christ has still not come. The result is that many people, Christians included, are tempted to dismiss the doctrine of the Second Coming. In the words of one Anglican bishop (JAT Robinson): "*With the Second Coming of Christ we reach what perhaps to most people seems the greatest phantasmagoria in the whole collection of mumbo jumbo that goes under the name of Christian doctrine*". Or to put it another way, if you believe in the Second Coming, then you might as well believe that the world is flat.

But it is not quite as simple as that. Jesus never spoke of a flat earth – but time and again he spoke of his returning.

- Matt 16.27: "The Son of Man is about to come in the glory of his Father with his angels, and then he will reward each one according to his deeds".
- Matt 25.31, 32: "When the Son of Man comes as King and all the angels with him, he will sit on his royal throne, and the people of all the nations will be gathered before him. Then he will divide them into two groups, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats"
- Matt 26.63, 64: "I tell all of you: from this time on you will see the Son of Man sitting on the right of the Almighty and coming on the clouds of heaven".

But was Jesus right to speak of his returning in glory? Surely, if Jesus were coming again, then he would have come by now?

This is the problem that Peter addresses in his 2<sup>nd</sup> Letter.

Rather than talk in general terms about the Second Coming, I thought it would be more helpful to focus on a passage of Scripture, viz. 2 Peter 3.3-14.

At the time when 2 Peter was written there was a group around who made the doctrine of the Second Coming a matter of special attack. **“He promised to come, didn’t he? Where is he? Our fathers have already died, but everything is still the same as it was since the creation of the world”** (2 Pet 3.3-4). Over against this taunt Peter sets forward four arguments:

### **THE CREATOR IS ALSO THE JUDGE (vv5-7)**

God didn’t simply set the whole evolutionary process in motion. He is intimately involved in the happenings of his world. Indeed, the Creator is also the judge of all the earth. Just as he destroyed the world in the day of Noah by water, so one day he’ll act again and destroy by fire.

In vv10, 12 Peter gives a graphic description of the end: **“On that day the heavens will disappear with a shrill noise, the heavenly bodies will burn up and be destroyed, and the earth and everything in it will vanish.”** In v12 Peter goes on to state that **“the heavenly bodies will be melted by heat”**.

Since 1945 many Christians have been tempted to see this as a description of a terrible nuclear holocaust. But Peter was not just talking about the destruction of this world, but the dissolution of the universe – something which not even Moscow or Washington could effect by the pushing of however many buttons. But Peter’s imagery is not to be pressed.

How the world will end, God alone knows,

But one thing is certain: the world is in God’s hands, and not ours. Just as the earth was formed at God’s command, so the world will come to an end at God’s command.

And part and parcel of this process will be the coming of the Lord Jesus. He will return to wind up all human history. Paul writing to the Romans speaks of **“that Day when God through Jesus Christ will judge the secret thoughts of all”** (Rom 2.16). Jesus the Saviour is also Jesus the Lord. He comes to gather together God’s people, but he comes also to judge the world in righteousness and truth.

All this is part of the necessary historical process. Emmanuel Kant once spoke of there being two things that convinced him of the existence of God: *“The starry skies above and the moral law within”*. This is a moral universe. Right must out.

If God is to be God, then there has to come a day when he has to be shown to be true to himself: on that day the righteous will be vindicated, and the wicked will be down away with.

God doesn’t look forward to the judgment. One theologian (James Steward) described God’s wrath as his love in agony, “smitten with dreadful sorrow”. But God has to be true to himself – justice must be done. And Jesus is to be the instrument of that judgement.

## 2. GOD'S WAYS OF MEASURING TIME ARE DIFFERENT FROM OURS (vv8-9)

We have no right to measure the limits of divine sovereignty by the yardstick of our own calendars. Peter quotes Psalm 90.4 to prove that **“there is no difference in the Lord's sight between one day and a 1000 years; to him the two are the same”** (3.8)

Alas, we are so short in perspective. It has been said that if we reduce the 500 million years during which life has been on this planet to the scale of one calendar year, we should find that from March to the middle of December the higher forms of living organisms appeared; man stood upright for the first time on 31<sup>st</sup> December at 3 o'clock in the afternoon; at 11.58 in the evening, two minutes before midnight, Jesus came!

Or to put it another way, we are over-pre-occupied with the waiting.

It's like waiting for the kettle to boil – it always seems to take an age when we stand over it. The Lord is coming – but when, we don't know. In the meantime let's not make God in our image.

Yes, God's ways of measuring time are different – this is not surprising, since in one sense God lives beyond time.

This is what explains the apparent contradiction between the promise of Jesus to the dying thief (**“Today you shall be with me in Paradise”**) and the words of Paul concerning the dead who have fallen asleep in Christ.

In a very real sense the day my grandfather died, the day I died, and the day my grandson Felix or Raphael die will be all one and the same day to the Lord.

Our linear concepts of time no longer have meaning to God.

## 3. GOD IS NOT SLOW, HE IS PATIENT (vv9-13)

The delay of Christ's coming is not because God is unable to keep his promise, but rather it is a sign of his patience towards all his creatures.

In the words of one commentator (CEB Cranfield): *“That which holds back the end of history is not any weakness or vacillation, dilatoriness or slackness on God's part, but his patience that waits to give us [lit. ‘men’] time to hear the Gospel and believe”*.

Or as Peter puts it: **“He is patient with you, because he does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants all to turn away from their sins”**.

God wants everyone to be saved

- Ezek 33.11: **“Tell them that a surely as I, the Sovereign Lord, am the living God, I do not enjoy seeing a sinner die. I would rather see him stop sinning and live. Israel, stop the evil you are doing. Why do you want to die?”**
- 1 Tim 2.4: **“God our Saviour wants everyone to be saved and to come to know the truth”**

It is not God who sends people to hell – we send ourselves. That is a sobering thought.

#### 4. GOD WILL SURPRISE US ALL (vv11)

God will surprise us, for Jesus will return unexpectedly: **“the Day of the Lord will come like a thief”** (3.10). If this is true, then we have no right to fix the date of the Second Coming by a speculative reading of the Book of Daniel or Revelation.

As Jesus himself said: **“No one knows when the day and the hour will come – neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son; the Father alone knows”** (Mark 13.342).

The story is often told of a 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish pastor, Robert Murray M’Cheyne, who once asked some friend, “Do you think that Christ will come tonight?” One after another they replied, “I think not”. When they had all given the same answer M’Cheyne solemnly repeated the text found in Matt 24.44: **“The Son of Man will come at an hour when you are not expecting him”**.

When and how Jesus will come – we do not know. But that Jesus will come again, that is certain. That was Peter’s conviction – and must be ours too. In the meantime Peter calls us to do three things:

##### 1. Wait patiently (vv8-9, 13-14).

Peter writes: **“We wait for what God has promised: new heavens a new earth, where righteousness will be at home”** (v13). We are not to worry about the ‘delay’ of Christ’s coming – it is all part of God’s providence.

The story is told of how one day when Martin Luther was ill, he was brought some proof-sheets for his latest book: “God has touched me sorely”, said Luther. *“I have been impatient, but God knows better than I do whereto it serves. Our Lord God is like a printer who sets the letters backward so that here we cannot read them. When we are printed off we shall read all clearly. Meanwhile we must have patience”*.

Yes, behind the course of human history, there is a plan and purpose, In the meantime we wait patiently.

##### 2. Live holy lives (vv11-12)

The doctrine of the Second Coming is an encouragement to holy living.

**“Since all these things will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people should you be? Your lives should be holy and dedicated to God, as you wait for the Day of God”** (vv11-12).

The ‘scoffers’ were living it up – for they rejected all talk of a coming judgment. ‘Let’s eat, drink and be merry’ was their theme.

But for the followers of Jesus it is different: we have a Lord to serve; a Lord to whom one day we must give account of our lives.

CS Lewis once put it this way: *“If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most about the next... Aim at Heaven, and you will get Earth ‘thrown in’; aim at Earth and you will get neither.*

Stephen Travis: people who try to improve the present situation without any ultimate purpose in view can easily become like brilliant footballers, dribbling their way round every obstacle in the field, but achieving little because there are no goalposts at the end.

Above all:

### **3. Be prepared**

Jesus will come – he has promised to come. What’s more, when he returns it will be no mere action re-play of the first Christmas, for he will come as King and Judge. The question there is: Will we be ready.....