

Study 10: 2nd Peter Chapter 3

Introduction

The second letter is written as a letter of encouragement for the brethren to remain faithful. In the third chapter, Peter reminds them of the certainty and assurance God gives to His children. He keeps returning to the theme of putting these things into practice as we focus on the perfect example of Jesus.

Body of the Study

The Certainty of the Lord's Return

The Last Days

The Evidence for Jesus Return

The End of the World is Coming

Implications for Christians

Recognition of Paul's Letters

Final Exhortation

Homework and preparation for next week:

Read the notes as a review of the study

Read both the first and second letters right through in preparation for the next study.

If the day of the Lord were to come in your lifetime, what things would you want to have accomplished first?

Think about the time of the Lord's return. What will it be like for you? Scary? Frightening? Relief? Comfortable? What assurances does Peter give us in this letter about that time?

Notes for study 10: 2nd Peter Chapter 3

The second letter is written as a letter of encouragement for the brethren to remain faithful. In the third chapter, Peter reminds them of the certainty and assurance God gives to His children. He keeps returning to the theme of putting these things into practice as we focus on the perfect example of Jesus.

The Certainty of the Lord's Return

Peter explains the reason for both the first and second letters “...in both of which I stir up your pure minds by way of reminder...” (2:3:1 NKJV). Although there is some dispute about Peter’s authorship of the second letter, this verse gives credibility to his authorship (or else it makes anyone else an imposter). Some writers, however, argue that the reference to a first letter here does not necessarily refer to first Peter (it could refer to another letter written by the author of the second letter). But we need to remember that the writer claims to be Peter who was an apostle of Jesus Christ (2:1:1). This is also emphasised in the next verse “...that you might 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...” (2:3:2 NKJV). Notice that the writer explicitly says the commandment of us the apostles. So, either the writer was Peter, or an imposter posing as him.

The point that Peter makes is that we need to go back to two things:

1. **The words of the (Old Testament) Prophets**, which foretold of the coming Messiah, and called God’s people to repentance in preparation. Particularly relevant to the discussion are what they had to say regarding “the day of the Lord”, such as Dan 7:25; and Dan 11:36-39.
2. **The commandment of the apostles**, which shows that the things that they spoke were authoritative, and are to be obeyed. The NASB has a slightly different rendition of this verse “...and of the commandment of the Lord and Saviour spoken by your apostles...” (2:3:2 NASB). Some try to use this rendition to say that the things that the apostles said was not authoritative. However the effect is the same, as they were only delivering what was passed onto them by the Lord (1 Cor 14:37), and they did not have the right to make up their own teachings on any subject, but rather to deliver to us the teachings that God had delivered to them. But that doesn’t mean that we can ignore what they say! The taught what God wants us to do – and as such, to reject the teaching of the apostles is to reject the teachings of God.

The Last Days

Peter presents the first and primary thing that we need to remember “...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”...” (2:3:3-4 NKJV).

The first area that requires comment is the term *the last days*, which does not refer to the closing sunsets of human history, but to the period (sometimes called “dispensation”, which is just a fancy term for a period of time) after the cross and before Jesus’ second coming. The Hebrew writer described the time in which he wrote as “...these last days...” (Heb 1:2). The prophet Joel foretold that “...afterward...” God’s Spirit would be poured out on all flesh (Joel 2:28), and this event was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost, when Peter quoted Joel’s prophecy of “afterward” as “...the last days...” (Acts 2:16-17).

In the first century, the populace who heard Jesus – and had some sort of belief in Him – expected that He would return soon. They had heard how He had promised to return, but thirty years later (around AD 65 when Peter wrote the letter), they still had not seen the return. Many became sceptical and began to question the validity of the claims of His return. They began to scoff at the claims, and today, around 2,000 years later, still there are many who scoff at Jesus’ claims.

The Evidence for Jesus Return

Peter reminds us that the claims (and rejection) of these scoffers is not based on evidence. On the contrary, they have actually ignored the evidence. “...*For this they willingly forget: that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of the water and in the water, by which the world that then existed perished, being flooded with water...*” (2:3:5-6 NKJV). The first piece of evidence is the flood. God destroyed the world because of the wickedness (2:2:5), by bringing about the global flood. Throughout almost all cultures in the world are folklore stories of a huge flood where only a few people survived. In some cultures, it is even quite specific that the number who survived was eight. Notice that Peter says that people *willingly forget* these facts. The evidence is there, but it is willingly ignored, as people do not want to accept the *consequences* of it. The same is true today. Many people deny the creation of the world, because they can then deny the creator who made it, and therefore they can reject the consequences of living their lives in recognition of an eternal God to whom we must give an account (Rom 1:20; 14:10-12).

The same power that brought destruction of the world by water, shall also bring destruction of the world by fire. Whilst the water destroyed the people but allowed the creation to regenerate, the fire will destroy not only the people but also the earth. “...*By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men...*” (2:3:7 NIV). It is not only the earth (ie the planet earth) that will be destroyed, but also the heavens – the stars and planets in the sky. Notice that Peter associates the events of the end of the world with the Lord’s return (2:3:4) and the day of judgement (2:3:7).

Whilst the scoffers remark that the Lord must have forgotten to return, we need to remember that God does not count time as we do. “...*But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day...*” (2:3:8 NIV). He reflects back to “...*For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in night...*” (Ps 90:4 NIV). In all of this, the slowness of God’s return is not because He is lazy or that He has forgotten, but rather because He wants to give mankind time to repent. “...*The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance...*” (2:3:9 NIV). His patience is directed to us! In the context of the letter to the Christians suffering persecution in the back-blocks of the Roman Empire, who were *strangers, pilgrims, and sojourners* on the earth, the assurance is that God has not forgotten His people! In fact, He is waiting so that He might redeem even more people!

The End of the World is Coming

The section concludes with the assurance that the Lord will return when it is least expected “...*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...*” (2:3:10 NKJV). It is clear from this passage that the earth will end at the day of the Lord. This is the same time that the Lord will return. The point is, that we need to be prepared. We do not know the time when the Lord will return. The consequence is that we need to live accordingly.

Implications for Christians

The implications of Peter’s arguments for Christians are brought out by his use of *therefore*. “...*Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness...*” (2:3:11 NKJV). The question is rhetorical – ones for which the answer are obvious. The NIV is even more plain “...*You ought to live holy and godly lives...*” (2:3:11 NIV). Like the brethren in northern Asia Minor who were *pilgrims and sojourners*, so our life on earth is just temporary. Our permanent dwelling place is in heaven, and we need to use our time on earth to prepare for it. We ought not to trust in the riches of the world, but we need to rely

on God in faith, and serve Him. The only true response we can have is to live holy and godly lives as we “...*look forward to the day of God and speed its coming...*” (2:3:12 NIV).

But how can Christians hasten what God will do? Peter would probably answer by saying that prayer (Mt 6:10) and preaching (Mt 24:14) are the two principal means to bring people to repentance and thus to hasten the day (cf. Mt 24:14). To the crowd that gathered after the healing of the lame beggar at the Beautiful Gate in Jerusalem Peter proclaimed, "Repent . . . so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ" (Ac 3:19-20). (NIVBC).

When Jesus comes again (the day of God – which Peter previously called the day of the Lord) will result in the end of the world “...*because of which the heavens will be dissolved being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat...*” (2:3:12 NKJV). Peter’s point is that there is no use in trusting in the physical things of the world which will be destroyed – rather, we need to put our trust in Him! Our focus must be drawn towards the future “...*But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness...*” (2:3:13 NIV).

Peter again takes the brethren back to righteous living “...*Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found in Him in peace, without spot and blameless...*” (2:3:14 NKJV). The terms *without spot* and *blameless* are the exact opposite of the false teachers, whom he described as *spots and blemishes* (2:2:13), and the clear implication is that Christians should be pure and not like the false teachers and intruders.

Peter comes back to the theme of the delay in the Lord’s return by adding “...*Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation...*” (2:3:15 NIV). God wants everyone to come to repentance, and by delaying His return He gives people more and more opportunities. Christians have heard and obeyed the gospel, and we need to strive to live our lives in recognition of the Lord’s sacrifice. Sometimes we fail, and when we do, we need God’s forgiveness – but we should try hard (strive) to live worthy of our calling, even though at our best *we are unprofitable servants* (Lk 17:10).

Just tonight (as I was writing this), a program came on the TV about a doomsday cult, that was predicting the end of the world on August 31st 2007. The program filmed the group as the months, weeks, and days approached, and then after the day. The leader of the group actually claimed to be the Messiah, and to be the Son of God. They saw no future or place in the world, and had withdrawn from society to live in isolation. But this is ***not*** what Peter was advocating. Whilst the world is not our home (we are strangers and pilgrims), God still wants us to live a fulfilling life – although not one which is driven by the pursuit of possessions – and He wants us to live a life of purity (unlike the cult who were engaged in sexual immorality).

Recognition of Paul’s Letters

Peter wrote in recognition of the letters that Paul had written previously to the brethren. We don’t know exactly which letters that Peter has in mind. It could be that he means the Galatian letter, but that letter was written to the churches in Southern Galatia. We have no information that would lead us to conclude that Paul ever visited the regions of Northern Galatia. We do know that some of Paul’s writings were lost (eg his letter to the church in Laodicea Col 4:16). It may well be that he wrote a letter (also lost) to the brethren in Northern Asia Minor, since Peter says “...*according to the wisdom given to him, (he) has written to you...*” (2:3:15 NKJV).

Secondly, Paul’s writings must have been substantially complete and widely circulated by the time of Peter’s letter for him to make the statement. This places the time of the letter as late AD 50’s to early AD 60’s (since Peter and Paul were both killed in AD 65). See comments on the introductory lesson. The churches had widely recognised (and accepted) Paul’s writings, which give credence to the things that they say.

But notice what Peter says “...just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. ¹⁶ He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction...” (2:3:15-16 NIV). Peter regards Paul’s writing as scripture – writing which had its origin with God, just as Paul himself did (1 Cor 14:37).

Further, he acknowledged that some of Paul’s writings contain things which are not easily understood. That is not to say that we can’t understand them, but rather that it might take some work! There is *the milk of the word* which is easily digested, and then there is the *strong meat* which requires that requires maturity in us to understand and deal with it.

Some people twist and distort the things that Paul wrote, and Peter describes them as *ignorant and unstable*. There was no doctrinal disagreement between Peter and Paul, and Peter describes those people who disagree with what Paul had to say as the ignorant ones! This suggests that Peter’s opposition might have been trying to play off Paul against Peter.

Final Exhortation

In the final few words of the letter, Peter reminds the brethren “...*You therefore, beloved, since you know these things beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked...*” (2:3:17 NKJV). The exhortation is to remain faithful in spite of the false teachers who were trying to undermine them and lead them away.

The letter ends on a positive note with the instruction “...*But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen...*” (2:3:18 NIV). We cannot stand still in our christian lives, but we must move forwards, and grow. We all fall short of the perfect example of Christ, and we all need to strive to live our lives after His perfect example. Therefore, we all need to grow!