

“Not Slow in Keeping His Promises,” 2 Peter 3:1-10 (August 7, 2016)

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.

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. 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.

PRAY

Before we get started, I just want to mention that we are about to wrap up our series in 2 Peter – we plan to finish 2 Peter next week. And then we’ll begin our fall series, and in the fall we hope to study two different Old Testament books. First, we’ll consider the book of Ruth for four weeks, beginning August 21. And then, beginning September 25 (and just to give you a frame of reference for that date, it’s one week after the Alabama game – did you know Alabama is coming to Oxford in September?), beginning September 25 we will study the book of Ecclesiastes on Sunday mornings, and Lord willing we will be in that study for seven weeks.

But today we are in 2 Peter 3, and here we read about one of the most important doctrines in Christian theology but, at the same time, one of the most neglected: here we read about judgment day. In verse 10, we read about “the day of the Lord.” Jesus Christ will return one day, and that day will end human history as we currently know it, and on that day he will judge everyone – the living and the dead.

This is a bedrock, fundamental, vital doctrine in the Christian faith, we don’t talk about it much, but we should. The New Testament talks about it a lot – there are at least sixty, if not more, references to the final judgment in the New Testament.

But Peter’s point in our passage for today isn’t only the final judgment – it’s that we are *waiting* for the final judgment. 2 Peter 3:8 is a very famous verse (Peter quotes here Psalm 90): “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 doesn't just write about judgment day, but the specific issues they are facing in his churches that arise from having to wait for judgment day. And there is a lot of application here for us.

Three points: first, the problem of waiting for judgment day. Second, the hope of all our waiting for judgment day. Third, the reason we wait for judgment day.

First, the problem of waiting for judgment day. In 2 Peter 3:3-4, Peter writes: “[F]irst of all, ... 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.’”

First thing I want to point out: Peter writes about the last days. If you grew up in church, or if you read a lot of the *Left Behind* books, you might be kind of conditioned to think about “the last days” as those days as still being in our future; it’s the period of time at the very end of history which will be really, really bad. Some of you may think we are already living in the last days in that sense. Certainly a lot of preachers I’ve heard over the years have said that. But preachers have been saying that for a long time. When my dad was a teenager in the 1950’s, preachers were saying that then. Maybe you think the last days are still ahead of us – maybe it will happen after the presidential election this fall, regardless of who wins.

But whenever someone asks me, “When are the last days the Bible talks about?” I always reply: “We are living in them right now.” Because whenever you read about the “last days” in the New Testament, it always refers to the time between the two comings of Jesus Christ. The last days have lasted for approximately two thousand years and will continue until Jesus physically returns.

But precisely because “the last days” have gone on for so long, it’s been a problem for the church, because when something is promised and it takes a long time for it to arrive it’s natural to doubt whether it will happen at all.

2 Peter was written roughly thirty years after the ascension of Jesus Christ, and already people were doubting. But I think that makes perfect sense – thirty years is a long time, you can do a lot of living over thirty years. And I believe if you had taken a poll of the disciples in the weeks after Jesus ascended into heaven, they would have said, “We would not be surprised if the Lord returned soon.” But it’s been thirty years and still no return of Jesus. So many doubted: “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.’” 2 Peter 3:4.

In other words, they thought Jesus would not return, so they could live however they wanted.

But then we read this: “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.” 2 Peter 3:5-6.

What’s Peter doing here? He’s addressing these scoffers. Peter says, “You say there is a God who created the world, but he can’t or he won’t come back to judge it. You say God is a kind of a clockmaker God who created the universe and set it in motion, but will not intervene in it in any way. But how can you know that? You can’t know that. Plus, you already believe God has intervened, because you believe in the story of Noah, and how God has already brought judgment once through a great flood. If he’s done it once, why can’t he do it again?”

In other words, your beliefs are logically inconsistent – you don’t even believe in the possibility of a final judgment, yet you believe in a God who created the universe and who has already judged the world once before. Why not again?

Now if you’re here this morning, and you likewise doubt that Jesus Christ will personally, bodily return one day and bring judgment (because after all it’s been two thousand years, not just thirty, that we’ve been waiting), first of all welcome. We are glad you’re here. You may think I’m a crazy person because I believe Jesus is coming back, so all the more reason for me to be grateful and thankful and humbled that you’re willing to listen to me.

But I want to show you, even though I may not know you, that almost certainly your beliefs are just as logically inconsistent as the scoffers in Peter’s day. You may think, “No way – because I don’t believe that God created the world (I’m an evolutionist) nor do I believe in Noah’s flood.” Doesn’t matter – I’ll prove to you your beliefs about our world, beliefs that are important to you, are inconsistent.

You say you don’t believe in a creator God – and certainly, lots of people don’t. You think the universe is random. But there are excellent arguments for believing that the universe was created – there are arguments from physics, arguments from biology, arguments from cosmology. You can read them in any standard apologetic text or go online and find them. I don’t have time to go into all of them, but any one of them, and certainly all of them added together, make a compelling argument that the universe is not random, but actually was created and has a design.

But the most powerful one to me is the moral argument for God, and it goes like this: everyone on the planet deeply believes certain things are right and certain things are wrong. Being kind and thoughtful and looking out for your neighbor is right, rape and murder are wrong. It’s not just that we all came together and agreed rape and murder are wrong, but we deeply believe it – certain things are capital-R right and certain things are absolutely, capital-W wrong.

But if you believe the universe is random, then your beliefs about right and wrong must be random, too. You can't have a random universe, and universe that came about by pure chance, and still have true, absolute, real, meaningful morality. No, if the universe is random and meaningless, then everything in it must be random and meaningless.

If the universe is random, if it is by chance that we are here, then our sense of right and wrong has no more authority than the roll of a dice. You roll a pair of dice, and you can say "eight" is good and "six" is bad, but that doesn't make it bad. It's random and meaningless. *If there is no creator, then your morals have to be like that, too.*

Now, here's the thing: I know many people who say they think the universe was not created, but it's random and meaningless, and I know a few people who are willing to say that morality is like that, too. *Yet I've never known anyone who has lived that way. I've never met anyone who really treated their moral sense as random like a toss of the dice.* I'm not saying, by the way, that people who don't believe God created the universe are immoral – not at all. You can be an atheist and be an extremely moral person, far more moral than many people who claim to be Christians.

But what I am saying is that, just like the scoffers of 2 Peter 3, ***your beliefs are inconsistent.*** Your beliefs don't follow from what you say are the facts. Your view of the world is logically inconsistent, you believe strongly in right and wrong, while saying the universe will live in is meaningless. And your inconsistency *will not change, not even if Jesus tarries another two thousand years before he returns.* The waiting may make you doubt, but that doesn't make your doubts logical.

Now, I know most of us in this room, maybe all, have no problem with God creating the universe, and in principal we have no problem with Jesus returning to judge it. But, still, even for us, the waiting leads to doubts.

These doubts probably won't be intellectual, but emotional, because we can all too easily say, "Yes, I know God created the heavens and the earth, I know he sent the flood during the time of Noah. I know Jesus died for my sins, and I believe Jesus will return, but what does it really matter? That's all well and good, but how in the world can that help me in the troubles I'm facing right now?"

I heard a pastor once tell a story about a fifteen year old girl in his church who was going through an awkward phase physically. She felt really unattractive, and it hurt, but she believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, and she trusted her pastor enough to go to him and to ask his help and she trusted him enough to be honest with him about her struggles.

So she sat down in her pastor's study, and this is what she said, "I know I'm a Christian. I know Jesus died for my sins. I know that I am worth more to him than many sparrows, that he even knows the number of hairs on my head, and that he will provide for me. I know he loves me. I know one day he will take me to heaven. I know I have all these blessings, but what good is it when boys won't even look at you?"

Isn't that how we feel so often? It's not that we have intellectual doubts about Jesus returning and the final judgment, but because it seems "all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation" (verse 4) and because of the normal stresses and trials of life it's easy to feel like none of it really matters. It's easy to doubt.

Second, the hope of all our waiting for judgment day. Let's read verse 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."

Now, when we first read that verse, it sounds like God is just ready to punish the earth – he can't wait to burn it up. He can't wait to pay us back for all our sins. But the burning, the fire, that verse 10 looks forward to is not the fire of punishment, but of purifying.

Jesus talks about this in Matthew 19:28: "²⁸ Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." And the Greek word translated as "in the new world" is the Greek word *palingenesia*, which is a very rare word in the New Testament – it only appears twice, and this is the only time Jesus uses it. It literally means "regeneration," or "rebirth."

It's a technical term from Greek philosophy. The Greeks did not believe that human history is linear, that it is going anywhere with any kind of climax. Rather, they believed that history is cyclical – in other words, every so often the universe would wind down, it would run out of energy, and then there is a *palingenesia* when everything worn out is burned up and purged, and then the universe is renewed and begun all over again in a new cycle – a new world is born.

But in Christianity we believe that history is linear, and it does have a climax – when Jesus returns. And that's what Jesus is referring to in Matthew 19. At some point in the future, Jesus Christ will return to physically and visibly usher in his kingdom, he will judge the quick and the dead, and there will be a *palingenesia*, a universal, once-for-all, regeneration, a purging of the universe with fire and a renewal, a new world, born.

And you know what? Everyone, everyone, to some degree, wants, hopes, looks forward to some kind of "rebirth." Why do I say that?

Because to some degree everyone thinks something is wrong with the world, and we want it fixed. Now, what you think is wrong with the world might depend on your political views – if you're politically liberal, you probably really despair over poverty in the world, the inequalities in income, over the inequities in the justice system, over racism in the world, over what's happening to the environment. If you're more conservative, you're more worried about all the sexual immorality in the world, the real threats of terrorism around us, all the broken families, over all the dysfunction and corruption we see in government.

Now, which group is right? Both are correct – this world is full of problems. And the one thing everyone ought to agree on is this: no one on earth can fix it. We all ought to agree on the imperfectability of man. These problems have always been on earth, and no amount of education, no amount of money, can fix it – if money and education could fix man, then the richest, most educated people would be the best people on earth – and no one thinks that.

But, the hope in all our waiting for judgment day is this: while no one on earth can fix all these problems, someone is coming who will! The Lord Jesus Christ will come and once for set things right that have gone wrong. He will rule in justice, he will rule in peace. He will punish those who live to hurt people, who trample on and exploit the weak, and he will lift up the poor, the oppressed, the downtrodden.

In Isaiah 65, we read perhaps the greatest prophecy in all Scripture about what life will be like once Jesus returns and ushers in his reign: “I will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in my people; no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress.²⁰ No more shall there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not fill out his days, for the young man shall die [at] a hundred years old, and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed [probably that means the wicked, the sinner, will not live to one hundred years like everyone else, because there will be justice].²¹ They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.²² They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.²³ They shall not labor in vain or bear children for calamity, for they shall be the offspring of the blessed of the LORD, and their descendants with them.²⁴ Before they call I will answer; while they are yet speaking I will hear.²⁵ The wolf and the lamb shall graze together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox, and dust shall be the serpent’s food. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain,’ says the LORD.” Isaiah 65:19-25. The rule of the Lord Jesus Christ when he returns on judgment day will be so powerful that even predation will cease – wolves and lambs graze together.

Now, I know a lot of you may be skeptical of all that – this promise of absolute peace and prosperity across the whole earth. But let me ask you this: while you may be skeptical, *don’t you want it? Wouldn’t it be wonderful if it were true?* This is the Christian hope.

But the objection to this for centuries has been: ok, if that’s the case, *then why the long wait?* Why in the world would Jesus wait so long and let all this suffering continue year after year after year if when it comes he’s going to fix it all? Doesn’t he read the news? Doesn’t he know about all the pain in the world, all the evil? Why doesn’t he come now if he’s going to make everything so great? Why doesn’t he come right now and get rid of all the evil and all the pain in the world?

Third, the reason we wait for judgment day. 2 Peter 3:9: “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.”

You see, judgment day could have happened immediately after Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. Jesus could have returned right then, punished their sin, and that would have been the end of the world. All that pain and suffering never would have happened.

But I don't think anyone actually wishes that would have been the case, because while the pain and suffering would have never happened, we wouldn't have happened either. We never would have been born.

The reason we wait for judgment day is that, ultimately, God loves people. He wants us born, he wants us to live, he wants to know us, and he wants us to turn to him. And so he's not slow in keep his promise to judge, but he's patient. That's a big difference. He's patient with us, he wants us to turn to him and have a chance to know him – and aren't you glad he is?

Aren't you glad Jesus didn't return twenty years ago, in 1996? I know I am – I was a college sophomore in 1996. Some of us would have been in a lot of trouble if he had returned then, some of us might have been caught in the middle of doing something awful if Jesus had returned then – some of us wouldn't have been born. You can't, no one can look back at history and say, "It would have been better if Jesus had returned on this date instead of making us wait." It's impossible – instead, it's better that Jesus wait and give us the chance to repent.

And that gets us to the final thing I want to say: when some of you think of judgment day, you get a picture of a God up in heaven keep score, keeping records, writing down all the bad stuff you've done, and then on judgment day what he's going to do is throw it all your face and tell you how bad you've been. And you think, "That's what's so bad about Christianity – the guilt trip. The central doctrine of the faith is how God is going to come down and judge us and tell us how horrible we are. I don't want any part of that."

If that's how you feel about judgment day, then you don't understand what Peter is saying here. 2 Peter 3:9: who does it say will not perish? Does it say: "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 so that everyone can get their act together before he returns"?

No – it says, "that all should reach repentance." Do you know what the key to passing muster on judgment day is? Knowing that by yourself you could never pass muster on judgment day. The key to passing judgment day is knowing you're a mess.

"But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap." Malachi 3:2. If you're out there, and the fundamental position of your heart is, "You know, I'm not perfect, I've made some mistakes, but I'm not as bad as most people I know. I've done a lot of good in my life, I've worked hard. And I'm way better than this group of people over there. And, really, I don't have anything to be ashamed of." If that's the position of your heart, *you will not stand when he appears*. The fire and the soap of judgment day won't purify you, they will destroy you; I don't care how good you think you are.

But if the fundamental position of your heart is, “I am not perfect, I have made tons of mistakes, I am not the person I should be, and I hate that about myself. I hate how I treat other people sometimes. I hate how jealous I can be, how angry I can get, how selfish I can be. I cannot, cannot, look down on anyone. I want to change, and I’m trusting in Jesus not just to save me by his life, death, and resurrection but to make me into what the Bible says I can be – loving, kind, patient, gentle.” If that’s you, then the fire and the soap of judgment day will not destroy you. You will stand on judgment day.

The fire and the soap will instead purify you – burning away and cleansing away all the things you hate about yourself. And it won’t hurt – you’ll go through the fire, you’ll be washed by this soap, with a smile on your face. Because all the junk you’ve been dealing with all your life that you hate is finally gone. And the reason we wait for judgment day is to give everyone on earth the chance to desire that change for themselves.

God loves sinners, so people who know they are sinners in need of a savior have nothing to fear from judgment day. We have, instead, everything to look forward to. God loves sinners, so much that he sent his Son to die for them in their place.

Years ago I heard the story of a young woman who grew up in a Christian home, had great parents, had everything we would want for our kids, but in college started dating the wrong guy. And she got pregnant. Not at all an uncommon tale, not the end of the world, but not the outcome anyone plans for their kid.

But she was determined to repent. She wanted to own her mistakes. She didn’t blame her parents, she didn’t blame the boy. She confessed what happened to her parents, she broke off the relationship with this guy, and she was determined to have this child and raise her the best she could.

But before word got out that she was pregnant, and obviously before she began to show, another guy – a Christian – whom she’d known for several years had taken an interest in her and asked her out.

And to her credit on their first date she told him, “Well, I’ve got to be honest with you about something – I’m pregnant.” And this guy gives the all-time best response in that scenario. He said, “Well, I like pregnant women.” They are now married and they have that child and others as well.

Now, is it a good idea to have sex before you’re married? No, Jesus doesn’t like that. But you know who loves? Sinners, people who know they are sinners, people who know they’ve made mistakes and really own them, people who have been humbled by life and want to change and be more like him. No matter what you’ve done, no matter how many times you’ve done it, no matter how many times you swore you’d stop and then you did it again – you come to Christ and he’ll take you, because he loves sinners. And we wait for judgment day because Jesus wants everyone in the world to know that about themselves and repent, turn to him, and feel his love, acceptance, and approval.

If you go to Jesus and your hope is in him, you have nothing to fear from judgment day, and everything to look forward to. He'll make you perfect, he'll make you like him.
Amen.