

2 Peter 3:8-10

Introduction

Last week, we saw that even in the days of Peter, there were scoffers who were saying things like this:

- 2 Peter 3:4 — “Where is the promise of [Christ’s] coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.”

These scoffers were people who wanted to be able to claim Christianity and yet still follow after their own desires – and it was these desires that motivated their scoffing. By definition, “scoffers” in the Bible are those who lack wisdom because their foundation for living life is not the word and the revelation of God, but rather what they *want*. Though this may never be admitted, the scoffing of the scoffers is never truly motivated by intellectual objections in the mind, but always rather by moral objections in the heart. This is why Peter says in verse three:

- 2 Peter 3:3b — ...knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, **following their own sinful desires**.

And then in verse five:

- 2 Peter 3:5 — For **in desiring this** [to be true] it is overlooked by them...

This is really Peter’s first response to the scoffers: He simply points out that they’re scoffers, with all their “thinking” actually enslaved to their sinful desires—what they “know” *first of all*. Peter’s second response is to remind us of what the false teachers have overlooked – the true meaning of creation and the flood. The reality of these two cataclysmic events in the far distant past is evidence to the true believer that if the earth today is stable and predictable and uniform, this is only because of the constant miracle, renewed every day, of God’s gracious, merciful, creative, sustaining power. Therefore, Peter concludes in verse seven:

- 2 Peter 3:7 — But by the same word [active in creation and in the flood] the heavens and earth that now exist [and the heavens and earth that have existed by God’s grace ever since the flood] are *stored up* for fire, being *kept until* the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.

In Peter’s second response to the scoffing of the scoffers, he takes their own argument and turns it on its head. The present stability, and predictability, and uniformity of the world is *for us* not the proof that God is not coming to judge the world, but a constant reminder that He is.

This, then, brings us to Peter’s third response to the scoffing of the scoffers. Granted that they’re scoffing is driven always and only by their sinful desires, and granted that they’ve overlooked the real meaning of creation and the flood and the present stability of the world, we still have to acknowledge that Christ has not yet come back. In Peter’s day, it had “already” been

approximately thirty-five years since Christ's resurrection and ascension into heaven. That doesn't sound like a lot of time to us, but for Christians who were looking for Christ's coming and expecting that His coming *could* even be in their own lifetimes, thirty-five years was truly a long time to wait. Peter himself wrote in his first letter:

- 1 Peter 4:7 — The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers.

This is a major theme that shows up repeatedly in the New Testament.

- James 5:8 — You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.
- Romans 13:11–12 — Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.
- Hebrews 10:25 — ...not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

If the scoffers could be scoffing at this idea of “nearness” after only thirty-five years, imagine what they'd be saying if they could see 2000 years into the future! If thirty-five years was already a “long time,” then 2000 years must be practically an eternity, right? And so for the false teachers, all this just goes to show that *if* Jesus was ever really coming, then He's obviously “late” (cf. 3:15). And if He's already late, should we really think that He's going to come at all? How are we to understand the apostolic teaching that the Lord's coming is “drawing near” and “at hand” and that we are to be daily “watching” expectantly for that coming, and the reality that thirty-five years—or 2000 years—has passed since Christ ascended into heaven? Peter goes on, now, to write in verse eight:

I. 2 Peter 3:8 — But this one thing must not be overlooked by you, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.

Brothers and sisters, we really, *really* have to be careful here. Because if we're not careful we might hear Peter saying, “you might as well relax and get comfortable because it's very likely the Lord isn't going to return for thousands and maybe even tens of thousands of years. Why not even hundreds of thousands of years? We hear Peter say, “with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day,” and our eyes glaze over and we think to ourselves that it must be almost certain, then, that Christ isn't going to return in our day. But this is obviously not what Peter intends. Peter still believes and teaches that the end of all things is “drawing near.” It's “at hand” and it could happen truly at any time. Peter still believes that we need to live our lives as Christians watching and looking and preparing for the coming of Christ even in our own lifetime (cf. 1 Pet. 4:7). Peter doesn't write these words here in verse eight in order to dampen in any way our sense of daily expectancy and longing. And yet he *does* write these words in order to explain the *apparent* “delay” or “lateness” of Christ's coming! So what's he really saying?

Notice what Peter does *not* say. He doesn't say that for the Lord one day *is* a thousand years. We're not meant to take this literally as though God experiences actual days that are one thousand years long. We can't say that for God it's only been two days since Christ ascended into heaven, because for God it has *not* been two days. Peter doesn't say that one of *God's* days equals one thousand of *our* years. If that's what he was saying, look what he'd have to be saying in the next part of the verse: "With the Lord... a thousand years [are] as one day," or, "one thousand of God's years equals only one of our days." So by the first standard Peter would be saying that for God it's only been two days since Christ ascended into heaven, and by the second standard Peter would be saying that for God it's already been 730 million years since Christ ascended into heaven (2000 x 365 x 1000). So, Peter, which is it – two days or 730 million years? But that's exactly the point. From the perspective of the eternal God, 730 million years might as well be two days *AND* two days might as well be 730 million years.

What we need to understand is that the point here is not how God experiences time, but rather how the eternal God relates to time and thinks about time. One thousand years is real to us and even a long time for us who flourish like the grass in the morning and fade away and wither in the evening (cf. Ps. 90:5-6), but for the eternal God, one thousand years is neither here nor there, it's neither "long" nor "short." For God there's no such thing as a "long" or a "short" time. "One day is *as* a thousand years, *and* a thousand years *as* one day." Peter must be thinking here of the song of Moses in Psalm 90, where Moses writes:

□ Psalm 90:1-4 — Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. You return man to dust and say, "Return, O children of man!" For a thousand years *in your sight* are but *as* yesterday when it is past, or *as* a watch in the night.

What we experience as a long time or a short time is, in the end, all the *same* to the God who inhabits eternity (cf. Isa. 57:15) and so it's in this light that Peter can go on to say in the first half of verse nine:

II. 2 Peter 3:9a — The Lord is not slow/late to fulfill his promise as some count slowness/lateness...

To say that the passage of thirty-five years or 2000 years makes the eternal God "slow" or "late" is very simply to make us guilty of thinking about God as though He were like us. But He is not like us, and we are not like Him. We look expectantly for Christ's coming, and yet we remember that no man knows the day nor the hour (cf. Mat. 24:36) and so we also seek to lead profitable and productive and God-honoring lives during whatever time is left to us here on this earth (cf. 1 Thess. 4:9-12; 2 Thess. 3:6-12). Brothers and sisters, the passage of thirty-five years, or of 2000 years, or of any number of years must not diminish our sense of expectancy, because when that happens, we know that we've overstepped our boundaries and begun in some way to require that God be like us – experiencing time and relating to time even as we do. This is the arrogance and the presumption of the scoffer.

Since it's the *eternal* God who has promised us that the coming of Christ is *at hand*, we daily look for Christ's coming with expectancy *while at the same time* we're never shaken in the slightest by the "long time" that has passed since God first promised His return. Or we could also say it the other way around: Since it's the *eternal* God who has promised us that the coming of Christ is *at hand*, we're never shaken in the slightest by the "long time" that's passed *while at the same time* we also never cease to daily, expectantly "watch" for the coming of Christ. Is the living of our lives a daily watching, and looking, and waiting? But if so, then what *are* we to make of the thirty-five years—or in our case the now 2000 years—that have already passed since Christ ascended into heaven? Granted that it can and it does feel slow and long to us, what's the meaning of this "delay"? Peter goes on to write in the second half of verse nine:

III. 2 Peter 3:9b — The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, **but is patient [*macrothumeo*] toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.**

Whatever "slowness" or "delay" we may experience as we wait for the coming of Christ—rather than being a reason for skepticism and doubt—is actually only a reason for us to rejoice in God's character – in His tender compassion, and mercy, and patience. The word for patience, here, is the same word that's used in the Greek Old Testament to translate the Hebrew expression "slow to anger."

□ Exodus 34:6 — The LORD passed before [Moses] and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger [*LXX, macrothumos*; patient, forbearing, longsuffering], and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness..."

So the meaning of this Greek word in a context like this is more than just patience as we might think of patience, but rather a "postponing" of judgment in order to give "time" for repentance. One commentator says that "patience" is "that quality by which God bears with sinners, holds back his wrath, refrains from intervening in judgment as soon as the sinner's deeds deserve it" (Bauckham). We see this idea over and over again in the Old Testament, but to give just one example, listen to what the Lord says through the prophet Joel:

□ Joel 2:12-13 (cf. Num. 14:15-19; Neh. 9:16-20; Ps. 103:8-14) — "Yet even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger [*macrothumos*], and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.

In light of the context here in 2 Peter and in light of the background of the Hebrew Old Testament, we could translate: "The Lord is not slow to fulfill His promise as some count slowness, but is 'slow to anger' toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." Whatever "slowness" or "delay" we may experience as we wait for the coming of Christ—far from being a reason for skepticism and doubt as the scoffers would have it—is actually only a reason for us to rejoice that God is who He says He is – "a God merciful and gracious, *slow to anger*, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness..." Every day that

there is “delay” is to be seen by us not as some kind of meaningless procrastination on God’s part. We should understand every day that there is “delay”—and every day that passes *is*, in some sense, a “delay”—as a deliberate and purposeful “extension” of time, a “grace period” as it were, because of God’s wish that no one perish but that all come to repentance. We’re going to talk more about what this means next week, but this week I just want us to focus on the main point of these words – and that is the compassionate and merciful and *longsuffering* nature of God. The scoffers foolishly interpret delay as an excuse to follow their own sinful desires, whereas for us as Christians, we interpret every single day of delay as a renewed call to repentance and faith. Remember Paul’s words in Romans chapter two:

□ Romans 2:4 — 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?

God’s “delay” should be *for us* the encouragement and the strengthening of our faith until Christ returns – because we understand this “delay” to be nothing less than the patience of our Lord, and—as Peter will encourage us in verse fifteen—we count the patience of our Lord to be salvation. “Salvation,” *when?* Salvation on the final day! While God is patient and longsuffering and slow to anger, He is also a God “who will by no means clear the guilty” (Exod. 34:7). Think about it like this: If the *point* of God’s patience is the repentance that leads to salvation on the final day, then every day of God’s patience and every day of “delay” should also be a reminder to us that that final day *is* coming. And so Peter goes on to write in verse ten:

IV. 2 Peter 3:10a — But the day of the Lord will come like a thief...

In the Greek, the very first word in this sentence is the word that we would translate in English, “*It will come...*” On the one hand, we live with the reality of “delay” which we understand biblically as God’s patience. On the other hand, we know this: God will not delay forever. Eventually, whether sooner or later, and at some time known only to God, the days of delay and patience will be over, and “*it will come*”; the day of the Lord *will* come. We see this theme also in the Old Testament.

□ Ezekiel 12:26–28 (cf. Isa 13:19, 22; 46:12-13) — The word of the LORD came to me: “Son of man, behold, they of the house of Israel say, ‘The vision that he sees is for many days from now, and he prophesies of times far off.’ Therefore say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: None of my words will be delayed any longer, but the word that I speak will be performed, declares the Lord GOD.”

Peter’s point is that one day, none of God’s words will be delayed any longer; instead, in that day, the word that He *speaks* will be *performed*. In the case of Ezekiel, God’s people were given a clear warning immediately before the event so that they knew when judgment was coming. But in the case of that final climactic day of the Lord, Peter says, *that day* will come “like a thief.” In other words, it will come at a time of no special significance – at a time when no one will happen to be looking for it any more than at any other time. Paul applies this theme of the day of the Lord coming like a thief to the unrepentant and unbelievers:

- 1 Thessalonians 5:2–3 — The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, “There is peace and security,” then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

Jesus used this same analogy of the thief that comes unannounced as an exhortation to *us*:

- 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.

The reality of delay should never be interpreted by us to mean that the coming of Christ is not every day immanent. It’s always “near.” It’s always “at hand.” As Peter writes these verses about the *final* day of the Lord, he probably has in mind this passage from Habakkuk which was originally about the Lord’s coming day of judgment on Babylon:

- Habakkuk 2:2–3 (cf. Heb. 10:36-39) — Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it. For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay.

And when—*not* if, but *when*—the day of the Lord comes, what will it be?

V. 2 Peter 3:10b — 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.

For us as Christians, these are sobering words. But Peter’s speaking here of the day of the Lord not in terms of what it will mean for the righteous who live by faith, but rather in terms of what it will mean for the wicked who’ve spent their lives following their own sinful desires. For the unbelievers and the unrepentant, these aren’t just sobering words, are they? They’re terrifying beyond all comprehension. I don’t know *how* the heavens will pass away with a roar or how the heavenly bodies (Greek: *elements*) can all be simultaneously burned up and dissolved. It defies my ability to understand, but just the thought of this should strike terror into the hearts of the wicked – *not* terror into the hearts of those who’ve repented and believed and who are daily finding refuge and safety in Christ, but definitely terror into the hearts of all who live their lives “following after” their own sinful desires.

Peter pictures the heavens passing away with a roar and all the heavenly bodies being burned up and dissolved so that in the end all that’s left is the earth (which itself will be subject to fire; cf. 3:7) lying bare and naked and exposed before God (cf. Isa. 34:1-4). In that day there will be nowhere to hide. No crack or crevice or hole in the ground to crawl into and escape the searching eyes of the holy and righteous judge. Instead, the earth and all the works that are done on it—with the emphasis here being on all the works of those who have followed after their own sinful desires—will be found out (cf. Mk. 4:21-22; 1 Cor. 3:12-13). And then—oh the dread and

the terror of that day—then the sentence will be passed and it will be irrevocable and unchangeable and all the wicked will go away into everlasting destruction and punishment.

Brothers and sisters, *that's why* we go door to door. *That's why* we tell others about the only refuge *on that day*, which is Jesus Christ. *That's why* we ourselves have repented of our sin and believed and trusted in the one who laid down His life for us – so that we might *not* perish on that day but inherit eternal life (cf. Jn. 3:16). *That's why*.

Conclusion

The scoffers 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.” And how does Peter respond? How do we as Christians respond to the scoffing of the scoffer?

In the first place, we know that the scoffing of the scoffers is motivated not by their logic and reason, but always deep down by their sinful desires – which make “reason” their slave. How we should rejoice to know that God has granted us true wisdom so that ours is a thinking and a “knowing” that has its starting point no longer in our own sinful desires, but rather in the truth of God’s word and in the revelation of His *righteousness*.

In the second place, in all the scoffer’s scoffing they’re forced to overlook the real *meaning* of creation and the flood and the present stability of the world. They interpret the stability of the world as evidence that this is how it will always be, but we see this stability as the *result* of that first cataclysmic divine work of creation when God caused the heavens to come into existence and the dry land to stand up out of the primeval waters of chaos. Furthermore, we see the present stability of the world we live in as the daily evidence of God’s faithfulness to His covenant with Noah after He had destroyed the earth in a cataclysmic flood. The present stability, and predictability, of the world is for us not the proof that God is not coming to judge the world, but rather a daily evidence and reminder that He *is*. “*By the same word* [that cause the earth to stand up out of the waters and that submerged the earth in water again in the time of Noah—*by this 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.”

In the third place, in suggesting that after thirty-five years or 2000 years God is late in fulfilling His promise the scoffers dare to think about God as though He were like us – as though He experiences and relates to time in the same way that we do. But this one thing, beloved, we must never overlook, “that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.” And so we live in humble faith, looking expectantly each and every day for Christ’s coming (because of God’s *promise*), and not concerned in the slightest by what *to us* is the “long time” that we’ve already been waiting.

And finally, in the fourth place, whatever “slowness” or “delay” we may experience as we wait for the coming of Christ—far from being a reason for skepticism and doubt as the scoffers would have it—is actually only a reason for us to rejoice that God is who He says He is – “a God merciful and gracious, *slow to anger*, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness...” The

scoffers foolishly interpret delay as an excuse to follow their own sinful desires, whereas for us as Christians, we interpret every single day of delay as a renewed call to repentance and faith. We know that “delay” is nothing less than the patience of our Lord, and we count the patience of our Lord as salvation.

After all this, then, Peter can respond very simply and very confidently to the scoffing of the scoffers—not so much for the scoffers’ sake, as for ours:

“But *it will come*, the day of the Lord, 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 laid bare.”

Let us not be guilty of the “quiet” skepticism or the “practical” skepticism that Christians are so often guilty of. Let us live always in light of the certainty of this event, being able to say with Peter, by faith: “But the day of the Lord WILL come...”