
The Sure Return

2 Peter 3:1-18

Russ Kennedy

The final poem of Robert Frost:

With what unbroken spirit naive science
Keeps hurling our Promethean defiance
From this atomic ball of rotting rock
At the Divine Safe's combination lock.

In our defiance we are still defied.
But have not I, as prophet, prophesied:
Sick of our circling round and round the sun
Something about the trouble will be done.

Now that we've found the secret out of weight,
So we can cancel it however great,
Ah, what avail our lofty engineers
If we can't take the planet by the ears,

Or by the poles or simply by the scruff,
And saying simply we have had enough
Of routine and monotony on earth,
Where nothing's going on but death and birth

Whether to seek a scientific sky
Or wait and go to Heaven when they die,
In other words to wager their reliance
On plain religion or religious science,

They need to crash the puzzle of their lot
As Alexander crashed the Gordian knot,
Or as we crashed the barrier of sound
To beat the very world's speed going round.

Examples of uniformity...

Reading the placards at the Grand Canyon this summer...

Theories of long slow processes over vast periods of time...

Examples of challenges to Biblical catastrophism...

Why assert that when the facts are obvious?

In the past, intentional to contradict the Bible...

Now, it doesn't even matter anymore. The Bible is simply dismissed as irrelevant.

A Mocking Challenge**(v.1-7)**

We need reminders and assurances because of the mocking challenges we are faced with today as they did in theirs.

¹ 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, ² that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles, ³ knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. ⁴ 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." ⁵ 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, ⁶ and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. 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.

The Reminder that is Needed**(v.1-2)**

Two letters to his beloved, to his sheep. Here is scripture reminding them about the rest of scripture. They must never forget the predictions of the Old Testament prophets. They must remember what Christ commanded them. They need access to how all that is interpreted by the apostles. The apostles are trustworthy and tested in contrast to the false teachers.

The Reasoning of the Scoffers**(v.3-4)**

We need these solid reminders because of the false reasoning of the scoffers. They are motivated and riven by sinful desires. This is not just intellectual difficulty; this moral culpability. In order to justify what they sinfully desire, they attack the truthfulness of the Scriptures. They mock Christian belief and Biblical hope.

They argue that nothing cataclysmic has happened in the past. They say that there is no evidence of universal judgment in the world. Why would we then expect that God is going to come back and judge us in the future? Since the Bible makes false claims about the past, how can its prophecies and promises of the future be reliable?

The Response from the Scriptures**(v.5-7)**

In actual fact, the argument of the scoffers is factually and Biblically wrong. While claiming intellectual superiority, they are in fact intellectually dishonest. They intentionally "overlook" the facts.

The Events of the Past**(v.5-6)**

Peter answers by giving two irrefutable events in the past: the beginning of the world and the destruction of that world by the flood. Here is the divinely given interpretation or summation of Genesis 1-8. The world as it was originally created was formed out of waters by God's Word.⁸ Those waters were stored up and then flooded over the world that then existed so that it perished.

The Judgment in the Future

(v.7)

That same word of God has brought forth the world as we now see it and has determined to destroy it by fire. The wicked will one day be destroyed, but not just by the cosmos going supernova. From other texts, we know that the judgment by fire on that day is the wrath of God and the lake of fire burning forever.

If the past judgment destroyed all the wicked then the future judgment will as well. This is basically Peter's argument. It also means that you cannot argue for a "local" flood. The flood of Noah's day destroyed the world as it was originally created, the world that then was. From it emerged a world reserved for destruction by fire.

That pagan world is now our modern world. Back then it may not have had the scientific plausibility it has now, but it was none-the-less rattling the saints. I have been somewhat ridiculed by church people and leaders in one place I pastored for believing in a young earth, literal fiat creation and world-wide flood. Science and intellectual honesty were the reasons put forward. It was not enough to simply point to texts and say, "This is the truth." To them, it didn't matter.

God's Sure Facts

(v.8-13)

But we must believe God's sure facts.

The Reason for the Delay

(v. 8-9)

⁸ 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. ⁹ 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 objection from the scoffers was based on the long time that had passed and Jesus had not come yet. What would they think now, 2,000 years later? Peter's answer is based on the character of the Lord. God is not frustrated by the passing of time. He is not time bound. A thousand years? One day? Doesn't matter. God is patient in the keeping of His promises.⁹

Therefore, it is not that God is slow, but that He is patient. He is patient toward you, toward His people. That He has willed us not to perish¹⁰, but to come to repentance is the reason for His patience. The ages roll on as He is bringing all of His people to repentance. So judgment may be slow but that is because His patience in His promise is long, lovely and sweet.

The Reality of the Destruction

(v.10)

¹⁰ 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.

Invoking the teaching of Jesus, particularly in Matthew and Luke, Peter points to the reality of certain destruction. It will happen during the Day of the Lord. That is a day of wrath and judgment. Then, the universe goes through a massive purging by fire. But this physical destruction is also a metaphor for the spiritual judgment that will take place on that day. Then, on the Day of the Lord, when this present shell is burned away, then God will bring His final judgment.

Peter is here alluding to several Old Testament texts. Here are two of them from Isaiah.

Isaiah 34:1-4 Draw near, O nations, to hear, and give attention, O peoples! Let the earth hear, and all that fills it; the world, and all that comes from it. For the Lord is enraged against all the nations, and furious against all their host; he has devoted them to destruction, has given them over for slaughter. Their slain shall be cast out, and the stench of their corpses shall rise; the mountains shall flow with their blood. All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree.

Isaiah 60:17-22 Instead of bronze I will bring gold, and instead of iron I will bring silver; instead of wood, bronze, instead of stones, iron. I will make your overseers peace and your taskmasters righteousness. Violence shall no more be heard in your land, devastation or destruction within your borders; you shall call your walls Salvation, and your gates Praise. The sun shall be no more your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give you light; but the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. Your sun shall no more go down, nor your moon withdraw itself; for the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your days of mourning shall be ended.

Your people shall all be righteous; they shall possess the land forever, the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, that I might be glorified. The least one shall become a clan, and the smallest one a mighty nation; I am the Lord; in its time I will hasten it.

Catastrophic, cataclysmic judgment is coming. Will you be safe on that day?

The Requirements it Entails (v.11-14)

¹¹ Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, ¹² 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! ¹³ But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. ¹⁴ Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace.

Well, if the world ends with a bang then we need to give attention to the kind of people we ought to be. There is a distinct “ought” here. The coming of the Lord is itself an exhortation and encouragement to be what we are – holy and godly in all our lives.

Waiting for that day is a good thing. It is not a resigned, “Oh, well what choice do I have.” Christian waiting is full of anticipation, hope, effort and labor.

So that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Corinthians 1:7-9 ESV)

For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come. (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10, ESV)

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify

for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works. (Titus 2:11-14, ESV)

But we are not first and foremost waiting for judgment. We are waiting for the new heavens and the new earth. The world we live in now emerged from the destruction of the flood with Noah and his family rescued by the Ark. So, we will be kept safe and will be rescued during the cataclysmic destruction of that judgment day. Not only will our souls be saved, but with glorified bodies we will enter the new heavens and new earth that will emerge on that day. It will be the perfect habitation for righteousness and God's righteous people.

So live now the way you will live then. In this old world we will be diligent to be pleasing to God. We will have His smile on that day.

Our Warning Challenges (v.15-18)

Through this whole book, Peter has been driving us back to the Scriptures. He has commended the Old Testament prophets and now

¹⁵ 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, ¹⁶ 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.

Our Resource of the Scriptures (v.15-16)

Paul's writings are essential to understanding how the Lord's patience is working out salvation in time and space. This is a reference to the truths and insight that was exclusively given to Paul. It was hidden in the Old Testament, but was uncovered through the writings of Paul. Paul referred to this as mysteries and wisdom. The effect is that to understand the Bible, you have to have a good grasp of what the Apostle Paul taught.

Now, comes what we often say but don't expect from Peter. Some things in Paul's letters are hard to understand. Yes, that is so. It would probably have been even harder for a Jew to understand. Understanding Paul requires overturning a great deal of the Jewish understanding and expectation from the Old Testament Scriptures. Even today, he is often misunderstood because of preunderstandings that are brought to the text. Hard stuff is made even harder when we bring our own blindnesses to it.

The result is that many people twist Paul's writings and all the Scriptures. The bad combination of their being ignorant and unstable mixed with difficult texts to understand results in their distorting the Scriptures to their own destruction. We have dealt with people like this. The blogs are full of the spiritual ignorance and personally unstable wresting the Scriptures. It will lead them to their own destruction. They will drag others down with them.

Our Resistance to the Error (v.17)

¹⁷ 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.

Since you know that is the way it will be, you had better resist their error. You must not allow yourself to be carried away, to be taken captive by those who

twist the Scripture. Instead of being passive in the face of error, you warned ahead of time to be actively resisting it. Set your heels in against those who distort the Scripture. “Do not be carried away by the errors of these wicked people and lose your own secure footing.” (NLT)

Why? Because if you do not you will become unruly and unstable. Buying into their error will cause you to become like them in your character and conduct. False teaching and teachers are dangerous not just because they affect the realm of ideas and thoughts and theology, but also because they affect your character (the sum of your beliefs and wants) and your conduct (the sum of your emotions and actions).

Since one of the aims of truth and effects of maturity is stability, instability is a grave failure. Stability here has two senses that help us see it. It is the inner firmness and strength because of being well-grounded in the faith. Think of a building whose foundations go deep into the rock versus a hut up on top of stilts. It also has the sense of safety and security as a result of being well fortified. Think of the wall of China versus a picket fence. So here is the stable Christian – safe and secure built on firm foundations and surrounded by strong fortifications.

Our Responsibility in Contrast (v.18)

¹⁸ But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

In contrast, we are to grow – grow in the grace and the knowledge of Jesus, our Ruler and Redeemer. The call here is for progress, for forward movement. Even more, the word growth also implies an enlarged capacity. You have a responsibility with the grace you have been given and the knowledge you have acquired to increase your capacity for both. The more you use the enabling grace you are receive the more grace you are able to receive. The more you know Jesus (not just know about Him) the greater your capacity to know more. Small souled Christians have small capacities. May you become a large souled Christian just bursting at the seams with enabling grace and sweet with the rich fragrance of personal experience with Christ.

Thus, we will bring Him glory. We will shift the focus of boasting and congratulation off of ourselves and onto Jesus. This will be our prayer and our pursuit. We will give Him glory and we will go after His glory. He will be seen to be large in our lives now and throughout all the ageless days of eternity.

Reflect and Respond

Make the Scriptures the focus of your defense. Simply continue to rely on and respond with the Bible...

Be patient in your waiting for Jesus' return. After all, He is.

Do not hold too tightly onto what will evaporate under the fiery wrath of God...

Be warned that ignorant and unstable people will try to suck you into their distortions of the Scripture. Careful, you may be hitching your wagon to the downward slide into destruction.

Work hard to understand the Bible. See the whole Bible as Christian literature. Work at it from this side of the cross – even more, through the interpretive template Paul gives us. His understanding of redemptive history is essential.

Are you a maturing and stable Christian? Are you on a sure foundation and within a strong fortification?

“Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.”

Notes

- ⁸ I have capitalized this to show that the Bible has a “done by this which is actually done by Him.” God created all that is by His speaking (Genesis 1). John 1 tells us that the speaking was the Son of God, the Word, by which the world was made and who is its illumination. The Father speaks and what is spoken is the Son working.
- ⁹ It is unlikely that some eschatological schema is being given here. There are those who say that for each day of creation there will be a thousand years of history. This is brought forward as an argument for a literal thousand years Sabbath. The seventh day of creation rest will be entered at the millennial thousand year period when creation is given rest. This is circular reasoning. Further, it isn’t the argument of the text. It is lifting out the sentence and making it say something on its own it does not mean in its context.
- ¹⁰ This sentence has caused no end to debate and controversy. It does show the desire or wish of God. That wish is that “any should perish but all come to repentance.” Does this mean that man can frustrate God and keep him from fulfilling his promises? Remember, that is what is in view here: that absolute certainty that God will keep His promise. Who is God patient toward? You. Who is the “you” of this text, this book? It is believers. I take this text then to be a stunning assurance that all that are gathered up in God’s promise and towards whom He is patient will never come to perish in eternal judgment but will come to the repentance that leads to life.