

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 10 December 2006

No. T0448

Speaker: Mr. Anthony Brett

Lessons from 2 Peter: Looking to the Future - 2 Peter 3:1-18

As we have discovered, 2 Peter is very different to 1 Peter. Both were written to Jewish Christians. But in 1 Peter he reminds them of the way they were called to an incorruptible and unfailing inheritance in heaven (1 Peter 1:4), having been redeemed with the precious blood of Christ, the spotless Lamb of God (1 Peter 1:18). He also warns them to expect violent opposition and persecution from those outside. However, in 2 Peter, he has to warn the Christians about other, more insidious dangers that they will face and have to resist. The opposition is now from within, false teachers, those who twist the truth for their own ends; this is emphasised in 2 Peter 2. Satan is consistent in his desire to spoil and undermine the Christian testimony and will do all he can to question and discredit the word of God. This was the way he attacked Adam and Eve at the very beginning of time. It was not a direct contradiction of God's word but rather a question, "Has God said?" (Genesis 3:1). Most of us would resist a direct frontal attack from Satan which contradicted God's Word, but then we might easily allow a seemingly innocent question to take hold and gain credence in our minds.

Let's continue our study of 2 Peter by looking at 2 Peter 3. I will read 2 Peter 3:1-9 before we think about them. "Beloved, I now write to you this second epistle (in both of which I stir up your pure minds by way of reminder), that you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us, the apostles of the Lord and Saviour, knowing this first: that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, 'Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation.' For this they wilfully forget: that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of water and in the water, by which the world that then existed perished, being flooded with water. But the heavens and the earth which are now preserved by the same word, are reserved for fire until the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men. But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance."

2 Peter 3:1 confirms that both epistles are written by Peter to the same group of believers. He is going to "stir up" or stimulate their pure minds by reminding these Christians of things that they had already learned. They had "pure minds" in contrast to those spoken of in the previous chapter whose intention is to deceive and lead astray. Peter was not teaching them anything new, but rather reminding them of the Old Testament scriptures and the commandments of the Apostles. We should not be reluctant to be reminded of truths we already know. By way of contrast, the Athenians to whom Paul preached in Acts 17 spent their time "telling and hearing some new thing." (Acts 17:21). If it was new and novel it interested them, however fleeting or insubstantial the theory or idea might be. Our newspapers are full of such trivia every day, fads and fashions that are front page news one day and entirely forgotten a week later.

Peter was not going to waste their time in this way. Rather he would remind them of truths that they had already heard and believed. As Christian Jews they would be very familiar with the writings of the Old Testament prophets whom Peter calls "holy" in 2 Peter 3:2. We often forget that the only scriptures available to the very early Christians would be contained in the Old Testament. It was to the Old Testament they turned if they wanted to search out and confirm the truth of what the Apostles were teaching. The Lord Jesus used these same Scriptures to encourage the two disheartened believers walking back to Emmaus from Jerusalem following the crucifixion (Luke 24:13-27). He proved to them from all the Old Testament that He had first to suffer and then to enter into His glory (Luke 24:26). Alongside the writings of the "holy prophets" Peter places the commandments of the Apostles of the Lord and Saviour. They carried the same weight and authority as the Old Testament scriptures.

So in 2 Peter 3:3 Peter warns them about those who scoff at the notion of coming judgement. There have always been those with this attitude; those who completely disregard God's holiness and ignore His warnings. However, as time passes and we move to what Peter calls "the last days", the problems will increase. People will use the very fact that God is patient and slow to anger as an argument to try and prove their cause. "Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation". It is the very continuance of normality, the day to day humdrum of life, that they argue proves that there will be no change, no judgement. If there is no coming judgement, they see no reason why they cannot continue to walk or live their lives according to their own lusts and desires. Who would dare to argue that this is not the case today? All manner of evil

living is not only tolerated but encouraged. Our society is full of openly immoral behaviour that flouts God's clearly defined standards. It is folly to suppose that a holy God will ignore such behaviour for ever.

So Peter continues in 2 Peter 3:5 by stating that these people deliberately or wilfully forget that the earth and heavens are created and sustained by God's Word. By that same Word of God, the earth was brought under judgement with a universal and destructive flood as described in Genesis 7:1-24. The fossil record is in the rocks all around us, indicating a sudden and catastrophic event. But instead of accepting the record of Scripture, every attempt is made to offer other explanations that have no foundation in fact but are taught as such in our schools.

Peter then goes on to explain that now, not only earth but the heavens as well are kept by the same all powerful Word of God, reserved until a time of judgement by fire. At the same time, judgement or destruction will fall on ungodly men. It is easy for us as believers to get discouraged as time passes and nothing seems to happen and matters only get worse. Wicked rulers flourish and nothing seems to stem the increasing tide of evil. Those who mock at our belief in the return of Jesus Christ point to the long centuries that have passed and take comfort. They consider that God is slack or careless about what He has promised, not realising that such is His love and patience that He is long suffering, "not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9) God is so gracious that His desire, even for those that laugh at Him, is that they should be saved. To this end He gave His Son Jesus to die at Calvary, being punished by God for the wrong that each of us has done. To those who repent and believe there is complete and eternal salvation. In the same spirit of grace and longsuffering, He waits today while those who hate Him mock as time passes, overlooking entirely God's desire to bless them.

Let's now read 2 Peter 3:10-13. "But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells."

What a big difference the little word "but" makes! In Acts 13:16-29, Paul recounts the way the Jews killed the Lord Jesus, and then adds, "But God raised Him from the dead" (Acts 13:30). The Jews had conspired together with the Romans to kill the Lord Jesus, but God had raised Him from the dead! And that changed everything! And now here again we are assured that God will intervene. 2 Peter 3:10 reads, "But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night". It will be sudden and totally unexpected. Peter is stating very clearly that whatever the appearances might be, or unbelieving men might think, the day of the Lord will come. It will come suddenly, at the most unexpected time, "like a thief in the night", unexpected and unwelcome by most.

Expressions like "the day of the Lord" or "the day of God" are used in the Bible to convey a period of time marked by certain characteristics. It is vital to differentiate between them. The "Day of the Lord" is a period of time that is characterised by, among other things, judgement as described in several Old Testament passages, such as Zechariah 11-14. In Philippians 1, we twice read the expression "Day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6) or "Day of Christ" (Philippians 1:10). I believe this is a reference to the thousand year reign of Jesus Christ here on earth. It is sometimes called the Millennium, the time when the rejected Jesus will reign in glory and majesty. It is also called the "Day of the Lord". At the end of the thousand years of peace and prosperity, Satan will again stir up a rebellion against God. God will crush him and consign him to the Lake of fire. Then God who created the heavens and the earth will cause them to "pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up" (2 Peter 3:10). This is also the introduction of what is called in 2 Peter 3:12 "the day of God".

Peter challenges us in 2 Peter 3:11 as to how this fact ought to affect our attitude and behaviour. Vance Hafner, a Baptist preacher from the southern states of America, questioned who would want to invest a lot of time and money in a world that would soon be a "big cinder"! And this is Peter's argument. These things are going to happen; God is Holy and Just, He cannot, and will not, continue to overlook what is going on in this world, He is patient and longsuffering so that men might repent and be saved, but the time will come when He will again intervene in judgement. In the time of Noah (Genesis 6-9), the flood was totally unexpected. It had never rained on the earth before, let alone flooded, and yet God intervened in this way in judgement. So too in a coming day, "the day of the Lord", He will again judge both heaven and earth in a way that has never been witnessed or experienced before.

So, in 2 Peter 3:11, Peter questions us as to what "manner" or "kind" of people we ought to be. He says we should be marked by holy living and godliness. What we see all around us is temporary and passing. What God through His grace has introduced us to is lasting and eternal! We all have responsibilities that relate to here and now, but how much time and energy do we expend on spiritual things that will last forever? God's holiness and His promised judgement should be a sober concern to us, affecting the way we live and the things we do and allow in our lives. They should also spur us on to tell others about the salvation that there is to be found freely in Jesus Christ. Paul

writes to the Christians in Corinth, “knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men” (2 Corinthians 5:11). For Paul and the other Apostles, this knowledge was an added reason to be more diligent and earnest in preaching the Gospel. They wanted to share God’s good news concerning His Son, but they also recognised they had a responsibility to warn others of coming judgement.

However it is not just the coming judgement that we look ahead to. We believe His promise that the heavens and the earth will melt as it says in 2 Peter 3:12 “with fervent” or intense heat. But we can look beyond them to a “new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells”.

If the 1,000 year reign of Jesus Christ is called the “day of the Lord”, the “day of God” is the eternal state which is ushered in by the destruction of the existing earth and heavens and the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. God in all His holiness and love and peace gives character to this eternal day. It is interesting to notice that in relation to the eternal state, Peter uses the expression “in which righteousness dwells”. The Millennium will be a glorious thousand year reign of righteousness. There will still be sin and evil in the world but it will be swiftly and righteously judged. In eternity “righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:15). It suggests a scene of contentment with nothing evil or sinful to disturb or trouble ever again. We have the glorious prospect of dwelling with God throughout eternity in a scene that is entirely suitable to Him. A place where, as we are told in Revelation “‘God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.’ Then He who sat on the throne said, ‘Behold, I make all things new.’” (Revelation 21:4-5).

I will read 2 Peter 3:14-18 before we continue to think about them. “Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless; and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation - as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures. You therefore, beloved, since you know this beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen.”

Again in 2 Peter 3:14, Peter makes mention of the glorious and certain hope that is ahead of us and encourages us to be diligent, concerned, careful to walk now day by day in peace, without spot and blameless. In Jude 24, we read about the Lord Jesus who will present us “faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy”. It is certain that when the Lord Jesus takes us home to heaven we will all be transformed and be faultless or blameless. It is also certain that the “day of God”, the eternal state, will be marked by these things, so we should be ambitious to be marked by them now. We should be concerned to live every day holy, blameless lives until Jesus Christ claims us for Himself. While we wait, we should not be impatient but accept that the Lord is longsuffering and this will be the opportunity of salvation for some. He is “God, ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness” (Nehemiah 9:17). If He waits, it is so that more people will be saved.

In 2 Peter 3:15 we have the word “beloved” or “dear friend” used again. Peter has used the expression three times already in the chapter (2 Peter 3:1, 8, 14) and will use it again in 2 Peter 3:17. Here it is used in relation to the Apostle Paul who had publicly rebuked Peter for being two-faced in his dealings with new believers in Antioch as recorded in Galatians 2:11. There is no bitterness or resentment here. What had happened in the past is not mentioned again, and Peter speaks of his fellow Apostle with a great deal of affection. Five times in this chapter Peter calls his fellow believers “beloved” or “dear friends”. What a wonderful way to appreciate and value all our fellow Christians! Not just as those who are loved by God, but now also loved by us; family members, brothers or sisters in Christ!

Peter also acknowledges that Paul had a great understanding of the ways of God. He had received wisdom to this end and shared his knowledge with the Christians of his own time. Through Paul’s letters or epistles, we too can learn more about the plans that God has in mind for His Son, the Lord Jesus, and for us, His children. Peter admits that these things are not always easy to understand or grasp, but that is not sufficient reason to ignore them. The Holy Spirit lives in each true believer and we are told in John 16:13 that “He, the Spirit of truth, will guide [us] into all truth”. It is also attractive that there is no hint of jealousy in Peter’s writing. Paul might have a great deal of wisdom and understanding in spiritual matters, possibly to a greater extent than anyone else. Peter is just glad that his teaching is available for the benefit of all.

Peter is concerned, however, about those who are unlearned or ignorant and unstable, who twist scriptures to suit their own beliefs and to gain their own objectives. There have always been people like this who shelter under a cloak of Christianity, who teach and misuse Scripture to achieve personal gain or advancement. Ultimately, playing about with Scripture in this way will lead to their own destruction. In 2 Peter 3:17, Peter again calls the Christians he is writing to “beloved”. Forewarned by him about these perverted and wicked teachers, they are forearmed. Peter trusts that they will not be stumbled and turned aside. The aim of these wicked men is in marked contrast to 2 Peter 3:18.

Peter's genuine desire in writing this letter is that these believers will "grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ".

This must be a primary objective of all Christian teaching. The only person who truly delighted God was His Son Jesus as He lived here on earth. God's requirement was that "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind," and 'your neighbour as yourself.'" (Luke 10:27) The Lord Jesus alone met that requirement. He said in John 8:29 "I do always those things that please [the Father]". Our desire day by day should be that we grow in our knowledge of, and likeness to, the Lord Jesus. In this Peter returns to the theme of the 2 Peter 1. He was concerned there, that those he was writing to should be diligent to "add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love" (2 Peter 1:5-7). He wanted to see progress, but it would require energy and diligence on the part of these Christians. Peter goes on in the next verse "For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 1:8). There will be real and evident growth, a fruitful Christian!

It is clear from 2 Peter that Peter realised that the time of his death was not so far away. It is wonderful then to see his concern for these Jews who had, like him, trusted the Lord Jesus as Saviour. He writes to warn and encourage them. Peter desires to see real spiritual growth and blessing in these converts. He concludes his letter ascribing glory to the only one worthy of it; "To Him [our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ] be glory both now and forever. Amen" 2 Peter 3:18.

We are constantly reminded by all the New Testament writers that we owe all to our God and Father, who sent His Son to be the Saviour of the world. Let's make sure that we do not let a day pass by without giving to both the Father and the Son the praise and worship that is properly Theirs.

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