

2 Peter 3:1-13 Patiently Waiting

The Christian way of understanding the world is very different from most people's – that there is a Creator who is independent of it but passionately committed to it. His independence and commitment include, as Peter reminds us, the return of Jesus to judge the world and make all things new.

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All of us are waiting at the moment, and most of us are sick of it.

2 Peter 3:1-13 is a complicated passage in which Peter defends the church's teaching that Jesus will return and judge the world, which is being laughed at (verse 4). He uses two arguments: saying that this is the message of the Old and New Testaments (verse 2, see list of New Testament references below), and that God has a history of intervening by both creating everything and destroying human life in the Flood, so he will intervene again to bring everything to judgement (verses 5-7).

Peter writes about judgement as fire, and that day's arrival as a thief in the night. And between these two images he tells us why God hasn't done this yet.

Fire

Reading verses 7, 10 and 12 makes it clear that this isn't a comfortable fire of a winter's evening or summer's barbecue! Some worldviews see fire as cleansing or restorative even, part of the circle of life but in Hebrew thinking it means destruction and is strongly associated with God and His judgement. With its unapproachable heat and light (1 Timothy 6:16) and its capacity for destruction, fire symbolises aspects of God's awesome nature. It is life-giving but it's life-threatening too (Genesis 3:24, Exodus 3:2, 13:21, 19:18, Leviticus 1, Deuteronomy 4:24). No wonder Jesus referred to the fires of Hell (e.g. Matthew 25:41).

This can make many of us feel deeply uncomfortable about God, that despite all that He has done to save people, we think He'd prefer to punish them. The Bible teaches that because God loves people and all His creation, He hates what damages and defiles them. He is not ambivalent when women are abused and intimidated, His anger burns against it and those who do it. He does not have a relaxed attitude to racial injustice, He is going to destroy the systems that allow and encourage it. The Bible says that this putting to rights ultimately that has to come from outside of our world because everything and everyone within it is so infected. So God will come: Jesus in all His glory to judge the living and the dead by His standards of love and holiness, and all that is opposed to God will be destroyed (see Matthew 24 and 25 particularly). Then everything will be made new and righteousness will dwell forever (2 Peter 3:13). This triumph of God's will and establishment of a perfect eternity is the focus of Christian hope.

Waiting

Why is God taking so long to do this? In verse 8, Peter quotes and expands Psalm 90:4 (the whole psalm is worth reading as it was clearly in Peter's mind), telling us that God doesn't relate to time like we do because He made it and exists outside of it. He knows the thoughts and deeds of billions of people in this one day and all of history is before Him at once.

Then in verse 9, Peter tells us something that's perhaps even more amazing: that this seeming delay is part of God's patient plan (Exodus 34:6). It is His loving desire that more and more people come into His Kingdom, so the gates continue to be held open, the gospel continues to be preached. Any of us who have put our trust in Christ have benefited from this.

Thief

Nevertheless, that Day will come (see Matthew 24:43, 1 Thessalonians 5:2, Revelation 16:15 for further uses of this image). We respond to the threat of thieves by locking our doors and then going to sleep but the meaning Jesus gave to this picture is of our needing to be ready for something that might happen at any moment (Matthew 24:44). We'll look more about what this means for how we live whilst we wait next week.

More waiting

Christian's lives should only make sense if Jesus is coming back (1 Corinthians 15:19) but for many of us, our lives look pretty explicable in the here and now, and we forget that we are waiting. It's very easy for this vital biblical expectation to slip our minds because we get very few external reminders of it – no-one around us is thinking and living this way. I believe that one of the things God has been doing through this pandemic is getting true (eternal) hope back into Christian's thinking and living – showing us the fragility and penultimate nature of this life, and teaching us how to wait in the natural so we can do so in the spiritual.

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Some of the key New Testament texts about Judgement Day / the return of Jesus: Matthew 24-25, John 14:3, Acts 1:11, Romans 14:10-12, 1 Corinthians 15:12-58, Philippians 3:20, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, Hebrews 9:27-28, James 5:7-8, Revelation 1:7 and all the rest of the book!

Extra quotes about judgement

"The biblical word for judgement means 'the decisive word by which God straightens things out and puts things right'." (Eugene Peterson, A Long Obedience in The Same Direction)

"God did not establish commandments, send prophets, and ransom humanity through the death of Jesus in order to maximize the population of hell." (Pheme Perkins, First and Second Peter, James, and Jude)

"If God were not angry at injustice and deception and did not make a final end to violence – that God would not be worthy of worship. ... The only means of prohibiting all recourse to violence by ourselves is to insist that violence is legitimate only when it comes from God. ... My thesis that the practice of non-violence requires a belief in divine vengeance will be unpopular with many... in the West. ... [But] it takes a the quiet of a suburban home for the birth of the thesis that human non-violence [results from the belief in] God's refusal to judge. In a sun-scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, it will invariably die... [with] other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind." (Miroslav Volf, Exclusion and Embrace)

"There's no pleasing some people. Depending on mood, the same person can attack God for not judging often enough, and then for judging too much. Questions like 'how could God allow that evil to continue?' and 'how can God say that sleeping with my boyfriend is wrong?' actually contradict each other; one is demanding intervention from God the judge, the other demanding the opposite, like the man who complains that the drug laws are not being enforced and then whinges about getting a parking ticket." (Andrew Wilson, Incomparable)

"Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, not between classes, nor between political parties, but through every human heart." (Alexander Solzhenitsyn, The Gulag Archipelago)

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Questions for group discussion

N.B. Luke will be doing another "I Have Questions" Zoom call after next Sunday's live stream, at 11.45am.

What have you had to wait for (apart from the obvious) that you found most frustrating or satisfying?

Most white western cultures don't like to talk about judgement and don't have any expectation of Jesus's return, or anything like it. If you're from another culture, could you share with the group what similarity and differences in expectations you have lived with?

Why do you think so many of us find it hard to live with the kind of expectation of Jesus's return that we see in the New Testament?

Peter uses the images of fire and a thief to help us understand Jesus's return – how do these make you feel?

What have you learned about waiting during the past year?

Luke spoke about transposing the waiting we've been experiencing during lockdowns to our anticipation of Jesus's return – how could you actually do this?

Do you love this life too much and the life to come not enough? Where are you focusing your efforts and ambitions?