

But about that promise

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[0 : 00] 2 Peter 3. You used to occasionally to see people wandering around with sandwich boards and a popular! slogan was the end of the world is nigh.

! It's certainly rather gone out of fashion nowadays. But we are to focus our minds on the last things and that's what Peter wants us to do here.

In chapter 2, in his polemic against the false teachers, Peter was not very specific about what their teachings were. But now he focuses on one particular error, one particular heresy.

And that's those who deny the return of the Lord. But we need to note, of course, from the first few verses of this chapter, it's not a new strain of argument.

It's a continuation of what has gone before. He reminds them of the need to stand firm. He reminds them of the words of the true prophets and apostles, verse 3.

[1 : 22] And later on, he reminds them not to twist the scriptures to their own ends, verses 16 and 17. And in those verses, he reminds them that sometimes the scriptures are hard to understand.

And that, in fact, you can always find some obscure verse to support your pet theory. But he wants to warn them that to do this is not a mark of some special insight or spiritual wisdom, but rather instability, as the English Standard Version translates that verse.

Unstable people is distort, as they do the other scriptures, to their own destructions. Unstable people is distort, as they do the other scriptures. And you fall from your secure position, as he says in verse 17, or as I say the English Standard Version.

Translators, you lose your stability. You become unstable. And so the particular issue that Peter wants to deal with here is this question of the Lord's return.

And he talks about these scoffers who will come scoffing. There's plenty of those around. But actually, they are raising two objections to this teaching.

[2 : 34] And Peter does think these objections are at least worth answering. The previous chapter, he doesn't really say much about what the false teachers were saying.

But in this particular heresy, this particular false teaching, he does at least think it's worth answering their criticisms. And basically, you'll notice that they raise two objections to this teaching of the coming of the Lord.

In verse 4 and then later on. And there are two objections. We might describe them as the following. There is the argument from continuity, as we might call it.

Which is particularly in focus in verse 4. And those verses. And the argument, as we might say, from timescale. Well, where is this promise then? Why hasn't it happened yet? And I think he addresses both those arguments.

And it's worth looking at those arguments, I think, and addressing them from ourselves. So let's look first of all at this argument from continuity. And this is kind of a scientific argument.

[3 : 49] And it's interesting, actually, that Peter frames his argument in some ways in terms of the scientific understanding of his day. In verse 12, he talks about the elements being destroyed.

Stoichion is the Greek word. And, of course, we think of the elements as being something to do with the periodic table. But, of course, in ancient Greek thought, the elements were earth, air, fire, and water.

These appeared to be Greek science. Greek science to be the things of which the world was made. And Peter refers to them here. The word translated heaven, which is Uranus, can also be translated air or sky.

And in Greek thought, these elements were not so much in harmony as in competition. And Peter gives this idea a scriptural context. It's an oversimplification.

But to some extent, in sort of Aristotelian ideas, the earth and the heavens are symbols of stability. But they are acted on by the agents of change, which are water and fire.

[4 : 55] And Peter, as I say, gives this idea a scriptural context. He says that water is chaotic. He mentions Genesis 1, verse 1. And it can be destructive, in verse 6.

But it is the cradle of order and life also, verse 5. It destroys, but it also brings about new life. But it is fire, and we meet fire, you notice in verse 7 and verse 10 and verse 12, which is the true purifier, the true cleaner, the true looser, which is fire which burns up the surface of things and exposes what is underneath.

In verse 10. So, Peter says, does this scientific argument that things have always gone on the same hold water? And no, it doesn't, frankly.

And we might frame our scientific arguments nowadays in a slightly different language, but the argument, the logic still holds. And in fact, if anything, you could say that the modern scientific understanding even reinforces it.

There was a time when scientists argued that things always go on the same, but that's no longer the case. And water does indeed appear to be the cradle of life.

[6 : 17] But we know that water can also be destructive, and we have tsunamis and floods which kill people. Stars we know now from observing are burning out and exploding all the time, and any such event will wipe out any life in its vicinity.

And it now appears that some catastrophe killed off the dinosaurs, whether it was a flood, or the flood, or whether it was perhaps a meteor strike.

One might think of a meteor strike perhaps as being a combination of air and fire. So science doesn't argue for continuity at all. Science argues for change, for instability, for catastrophe.

Now some scientists might object to this linking of this to a creator god and a returning lord, but that's not a scientific objection in itself. The argument from continuity simply does not work.

We know that things in this world do change. They are not always the same as the scoffers were arguing. So we can really reject this idea of continuity, that things have always gone on the same.

[7 : 31] It's simply untrue. It just doesn't hold water at all. It's only from the perspective of our relatively short human lives that these things appear to be unchanging.

And that brings us to the second thread in Peter's argument, which is this matter of time scales. And actually this argument from time scale is a more difficult one to answer, I think, to address.

If this argument had some force in AD 68, then perhaps it seems to have even more force nearly 2,000 years later in 2016. Peter presents his answer in verses 8 and 9, but perhaps it needs or would benefit from a little expansion.

So let's look at some of the other scriptures which bear on this and see what they have to say. So the first question, of course, is what is the promise that Peter is talking about?

And does it have a time scale attached to it? Well, the clearest statement of the promise is probably Acts 1, verse 11, where we read, Men of Galilee, they said, they being some angels, why do you stand here looking into the sky?

[8 : 54] This same Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven will come back in the same way as you have seen him go into heaven. So that seems clear enough.

But if we're not to twist this, we do need to look at some other statements to get a clearer picture. And there are plenty of examples, but let me just pick a few of them.

Quite a lot of them in Matthew, you're probably aware. And so from Matthew 16, This is Matthew 16, verses 26. Sorry, I should have said 227 now, I think.

It's a typo there. Matthew 16, 26 and 27 says, What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?

For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels. And then he will reward each person according to what he has done. So here in Matthew, the promise is linked explicitly with two things.

[10 : 01] First of all, with the time of judgment. And secondly, by extension, with the resurrection. Because of course, without resurrection, how can each man be rewarded for what he's done?

And of course, in Matthew 24 and 25, there's a whole great chunk of teaching on the last things. And we can't sort of just go through the whole thing.

But I will pick out a few bits of Matthew 24 and 25 to make the point. Matthew 24, verse 30 and 31 says the following. At that time, the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky.

And all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call. And they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other. Again, that seems pretty clear. The scripture does insist on a visible and public return of the Lord. [11:08] That seems indisputable. There was a fashion, perhaps particularly in the last century, for what was called realized eschatology, which was the view that there's no real return of the Lord, true return of the Lord.

It all just refers to our experience of the Lord now. That's hardly a new idea, of course. Paul argues against that in 2 Corinthians as well. And while there is some sense in which the blessings of the kingdom are here now, these passages are absolutely clear. It can't really mean anything else. There is a visible and a public return. There will be a sign in the sky. Whether that means some astrological event or some astronomical event. But it will be something visible. And the Son of Man will be coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. You won't be able to miss it, is the point that's being made. You'll know when it happens. And there are other passages that give a slightly different slant on this because they talk of a new heaven and earth.

[12:23] And you noted Peter in his letter here has said a bit about a new heaven and earth. And so, for instance, in Revelation 21, these three verses, we read the following.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. For the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.

I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride, beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them.

They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. So we're told that this is not just going to be a sort of minor event, as it were, but a complete renewing of the creation of the world and the new city.

But when's this going to happen? What is its time scale? And one has to say, actually, that when you look in the scripture, it's not entirely clear.

[13:38] In fact, the short answer is that we don't know. There are at least two passages that teach that. So we looked at the beginning of Acts, when the angels announced that the Lord would return.

But just before that, the disciples had asked Jesus about the times and seasons. And Acts 1, verse 6 and 7 says the following. So when they met together, they asked him, Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?

He said to them, It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. So in other words, you are not going to know.

I'm not going to tell you. And of course, that perhaps most surprising verse in the New Testament, again in this passage in Matthew 24, Matthew 24, verse 36, which talks about the hour when the sun will come, says, No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the sun, but only the Father.

This event is set in the will of the Father. And not even the angels, no, and not in the sun, at least presumably means the sun, as when he was on earth, had access to that information.

[15:03] So the simple answer to that question is we don't know when it will happen. But still, there are passages that seem to give some idea of a timescale. But to some extent, they seem to vary.

So again, it's perhaps worth looking at some passages that seem to suggest a shorter timescale and some other passages that seem to suggest a longer timescale. Matthew 6, 28, sometimes quoted, it says, I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.

But it's usually taken in the context to refer to the transfiguration, which is a kind of preview of the Son of Man coming in glory. So that verse is probably not appropriate, relevant.

So we can probably discard that verse. But there are other verses, certainly, that seem to say similar things. Again, going back to Matthew 24, if we read verses 32 to 34, it says, Now learn this lesson from the fig tree.

As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near right at the door.

[16:30] I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Now, let's remember the context here is that Jesus' words certainly will come to pass.

And it's not clear what generation here means. We sometimes use it to mean a single generation, but it can also mean this race of man will not pass away. And it is also possible, although it's difficult to argue that, that this refers to the prefigment of the final judgment that was the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, which of course is what a lot of Matthew 24 is about.

But even so, one has to say it does leave us a little uneasy, doesn't it? Where is the promise of his coming? And again, if we turn to Revelation, in Revelation chapter 22, verses 12 to 13, we read the following and there are similar verses throughout Revelation.

Revelation 22, 12 to 13, says the following, Behold, I am coming soon. My reward is with me and I will give to everyone according to what he has done.

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. So he says there, Behold, I'm coming soon or I'm coming quickly, which is a perhaps more accurate translation.

[17:57] I'm coming without delay is one translation of that phrase. So why is there a delay then? And yet if you look at other passages, they would seem to suggest a longer time scale.

So for instance, this one I think is often missed, but I think it's actually quite a significant one. In Mary's song, in Luke chapter 1, after she'd been told that she would be the mother of Jesus, and she sang this song, we call it the Magnificat, and it's based loosely on the song of Hannah, but it's different in many ways.

And Mary said, let's see this, My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

From now on, all generations will call me blessed. If the end of things was going to be imminent, and that was the last generation, then in a sense, this verse would seem to make no sense.

She's saying, my name is going to echo down the generations, as the one who was blessed of the Lord. And if we turn again to those passages in Matthew 24 and 25, we find other phrases that seem to point to a longer time scale.

[19:25] So in Matthew 24, 5 to 8, we read the following. Many will come in my name, claiming I am the Christ, and will deceive many.

That's certainly been true, hasn't it? How many people have claimed to be the Christ, or a leader, and deceived many? You will hear of wars, and rumors of wars, but see to it you're not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places.

All these are the beginning of birth pains. And I think that's just the beginning, he says, when you see these things happening.

Perhaps there he is referring in particular to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. This is just the beginning of things. It's not the end by any means. And again, in Matthew 24 and 25, we have a couple of parables.

[20:39] Matthew 24, verses 45 to 50, says the following. Who then is the faithful and wise servant whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time?

It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions.

But suppose the servant is wicked and says to himself, my master is staying away a long time. And he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards.

The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and that's an hour he is not aware of. See, the servant says, where is my master's return?

He's staying away a long time. And of course, in Matthew 25, there are several parables of this sort. In Matthew 25, we have the parable of the wise and foolish virgins.

[21:39] I won't read the whole of it. But in Matthew 25, verse 5, we read, the bridegroom was a long time coming and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

So to be honest, it's a bit difficult to understand. There do seem to be some passages that say, behold, I'm coming quickly. But also some passages that seem to suggest a longer time.

And of course, perhaps most important of all, we have Matthew 28, the Great Commission. What did Jesus say?

Jesus said to them and came to them and said, all authority in heaven on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always to the very end of the age. Notice we get the end of the age and some sort of realized eschatology, if you want to use that phrase here.

[22 : 50] The Lord is with us now, but he will return at the end of the age. That makes it clear there will be an end to the age, but this command isn't something that's going to be carried out by some five-year plan, is it?

It's an awfully big world. There's an awful lot of nations. And how can that be carried out if this is going to be a very short time scale?

And of course, this is the point actually that Peter picks up really here. Some things are difficult to understand.

So how does Peter resolve this conundrum of apparently being Jesus saying, I'm coming quickly, and yet there are so many things that seem to have to happen first.

And it does seem to be not happening instantly, as it were. And Peter refers this to, this quotation in verse 8, is a quotation, of course, from Psalm 90, verse 4, the prayer of Moses.

[23 : 57] And it's perhaps worth reading Psalm 90 from verses 2 to 4, get a bit more what it actually says, because that's a, it is kind of a creation psalm.

It explains how things happen in creation and change. Psalm 90, verse 2 to 4, reads as follows. Before the mountains were born, or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

You turn men back to dust, saying, return to dust, O sons of men. For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night.

Well, by that way of accounting, it's only two days, isn't it? What is quick and without delay from the viewpoint of heaven might perhaps seem slow to us.

And the point Peter makes here is that the promise is attached to the Great Commission. Verse 9 in 2 Peter chapter 3, that all should be given the opportunity to repent.

[25 : 11] There are things that have to be fulfilled before he comes and indeed he even talks about hastening his coming in verse 12. Now, in a sense, how can you hasten what is set in the will of the Father?

But in another sense, you can hasten his coming because you can be involved in the preaching of the Great Commission and therefore, in a sense, preaching that all should repent and find the opportunity to repent and how can they hear without a preacher?

So, in that sense, you can hasten his coming. So, we don't know. The time set by the Father may not be yet, but there is no unnecessary delay.

the Son will come and he says, I am coming quickly. It might not seem quick to us. Maybe, may not be yet, may not be in our time, in our generation.

On the other hand, of course, it might be tomorrow and we need to be worried. not to be worried, we need to be ready. And that, of course, is the main point that Peter is trying to make here and that is the point of all those parables, isn't it?

[26 : 29] It's not the right way to say, oh, the Lord's coming is delayed, it doesn't matter what I do. I've got to be ready. So, what sort of people ought you to be?

That's the question that Peter arranges in verses 11 to 18, isn't it, as he draws his letter to a close. Verse 11, what kind of people ought you to be?

And as some of those passages we've looked at, I think there are two errors we can fall into regarding our understanding of the last things. And the first one is to say, well, if it's all going to be burnt up, what does it matter what we do now?

And some people were saying that in two Thessalonians, Paul tells us that some people were going to the extent of refusing to work. They say, well, what's the point in working in this age if it's all going to be destroyed?

And Paul gives that argument short shrift. He says, well, okay, if you're not going to work, then don't eat. We do live in this world. That's 2 Thessalonians 3, verse 10, if you don't believe me.

[27 : 50] It is true that we are supposed to feed the hungry and those who are in need. But it is also true that Paul says, if you won't work, then don't eat. Not to be sponges.

So we can say, well, what happens in this world doesn't matter at all. Why polish the brass on the sinking ship as I once heard it put?

But that's not the right attitude at all. We should be living holy and godly lives now is what Peter tells us. But of course, we can also fall into the opposite error of either saying that these things won't happen at all, it's all just realized eschatology, as I say, to use that phrase.

It's all just picture language of what has already happened, which amounts, like in 2 Corinthians, for saying, sorry, it is 1 Corinthians 15, isn't it, I think, for saying that the resurrection has already happened and Peter will have no truck with that idea.

There will be a time when the Lord returns and we need to live in the light of that. So we might deny how it happens at all. We might think it's so distant to have no relevance to everyday life.

[29 : 05] We might think it's all sort of pie in the sky or as Martha, Mary's sister, said, well, I know there'll be a resurrection at the last day but, you know, it doesn't have much relevance to now, does it?

Seems to be what she was saying. We might conclude that it doesn't really matter what we do because we'll get away with it. And if we take that sort of attitude, it leads to just feathering our nests here in this life and not really caring that the Lord will return and will reward each one for what he's done.

And so Peter has to remind us that both these attitudes are wrong. The correct response in verse 11 and 12 is to live now in anticipation of what is to come.

Our holy living now will be fitting us for the world of righteousness in verse 13. That's what he says. You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God's coming and speed it, the day of God and speed its coming.

That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire and so on. But we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth. It's not that it's so discontinuous that whatever we do now doesn't matter.

[30 : 27] On the contrary, the treasure of the nations will be taken into the holy city. The way we live now, as Paul again reminds us in Corinthians, we can take it with us.

We should be building with precious stones now because that will have value. That will be treasure in heaven as Jesus describes it.

And the way we live now will have value in the world to come. We live that way because we're looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth. Not in spite of it, but because we are.

And you notice perhaps in verse 10 that Peter himself refers to the teaching of Jesus on this point when he talks about the day of the Lord will come like a thief.

And he's referring there, of course, again to that passage in Matthew 24. Matthew 24, starting at verse 43, he says the following, Understand this, if the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into.

[31 : 40] So you also must be ready because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him. Who then is the faithful and wise servant whom the Master has put in charge of the servants in the household to give them their food at the proper time.

It will be good for the servant whose Master finds him doing so when he returns. I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But suppose the servant is wicked and says to himself, and this, of course, is the passage we read earlier, suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, My Master's staying away a long time and then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards.

The Master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and that's an hour he's not aware of and he will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The faithful servant is the one who's doing his job now, looking after the household of God now, giving them food and proper time.

That's the servant who the Master will reward when he returns. And so, if there are things that are hard to understand, we can say the scripture at least is absolutely clear on this point.

[33 : 05] We shouldn't be getting stewed up about times and seasons and dates. Lots of people have done that over the years and they've just landed up making themselves look foolish and unstable.

There was one a year or two back who insisted that the return would be on a particular date and this actually got picked up on the television program Have I Got News For You?

And as one of them said, well, if you're watching the repeat on Dave, then you've missed it. And he's right, of course. We shouldn't be making predictions like that. We'd end up twisting the words of scripture to suit our own pet theories if we do that.

And I'd say to you, if you think you've had a revelation of the day the Lord's coming, then I suggest to you it's time to get help. Your sanity is slipping. It's absolutely clear in the scripture that the Lord will come like a thief in the night when he's not expected.

But we do have a way to live in such a way as to hasten Jesus' coming as Peter reminds us in verse 12 by living according to those values of the world to come.

[34 : 27] And what are the values of the world to come? It's the world in which righteousness dwells in which all that is evil is burnt up. So we should be living now in that way as a suitable way to live in a world in which righteousness dwells even if in this world the evil is not burnt up.

And that's the correct way to prepare for his coming. That's the way to be ready to be doing what the Master has told us to do caring for the people of God living according to his word and looking forward to his coming.

So to conclude let me draw your attention to Peter's final words. Sorry, yes that is the last slide. Let me draw your attention to Peter's final words in verses 17 and 18.

And in fact the NIV slightly hides the literal meaning here when it says now and forever.

Of course in fact the literal meaning of the phrase as you'll see if you've got an English Standard version is for now and the day of eternity. What he's saying actually is live in a way that is appropriate both for now and for the day of eternity.

[35 : 53] So how do we do that?

Well he tells us we need to grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and then as he says to him be glory both now and for eternity.

Amen. Amen. So let's sing a hymn that reminds us of the Lord