

# The End Is Near

2 Peter: Faithful to the End

2 Peter 3:1-18

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“The end is near.” What sorts of emotions does that phrase make you feel? “The end is near.” I imagine that there’s quite a wide range of gut reactions: discomfort, skepticism, despair, panic.

The judgment day, the apocalypse, the end of all things, is not necessarily a comfortable topic. In fact, for most people it can be really frightening. Not so much something we’d talk about around the dinner table. More something that we might hear on a bus from a guy with a tinfoil hat. And so we don’t talk about it, because we don’t want to be that person. The end times have fallen on hard times.

But today I want us to take a long hard look at the end. What I think we’ll find is that what seems crazy to the world is really not so crazy at all. Because actually a right view of the end means everything for how we live now. Since the end is coming, we are called to live faithful to the end.

Please turn now to 2 Peter chapter 3. As we’ve seen so far in this book, faithfulness, righteousness, was very much in doubt. False teachers were questioning whether there was any call to be righteous, and as we’ll see today, this question of righteousness was rooted in doubts about the end.

Today we’re going to deal with four of these doubts. Four doubts that the false teachers were spreading about the end. Four doubts that were a big deal in Peter’s day as well as in ours. And for each of these doubts, we’re going to respond with a truth that will help guide the way we think about the coming judgment day. A day that is, as we’ll see, our great hope.

Let’s start off, then, by reading verses 1-2: “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 Savior through your apostles.”<sup>1</sup>

Peter’s second and final letter began (as we read a couple weeks ago in chapter 1) with a reminder. That reminder was simple, and Peter asks us to remember it again. If you were able to join us in week one, this should sound familiar. Here in verse 2 Peter’s saying: Remember, church, the predictions of the holy prophets. What are those predictions? That Christ is coming back soon and we will share in his glory. Remember, church, the commandment of the Lord. What is that commandment? That because Christ is coming back, we should live righteous lives that fit with our future glory.

Peter is clear. This is and has been the message of the apostles. He’s saying: “Guys, we’ve been telling you this from the very beginning. Our message hasn’t changed. First Peter talked about this and now I’m writing 2 Peter to remind you.” So if he’s said it before, why say it again?

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<sup>1</sup> Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

Because, as Pastor Mike masterfully showed us last week from chapter 2, false teachers were teaching the very opposite. While the prophets and apostles teach that Christ's return calls us to righteousness, these false teachers were leading people away into unrighteousness.

As we'll see today, this unrighteousness was based in the lie that Christ would not be returning, that there would be no judgment for sin, and that, because of that, you can live however you want. A lot rides on whether or not you think the end is truly near. Which brings us to the first doubt.

## **DOUBT #1: WILL CHRIST REALLY COME BACK IN JUDGMENT?**

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You can hear it in the false teachers' own words in verses 3-4: "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.'"

Now remember why Peter's writing. He's about to die. We don't know exactly when, but this is certainly towards the end of the first generation of the church. One by one the fathers of the church are falling asleep; the apostles are dying. Most of them killed for the sake of Christ.

And once they're gone, there's going to be a problem. All the false teachers that had come into the church will say, "Well, shouldn't the kingdom have come by now? The apostles said that Christ was coming back 'soon.' Well it's been decades and 'soon' hasn't happened. Now the fathers are dead and still nothing happens. Maybe they were wrong. Maybe Christ isn't coming back at all. Maybe it was a lie. And if this was all a lie, then why keep living this hard life? Why not just live how we want? Why bother being righteous? If there's no judgment day, then there's no judgment."

See, they're frustrated. It was supposed to have happened already. I think that's actually something that we can all understand. Think about it. Have you ever waited for something without knowing when it would happen? Waited for a response to that job application. An offer on your house. That girl to text you back. There's no guarantee that anything's going to happen. It's out of your hands. All you can do is wait. But if you wait long enough, the question stops being "when is this gonna happen" and it becomes "is this gonna happen at all?"

At the time of 2 Peter, a whole generation was passing away. A lifetime of waiting. And yet, nothing. And now without the apostles, what do you think this second generation is thinking? Well, were the fathers wrong? Are the false teachers right? Is Jesus not coming back?

I wonder if this is how a lot of us feel now. I mean, gosh, it's been almost two thousand years. Maybe it's not happening. Do you find yourself thinking that? Is it hard to believe the end is near? Is it easy to forget this certain future? Sure it is. It's very easy.

So you can see why people would believe the false teachers when they say, "Look, the end isn't coming. Things are going to continue as they always have since the beginning of creation. This world will be as it was. Live in the moment, man. Don't worry about it." And when they put it like that, it makes a lot of sense.

Except for this: Peter himself does not doubt for a second. Although he's been waiting his whole life for Christ to return, although he will not live to see the promise fulfilled, Peter is confident that God's promise still stands. That the end is near.

The false teachers say that “all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.” But Peter says, “You’re dead wrong.” Things have not always been this way and they will not always be this way. He says this in verses 5-7: “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 (*it was flooded*) 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.” Here we have the response to the first doubt and our first truth.

## **TRUTH #1: JUDGMENT HAS COME BEFORE AND WILL COME AGAIN.**

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The past event that Peter’s talking about is, of course, Noah’s flood, the great deluge. A cataclysmic event that wiped out the entire world in a torrent of water and forever changed both the earth’s physical landscape and the course of history. As Pastor Mike brought up last week, evil was running rampant in the world before the flood. Evil of a kind that we couldn’t even begin to imagine. And God was patient and waited many generations, but then in an instant he opened the waters of the heavens and judged the sinful world that then existed.

God acts. God does not just sit idly by. God did not make the earth, put it together, and then set it aside to go work on something else. No, the Lord is intimately involved in creation. Christ sustains every molecule, and atom, and quark. He directs the vast motion of every planet, and star system, and galaxy.

Nothing has existence in and of itself. Everything is totally and utterly dependent on the constant sustaining work of the Lord. You are not an independent creature. Every breath you draw is from Christ.

And the only reason that things today seem the same as they were yesterday is because Christ declares it so. If God wanted, tomorrow up would be down, fast would be slow. God could change the laws of the universe in an instant by his Word—Christ, the Word of God.

Peter’s clear in this passage that it is by God’s word that all things happen. Look again with me at verses 5-7: “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 word of God and water*) 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.”

The Word of God created the world, destroyed the world once before, and now we can be confident that since this same Word decrees that the world is coming to an end, it will surely happen. And just as the ungodly then were destroyed suddenly by water, so too will the ungodly in this age be destroyed suddenly by fire. I don’t know if this is talking about nuclear war, meteors, the expansion of the sun, sudden combustion of the atmosphere, the text doesn’t say. What is clear, though, is that it will not be a random act of nature, rather it will be the deliberate judgment of God.

In short, judgment will surely come because the same powerful Word that judged the world before declares that it will judge the world again. So then, if the end is really happening, what’s taking so long?

## **DOUBT #2: IF JESUS WAS COMING BACK WOULDN'T HE HAVE COME BY NOW?**

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You can almost hear the cries: What's the hold up? Why the delay, God? If this was a painful question in the first century, it is just as painful today in the twenty-first. This year especially I have been wondering and wondering why God doesn't send Christ back now, to put an end to evil, and to right all of the wrong that we see around us.

I wish I could say for certain that the end was for sure happening in, say, December. It would be so much easier if God sent me a prophetic vision so I could put it on a calendar, set a reminder on my phone. But we're told that no one knows the day or the hour. And so all we can do is wait, and ask, "How long O Lord?" What's taking so long?

So why does God delay? Why is it taking so long? The answer is both simple and profound.

## **TRUTH #2: JUDGMENT WAITS ON THE LORD'S GOOD TIMING.**

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That statement is going to need a little unpacking. Peter explains it to us in the next section. Verse 8 says, "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."

This is the second time we see that word "overlook." In verse 5, the false teachers overlook that God is in control of the universe. Now, you, beloved, do not overlook this, that God's timing is not like our timing. In fact, God's very experience of time is not like our experience. As verse 8 goes on to say, "with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day."

Right now it's summertime. Do you remember what it was like to be a child in summer? Carefree. Do you remember how long those days felt? How slowly the weeks went by? One summer could feel like a whole year when you were a kid. But now that you're older, the years go by quickly. It wasn't long ago that your kids were small. Where did the time go? The days seem to fly by now. If it's like this for us, think about how it must be for God.

You want to know why we have to wait? Because judgment waits on the Judge. And from the Judge's point of view, the wait hasn't been long at all. God stands high above time. An ageless being who has always existed and will always exist.

In fact, not only is he everlasting, he is eternal. That is, not only does he live forever, he is outside of time. He created time itself and so is not bound by it. Because after all, time is just another part of creation. And all creation bows before the Creator. His ways are not ours. What seems slow to us, is not for him.

So to God, the wait hasn't been long. But why is God waiting at all? Why didn't Christ just come back right away? Peter shows us why in verse 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."

Remember the second truth says judgment waits on the Lord's good timing. Here in verse 9, we see that the Lord's timing is indeed very good. God's waiting is not slowness, but patience, compassion. It's not that God dropped the ball and forgot about this meeting. It's that he has chosen to wait. And because he waits, many have time to repent.

Brothers and sisters, let me put it this way: Waiting is hard, but thank God that he waits. Because think about it. If judgment had come down in Peter's day, the body of Christ would be much, much smaller. In fact, if the end had come two millennia ago, none of us, not me nor you, would have the hope of eternity.

So on the one hand, yes, I want God to come back and set all things right, but on the other hand, God, thank you that there's more time. Thank you that there's time for our missionaries to reach the nations. Thank you that we have time to evangelize our unbelieving neighbors, friends, and family. Thank you that for those of us who have fallen away there is still yet time to repent.

We have this time now because, as Peter tells us, God "is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." Now there's a lot we could go into here about why people perish and why some people don't ever repent even though God would like them to. Much of scripture deals with that issue, but it is not the point of this passage. This verse does not address it. Peter here wants us to simply know that God is sad when people perish for their sins, and that he is incredibly happy when we repent. This is why he waits.

But that begs the question: If God is compassionate and slow to anger, will his return really be that bad?

### **DOUBT #3: WILL CHRIST'S RETURN REALLY BE THAT BAD FOR THE UNGODLY?**

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Some people have twisted verse 9 to mean that God will save everyone. That all of us have eternal life regardless of where we stand with God. But to the contrary, we can be sure that this passage is not saying that all will be saved whether or not they repent and call upon Christ. This chapter is clear that judgment is coming for the ungodly. In fact, far from saying that all will be saved, the very next verse tells us in no uncertain terms that judgment will come.

### **TRUTH #3: JUDGMENT ON THE UNGODLY WILL BE SUDDEN AND TERRIFYING.**

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Let's look at verse 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."

Peter tells us the day of the Lord will come like a thief. Thieves don't give you a heads up that they're coming in a half hour. They don't call ahead to see if now's a good time. They just come, and they come suddenly. So while, yes, God waits, he will not wait forever. Christ will surely come in judgment. And when he comes, it will be suddenly, like a thief.

There's a tension there, and I hope you feel it. Peter's saying the wait has been long, but it won't be much longer. The end is delayed but it's coming very soon. If this was an important message for the early church, this is an important message for us now. Today it's hard to live like the end is near. The things of this world feel very real and Christ's return seems far away. Something I don't have to deal with.

But Peter's saying "Wake up!" When Christ returns, "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." Sin will be found out. And all the shadows hiding sin will be burned up and evil will be exposed to the gaze of the judge who will pronounce his judgment, finally.

Friends, judgment is coming. It will come suddenly, and it will be a terrifying day for all who oppose the reign of our God. But what will it mean for us, the people of God?

Let's look at the next section. Verses 11-13 say: "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."

Peter tells us the heavens themselves will be set on fire and dissolved. The world that we know is passing away. And all the brokenness of this present age, all the heavens and the earth, will be burned up and then made new. Brand new. And there will be no trace of sin. Instead Peter tells us in verse 13 that "according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells."

This new world will be a place where righteousness dwells. Literally, a place where righteousness is at home. This is a beautiful promise. And note: this is not a picture of us sitting up in pastel clouds, playing harps, and hanging out with winged infants.

Our hope is in much more than just life forever in heaven. Our hope is in the renewal of all things. A new heaven and a new earth where our bodies, this planet, all of creation itself will no longer be broken, but whole. So if we have this promise, if we know that this is what awaits us, what sort of people ought we to be? How then shall we live?

Peter is writing mainly to answer this question, because the big claim of the false teachers was that we can live however we want.

#### **DOUBT #4: WE CAN LIVE HOWEVER WE WANT, RIGHT?**

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For as long as the church has been around, false teachers have taken advantage of the truth to justify their own sinful desires. They take something true, like our free gift of grace, and they twist it. Grace is free, so why bother doing good? But that's the very opposite of what Peter says. For Peter, our free gift of grace, our glorious future, and especially Christ's coming judgment, calls us not to sinful desire, but Christlike righteousness. Look back with me at verses 11-12: "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."

The false teachers deny the coming judgment and they live unrighteously to their own doom. If you follow their teaching, you will suffer the same fate they do.

Church of Christ, wake up! Our whole world changed this year because of one virus. Because of it, we have altered the way we live and work. The coming judgment, the day of the Lord, is an even more certain reality than a pandemic. How much more should our lives change in light of this coming day? Because on that day, there will be much greater change than just closed restaurants and video calls. On that day, the old world dies and the new world is born. So if our future is a world where righteousness dwells, then we are not to live as people who belong to this world, but to the one that has yet to come.

## **TRUTH #4: JUDGMENT CALLS US TO LIVE AS THOSE JUDGED RIGHTEOUS.**

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If you call upon the name of Christ, you do not need to fear the coming judgment, because Christ has taken upon himself the judgment that we deserve. Instead, we receive his judgment, his righteous verdict. And by that, we have gained an entrance into the kingdom of God. Because of this, Peter urges us now to live lives of holiness and godliness. Be the kind of people who fit in the new heaven and the new earth where righteousness is at home.

The false teachers don't believe in the new world. They think that this is all there is and so they're trying to convince you to live like this dead world. But hear me, church, you are citizens of the eternal kingdom. And even though the kingdom has not yet come, it is already here. When we gather as one body, when we move and work and live in this broken world, we are ambassadors of the new heaven and the new earth. We are the forward guard of an invasion of God's army against Satan's stronghold. And our mission is to declare that this world is passing away and the new one is coming soon. To declare the good news of the kingdom of Christ.

And so it's with this in mind that Peter summarizes his letter in verses 14-17: "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."

Peter and Paul have had their disagreements, but now at the end of their lives, Peter is clear that he holds Paul's writings as equal to the other Scriptures. Even if there are some things Paul says that even Peter admits are hard to understand.

And that's why it's so important to be earnestly studying scripture to discern the truth. It's why we spend so much time unpacking the text in these sermons. Because, as Peter says, the ignorant and unstable twist scripture to their own destruction to justify their lawlessness and sinful deeds. We would do well to beware their teaching. For judgment is coming upon them. But for those who love the Lord, Peter closes by telling us to grow in the grace, the gifts, the saving knowledge of Christ.

Because it is Christ who reigns supreme over all creation. It is him who wields the sword. It is him who holds power both in this present evil age, and on the day of judgment. A day that will usher in the glorious eternal kingdom of the new heaven and the new earth where righteousness is at home.

And because of this, for believers, the end is not a frightening thing. For us the end is hope. Hope of life eternal with Jesus Christ our Lord. So with that hope in mind, hear now the final verse of 2 Peter: "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."