

Looking Forward (Part 1)

2 Peter 3

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- In 2005, the world saw increased destruction and death caused by a huge tsunami.
- Multiple devastating hurricanes hit the southern coast of the United States permanently displacing thousands of people from their homes. Many experts are predicting that the areas hit hardest will never be restored to their former status.
- Devastation from earthquakes has overwhelmed relief efforts, especially in Pakistan where many are starving and freezing to death in remote mountainous areas.
- The global sex trade has reached such a powerful status, that governments including the United States turn their heads as our sons and daughters are kidnapped to be sold into the sex-slave trade.
- The U.S. is at war in Iraq over oil.
- The Muslim world is at war with the non-Muslim world, resulting in embassies and other buildings in flames. Has the non-Muslim West finally been pushed too far?
- Iran most likely has nuclear weapons and no one is sure quite what to do about it.

We continue to hear of "wars and rumors of wars." Then, we say, "Why are things taking so long to develop?" And we think to ourselves, "The Lord delays His coming! Where is the promise of His coming?" Why do we have to go through dashed hope after dashed hope as things on the world scene for so many years have seemed to move at a snail's pace? Even now, as the pace through the end of this age has picked up dramatically, it still seems like things keep dragging on and on.

The first century church felt the same way and it was taking its toll on them. The apostle Peter opens his second epistle in verse 1 with, "Simon Peter, a bondservant and apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who have obtained like precious faith with us by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ." And so although we understand that he is writing to all of the members of God's church, his inspired words are particularly applicable for us in this end-time.

Twisted versions of the truth of God were being taught. As Peter recalls his firsthand experience of Christ's glory at the transfiguration, he explains the more sure truth of the gospel as an antidote to heresy. The gospel is like a lamp shining in a dark place.

In chapter three Peter focuses on those who scoff at the idea of Christ's triumphant return and the final judgment. God once destroyed the earth with water; He will similarly one day destroy it with fire. In light of this, we should live in holiness and godliness as we wait for the return of Christ and the salvation He has promised to the saints. That, of course, is easier said than done. But, we have God's promise that He will help us. Peter sees the necessity to remind us of these things.

II Peter 3:1 Beloved, I now write to you this second epistle (in both of which I stir up your pure minds by way of reminder),

We see here why he is writing that. He is reminding them, and in turn I am passing this on to you as a reminder.

II Peter 3:2-4 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 Savior, 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."

So we see at that time, just as now, there were scoffers who were scoffing even at the idea that Christ would ever return. The characteristic of the heretics that worried Peter the most was their denial of the second coming of Jesus. Literally, their question was: "Where is the promise of His coming?" That was a form of Hebrew expression which implied that the thing asked did not exist at all, therefore, would never happen. These scoffers were not only scoffers in the world but they were scoffers among the members of the church.

- During Malachi's day the evil men asked, "Where is the God of justice?" (Malachi 2:17).
- About the time of David, the scoffer demanded, "Where is your God?" (Psalm 42:3; 79:10).
- Jeremiah's enemies asked him, "Where is the word of the Lord?" (Jeremiah 17:15).

In every case the implication of the question is that the thing or the person that is asked about does not exist. The heretics of Peter's day were denying that Jesus Christ would ever come again.

Let me summarize their argument and Peter's answer to it. The scoffers demanded to know, "What has happened to the promise of the second coming?" The argument of the scoffers, referenced in verse 4, was twofold. Their first argument was that the promise had been delayed for so long that it was safe to assume that it would never be fulfilled. Their second assertion was that their fathers had died and the world was going on exactly as it always had. Their argument was that this was characteristic of a stable universe and convulsive upheavals like the second coming did not happen in such a stable universe as the one we live in.

Peter's response is also twofold. He deals with the second argument first in verses 5-7. His argument is that actually, and in fact, this is not a stable universe. The earth was once destroyed by water in the time of the Flood and that a second destruction, this time by fire, is on the way.

The second part of his reply is in verses 8-9. The scoffers spoke of such a long delay that they felt safe to assume that the second coming was not going to happen at all. We know that politicians today realize, and actually use it as a tool, that if you tell a lie often enough eventually the deceived will believe it to be true. So the scoffers had actually convinced themselves that this was fact because they had told it to each other for so long. Peter's response nails their ridiculous human reasoning with two facts:

1. We must see time as God sees it; with Him a thousand years is as a day.
2. In any event, God's apparent slowness to act is not negligence or abandonment. It is, in fact, mercy. He stays His hand in order to give us more than enough time to repent of, and overcome, our sin.

Peter goes on to conclude in verse 10 that the second coming is on the way and it will come with a sudden terror and destruction which will dissolve the universe in melting heat. In a practical sense, if

we are living in a universe on which Jesus Christ is going to descend and which is speeding towards the destruction of the wicked, certainly it would be wise for us to live righteously so that we may be spared when the terrible day arrives. The second coming is used as a tremendous motivation for overcoming sin, so that we may prepare ourselves to meet our God. This is the general theme of II Peter 3, and now we are going to look at it section by section.

Peter's first argument is that the world is not eternally stable. The point he is making is that the ancient world was destroyed by water, just as the present world is going to be destroyed by fire.

II Peter 3:5-6 For this they willfully 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.

He says that the earth was composed of water and through water. According to the first chapter of Genesis, in the beginning there was a watery chaos.

Genesis 1:2, 6 The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters."

Out of this watery chaos the world was formed. Also it is through water that the world is sustained because life is sustained by the rain which comes down from the skies. Peter establishes the foundation of his argument against the scoffers by pointing out that the world was created out of water and is sustained by water and it was through this same element that the ancient world was destroyed. He is building his case to show that the universe, especially the earth, is not going to sustain itself forever, and it is not an eternal existence.

Peter is warning the church that these scoffers reason like this: "Things now are as they have always been, and the future will be the same." Their argument is that nothing changes. They build their hopes on the false idea that this is an unchanging universe; and they ignore the fact that the ancient world was formed out of water and was sustained by water, and it perished in the Flood.

The lesson of history is that there is a moral order in the universe and he who defies it does so to his own demise. That is what is happening to the world. Peter continues with his conviction that, as the ancient world was destroyed by water, the present world will be destroyed by fire.

II Peter 3:7 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.

I think that this scripture can be looked at in two ways. In one it may be a reference to the Great White Throne Judgment because it says there "the day of judgment" but if we read that as "a day of judgment," it can refer to the second coming of Christ. So Peter here is not that concerned about chronology of the events that are happening. He is using the events to prove his point against the scoffers to firm up the other members of the church.

The same word that preserves the existence of the earth sent the Flood in the past and warns of the destruction by fire in the future. Peter read and studied the scriptures of the Old Testament and he knew what the prophets were inspired to foretell. For example:

- Joel foresaw a time when God would show blood and fire and pillars of smoke (Joel 2:30).
- The psalmist has a picture in which, when God comes, a devouring fire will precede Him (Psalm 50:3).
- Isaiah says the Lord will come with fire; by fire and by His sword will the Lord plead with all flesh (Isaiah 66:15-16).
- Nahum writes that the hills melt and the earth is burned at His presence; His fury is poured out like fire (Nahum 1:5, 6).
- In the picture of Malachi the day of the Lord shall burn as an oven (Malachi 4:1).

The God who created the beginning of all things certainly has the power to end them. God Himself is described as a consuming fire in Deuteronomy 4:24 who will consume what is wicked and refine what is good. The Old Testament spoke of a flood in the past as well as a fiery crisis in the future, both of which the scoffers chose to ignore and deliberately forget.

The imagery is as relevant and powerful today as it was then. Mankind cannot presume on the stability of the world. We cannot take for granted that our environment will continue to make possible human life. God Himself will decide how long our environment will sustain us. And if He allows humanity to continue to mistreat it much longer, we will destroy all life on the planet. That is the ultimate physical result of enmity against God.

The forces of nature retain their primeval destructive power. Nuclear weaponry makes the literal fulfillment of Peter's apocalyptic picture of a cosmic inferno not only possible but a very real sledge hammer hanging over everyone's head.

Peter assures us that these things are not governed by rationalistic presumption or chance, but by God's will and control. This is the ultimate justification for having hope in the midst of a crazy mixed-up world. God is still on His throne; God is in control and will always remain there! In light of what prophecy tells us about the last days of the world, final doom is no more inevitable for the world than it was for Nineveh, if, like the men of Nineveh, everyone humbles himself and repents.

In the second half of II Peter 3:7, Peter very carefully chooses his words. God created the heavens and earth, and the earth has remained fixed and stable. What was destroyed at the Flood was the human world. What awaits in the future, however, is the fate of the whole creation—that is the heavens and earth. Although the Flood was an advance warning of what will happen, it was much more limited in scope compared to what God has in store.

"By the same word the existing heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept until the Day of Judgment and destruction of ungodly men." The fact that we do not see God actively judging His world is not a sign of His weakness. He is in absolute control and He is exercising His powerful word by not destroying the earth at this point. Creation is reserved and being kept for its final judgment because of the flagrant sins of wicked people. God will dissolve the existing heavens and earth and replace them with a new heaven and a new earth.

In Matthew 24:37-39, Jesus Himself said the Flood forewarned of a judgment ending in fire. That event will be first and foremost a day of judgment; the righteous standards that Jesus Christ established for us will be taught again and all men and women will be measured against them.

Those who have lived lives which fail to meet those standards will be declared ungodly; this is the term Peter used in II Peter 2:5-6 to describe the inhabitants of the world of Noah's day and Lot's fellow citizens in Sodom and Gomorrah. Those who are declared ungodly face destruction.

In the light of God's righteous standards we are called on to live godly lives. We have been forewarned. The reason for God's patience is to give us every possible opportunity to repent and change, and to develop righteous character in preparation for His Kingdom. It is God's right and duty to judge; and the wonder of His love is that He offers salvation against this background of destruction. He gives us a way out, or a better way.

In II Peter 3:8-9 Peter defends the teaching of Jesus' return against the conspiracy of the poisonous skepticism infecting the churches. Peter exposes the weakness of the scoffers' presumption in verses 5-7, then he returns to their question of verse 4, "Where is this 'coming' He promised?" He answers that the Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, and that "the end of all things is near."

II Peter 3:8-9 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.

If verse 7 was a reference to the White Throne Judgment and verse 8 looks back at the Millennium and the principle about how God views time, then the Millennium is a time that shows the mercy of God's longsuffering. It gives hope today because we see that God wants all human beings to come to repentance. And He is going to give them that opportunity.

Or, if verse 7 is applied to the Day of the Lord, then the Millennium is something to look forward to.

II Peter 3:8 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.

So, a thousand years for mankind to learn God's way of life and to repent and to become like Christ is a long time. But for God it is only a day. Either way His patience is shown. God knows how to rescue the righteous saints from trials. The pause before the Lord's coming is not so much a delay in judgment, as it is an allowing sufficient time for His people to be made ready.

Time is not the same to God as it is to human beings. God sees time with a perspective and intensity we lack. He can see the broad sweep of history in a moment, while at the same time He can stretch out a day with patient care. Peter's reference in verse 8 is to Psalm 90:4, "For a thousand years in Your sight are like yesterday when it is past, and like a watch in the night."

Whenever the Bible quotes the Bible, it is wise to assume that the writer may be looking at the surrounding passage and not just the words he has quoted. In this case Peter references Psalm 90 and draws out five points. What I am going to do is to read verses 1-17 of Psalm 90 and pull out those five points.

Psalm 90:1-17 Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever You had formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God. You turn man to destruction, and say,

"Return, O children of men." For a thousand years in Your sight Are like yesterday when it is past, and like a watch in the night. You carry them away like a flood; they are like a sleep. In the morning they are like grass which grows up: In the morning it flourishes and grows up; in the evening it is cut down and withers. For we have been consumed by Your anger, and by Your wrath we are terrified. You have set our iniquities before You, our secret sins in the light of Your countenance. For all our days have passed away in Your wrath; we finish our years like a sigh. The days of our lives are seventy years; and if by reason of strength they are eighty years, yet their boast is only labor and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away. Who knows the power of Your anger? For as the fear of You, so is Your wrath. So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom. Return, O LORD! How long? And have compassion on Your servants. Oh, satisfy us early with Your mercy, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days! Make us glad according to the days in which You have afflicted us, the years in which we have seen evil. Let Your work appear to Your servants, and Your glory to their children. And let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands for us; yes, establish the work of our hands.

That psalm is certainly applicable to the church, and what we should be praying and asking God for. Now the five points that I have taken from Psalm 90:

1. God is an eternal God. Verse 2 says, "Deep in eternity, from everlasting to everlasting you are God." This is the perspective from which a millennium can look like a day. The scoffers should have realized that it is fundamental to the Bible's view of God that although He deals with us in our time-span, He is Himself outside time. He is not limited by time.

There is comfort in the thought of a God who has all eternity to work in. It is only against the background of eternity that things appear in their true proportions—in their right perspective—and assume their real value. The scoffers rely on their enjoyment here and now, but from the perspective which God teaches us to take, that is a short-sighted and foolish attitude.

2. God is a creating God. Again in verse 2, "You brought forth the world." This also has been a weakness of the scoffers; they do not believe that this world has been created, so they think that it cannot be uncreated by its Creator. The Bible has a bigger view of God.
3. God is a judging God. Verse 3 says, "You turn men back to dust, saying, 'Return to dust, O sons of men.'" The psalmist has been thinking about the consequences of sin, "dust you are and to dust you will return." But he makes us feel the fear of death and judgment on an individual level too.

Verses 8-9 say, "You have set our iniquities before You, our secret sins in the light of Your presence. All our days pass away under Your wrath." The scoffers deny God's right to pass judgment on their secret sins.

4. God is a saving God. The frame of this psalm is God as a covenant God, proclaiming in verse 17, "may the favor of the Lord our God rest upon us." Therefore, despite God's anger, indignation, and wrath we can still confidently pray for God to show compassion, love, and favor on us.

The false teachers in II Peter 3 were denying God's ability and right to keep His judging word, and therefore the need for Him to exercise His saving word.

5. God is a moral God. Those who know in advance what behavior God will judge, and are certain that He will judge will have a right fear of Him as the psalmist says in verse 11. They will want to modify their behavior in light of that knowledge. So, the psalmist in verse 12, prays, "Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom."

These five lessons are central to Psalm 90. Peter's fellow church members were in danger of being distracted from recalling that God is the Eternal Creator, who judges according to His moral law, and saves according to His love.

II Peter 3:9 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.

Why did Peter feel it is important to remember this? It was because God was being accused of slowness, or even of being "slack." So Peter emphasizes in verse 10 that the Day of the Lord *will* come. Whether those who perceive this slowness are the recruiting false teachers, or some Christians who are starting to be swayed, does not minimize their accusation.

God has clearly promised to judge, so why the lack of action on the part of those members who had been swayed by the scoffers? Peter says that the answer lies in correctly understanding Psalm 90. The psalmist was inspired to write, "You turn men back to dust," which takes us all the way back to the creation of Adam and Eve. God forbade them to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. He said, "When you eat of it you shall surely die."

Although they did eat, they did not die immediately because God mercifully extended the possibility of salvation. Instead of dying on the day of our disobedience, "the length of our days is seventy years—or eighty, if we have the strength." But all our days pass away under His wrath. Both the Old and New Testaments teach us that God is patient. But the scoffers take advantage of the patience and they use it to claim that Jesus Christ is not returning.

That is a lesson which the false teachers deliberately forget, but which we must *never* forget. It is for our benefit that God measures time on His timescale rather than on ours. He is patient with us, not wanting any of us to perish. He would much rather everyone come to repentance. But, we must not forget what Peter says in verse 7, about the "perdition or destruction of ungodly men."

In light of this, we have to be careful to wisely use the time while God is being patient with us and not take advantage of it. First, we should bear in mind that Peter's direct appeal is to the members of God's church—to us here today. Peter is cautioning us with the awful warning of the judgment on the false teachers ringing in our ears. Peter warns us to be on continuous watch for fear that our imperfect lives may stretch God's patience with us.

On a similar vein, Paul warned the members in Corinth in I Corinthians 10:12, "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall." The challenge is to be neither self-absorbed nor lackadaisical. We have to be Christians who are motivated to fulfill the great commandments of love

toward God and our fellow human beings, and vigorous to fulfill the great commission of truly witnessing God's way of life in the way we live our lives. Many people do not realize that these are one and the same.

The patience, with which God has designed His plan of salvation for the first-fruits, and the rest of mankind at a later date, is not resulting in the failure of God's plan, but rather the condition of its success. He is allowing us all time to overcome and to be shaped and molded as He wants us.

We can also see from II Peter 3:9 that time should always be regarded as an opportunity. The years God gives the world is a further opportunity for us to repent of sin and turn to Him. Every day we are given is a gift of mercy. It is an opportunity to improve ourselves; to provide some service to others, and to draw closer to God.

Throughout his letter, Peter has been concerned to defend the whole of God's Word from attack. He has consistently made the New Testament apostles and the Old Testament prophets (that is, the whole Old Testament) an inseparable combination of one complete work. He is constantly tying the two together.

He shows how they speak with a united voice as he combines the promise of God's patience from Psalm 90 with the New Testament promise of Christ's return.

II Peter 3:10 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.

Peter is speaking of the New Testament teaching of the second coming of Jesus Christ, but he is describing it in terms of the Old Testament teaching of the Day of the Lord. As you know, the Day of the Lord is a concept that runs through the prophetic books on the Old Testament. Mankind's enmity against God has set the world on a path of destruction for thousands of years.

The Day of the Lord begins following the heavenly signs of the sixth seal of the book of Revelation. Christ's return is at the seventh trumpet blast of the seventh seal which is during the Day of the Lord. The Day of the Lord is just prior to the Millennium.

The only way the world's process of physical progress and spiritual degeneration can be changed is by direct intervention of God. Mankind will not do it on their own. Intervention on an individual scale is very limited right now. God is directly intervening on a daily, even hourly, basis for those He has called and chosen—for those He has given the help of His Holy Spirit.

What did Jesus tell His disciples? "Keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But, 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."

So you and I must be ready because the Son of Man will come at an hour when we do not expect him (Matthew 24:42-44)—unless we have an intimate spiritual relationship with Him—and then God will let us know when He is coming at the proper time. In the meantime we have to exercise faith, manifest works in our lives of the fruit of the spirit, obedience to God, and overcoming sin.

Amos 3:7 says, "Surely the Lord GOD does nothing, unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets." While it is yet a "secret" counsel within Himself, He forecasts to His servants the prophets. The same word signifies "secret counsel with a friend." He is not only speaking about revealing these things to His prophets, but also speaking about individually revealing what we need to know, as being His friend; we would have an intimate relationship with Him. That intimate relationship through prayer, Bible study, and fasting is so very important.

God revealed to Noah that He would bring the deluge. He revealed to Abraham and Lot that He would destroy the cities of the plain. He revealed to Joseph the seven years of famine in Egypt. He revealed to Moses the plagues. He revealed to Moses and Joshua all the chastisements of His people. He revealed to Jonah the destruction of Nineveh, that they who heard of the coming punishment, could avoid it by repentance, or, if they despised it, might be more justly punished.

He did not inflict any plagues on Egypt by the hand of Moses until He first forewarned Pharaoh and the Egyptians by him; nor the sufferings by the Ammonites, Midianites, and Philistines, related in the book of Judges, but He admonished Israel beforehand through Joshua; nor did He inflict on the Jews the destruction by Titus and the Romans, but He admonished them beforehand by Christ and the apostles.

Neither will He bring the last destruction on the world without having first sent the prophets and angels, who, sounding with the seven trumpets, will proclaim it throughout the world.

Peter has emphasized that God will be patient, but He will come, and both the patience and the coming have been promised. Revelation 10:6 tells us that there will be a day when God says, "There will be no more delay!" That promised day will be an unwelcome shock to those who thought that it had been postponed indefinitely. The false teachers, of course, would have believed that Jesus expected the Kingdom to come fully either in His lifetime or within a few months of His ascension.

In light of that not happening they said that His promises must be reinterpreted in a more poetic, less literal way, and subjected to a more critical examination. To me that almost sounds like what WCG did, in the late 80's and early 90's, when they began to re-evaluate, beginning with prophecy, all of the doctrines. Once they destroyed, so to speak, the speculations of prophecy that Worldwide had, then it opened the floodgates for other doctrines to be explored and changed. It actually stems all the way back to the 1960's and 70's when it was speculated that we would be fleeing in 1972, and Christ would return in 1975. About that time period is when we saw scoffers coming full force into the church, and trying to convince us that the Lord delays His coming, and that it might not even come.

These false teachers are like homeowners who casually leave doors and windows open. Peter calls this lackadaisical approach foolish. Jesus said He will come when people do not expect Him, not when they do, and that day will be one of unrivaled cosmic destruction.

Although God will send His two witnesses, the Day of the Lord will seem like it comes without warning, but only because the warning witness is scoffed at by the world. It will be a time when the earth will be shaken to its foundations. It is a time when the judgment and obliteration of man's rule on earth will come to an end, and therefore, it is a time of terror.

Zephaniah 1:14-17 The great day of the LORD is near; it is near and hastens quickly. The noise of the day of the LORD is bitter; there the mighty men shall cry out. That day is a

day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of devastation and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet and alarm against the fortified cities and against the high towers. "I will bring distress upon men, and they shall walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the LORD; their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like refuse."

I just wanted to read that to show you the type of passages that Peter was reading.

Isaiah 13:9-13 Behold, the day of the LORD comes, cruel, with both wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate; and He will destroy its sinners from it. For the stars of heaven and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be darkened in its going forth, and the moon will not cause its light to shine. "I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; I will halt the arrogance of the proud, and will lay low the haughtiness of the terrible. I will make a mortal more rare than fine gold, a man more than the golden wedge of Ophir. Therefore I will shake the heavens, and the earth will move out of her place, in the wrath of the LORD of hosts and in the day of His fierce anger.

Peter's picture in II Peter 3:10 of the second coming of Christ is drawn in terms of the Old Testament picture of the Day of the Lord.

II Peter 3:10 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.

Some translations say "burned up" instead of "laid bare." Either way the destruction will be near complete on the earth. It will not be total because there will be individuals who will still be alive on the earth. He uses a very vivid phrase, "with a great noise" or, "with a roar." In the Greek it is what you might call a noisy word, used for arrows whizzing, birds' wings rustling, the rushing of a rising stream, or, the crackling flames of a forest fire. With this crackling crash the heavens will disappear from the sight of men.

Another descriptive phrase that Peter uses is "the elements will be destroyed by fire." By the elements Peter does not mean the chemical elements listed on the periodic table. The word "elements" was used of numbers in a series, letters in alphabetical order, or of anything in a row. Over time the word came to mean the stars, planets, and galaxies—anything which was a component part of the universe. Peter and the Old Testament prophets saw the Day of the Lord as one of universal upheaval. We know that there is not a new heaven and a new earth until after the White Throne Judgment. It is not talking about a total destruction of the heavens and the earth at the time of the Day of the Lord, but a major upheaval of them.

This blistering destruction is so unimaginably vast that we begin to see how futile it is to think of the Day of the Lord in terms of a global nuclear holocaust or planetary climate change to illustrate the universal meltdown that Peter envisions.

Our limited imagination cannot grasp the true picture of the Day of the Lord. To rely on our own imagination would cause us to invent or manufacture a God who is too small to be the Creator and Judge of the universe. But this is exactly what the false teachers have done. They have reduced God to more of a theory than a reality.

Instead, we have to rely on the description of God contained in His Word. The Bible starts and finishes with a God who creates a universe and then creates a new universe; who makes us in His image and then remakes us in His image. God is a God who says, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will never pass away." It is enough to note that Peter sees the second coming as a time of terror for those who are the enemies of Christ.

The stoics of Peter's time, and the scientists of today, have an inevitably pessimistic view of the future. But Peter encourages us to understand that we have a wonderful hope. We can see the future destruction of absolutely everything, and yet know in its recreation that there is something infinitely more wonderful to follow.

Peter, in the rest of the New Testament, expresses this hope of a renewal and liberation of God's creation. In contrast to this impending destruction, Peter tells us three times in verses 12-14 of II Peter 3 to "look forward," beyond the destruction to a new environment.

II Peter 3:11-14 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. Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless.

Peter emphasizes it three times that we are to be looking forward, and that means that it is very important to have that vision to be able to see what God's plan is going to bring about. This is what gives us hope to get through the troubled times. No one will be able to keep his sanity through the Tribulation and the Day of Lord without seeing that future hope.

The phrase in verse 11 "will be dissolved" or, "will be destroyed" is a present participle grammatical sense in the original, almost as if the process has already started. What the astro-physicist sees as ten billion years ahead has already started as Peter expresses it. God has started His plan and He is continuing with it.

If the universe ends not with an impersonal cosmic implosion, but with an encounter with the personal and living God, then our human response to God does most certainly matter. The false teachers tell us that that does not matter, but it does. If we can neither flee from Him, nor be crushed into infinite insignificance, we must face up to our responsibility to live holy and godly lives. There is no way to avoid answering for our actions. A person cannot run from the church or run from the truth and go into the world and be safe, because judgment will come and they will have to answer for their ungodly ways. There is no way to avoid answering for our actions.

Peter does not give us a list of what we can do and what we cannot. The words "holy" and "godly" are both plural, and literally mean "in holy forms of behavior and godly deeds." It is an attitude that follows with works, with doing and living a life similar to Christ when He was on earth. The plural of "holy" and "godly" imply that there are many ways in which holiness and godliness can be practiced.

Peter wants us to expand these ideas beyond the narrow concept of religious things to do and to focus on the spirit of the law—the righteous principles of God's way of life and applying them. Those who do not understand how to apply the righteous principles of God's way of life will always be looking

for rules about whether they can do this or that. But, when we apply the spirit of the law, with the help of the Holy Spirit, an understanding of the principle of the spirit of the law and righteous principles that apply in all areas of life and we do not have the need to ask someone specifically whether we can dye our hair or not, or whether we can wear a short skirt, or a bathing suit. These are all specific things that people want to know, but God wants us to develop righteous principles and apply them.

Peter is emphasizing the moral connection with the second coming of Christ. If these things are going to happen and the world is hurrying to judgment, obviously a person must seek with all his heart, mind, and strength to be spiritually healthy to be an inhabitant in that new world.

Christ will return to judge the ethical and moral deterioration, and there will be a consequence. If there is nothing in the way of a second coming, nothing in the way of a goal to which the whole creation moves, then life is going nowhere, and it does not matter whether we obey or live God's way of life or not. This was the problem with the false teachers and scoffers that Peter is warning the church to avoid.

If there is no goal either for the world or for the individual life, other than extinction, certain attitudes toward life become inevitable. These attitudes have permeated society for centuries.

Let me just mention some things that have caused our own youth in the church to lose hope or lose vision of the future. Listen to what they have interpreted from what we as parents in the church have inadvertently impressed upon them. I speak these things from what I have observed in traveling to different church areas and at the Feast. It is not just about this congregation, it is about all of the congregations of God. Here is what they interpret that we say:

- If there is destruction to come (which they interpret as "nothing to live for") we may as well make up for missing out on the "pleasure" the world has to offer.
- If there is destruction to come we have nothing to live for, so we may as well just give up and be completely indifferent to life. Nothing matters much if the end of everything is extinction in which we will not even be aware that we have been extinguished.
- If there is destruction to come we have nothing to live for but extinction and the world is going nowhere, what has entered into our lives is a kind of lost-ness that we are drifting in. We are coming from nowhere and on the way to nowhere.

This is something that I have observed by some of the youth in our church. They do not have goals and hopes; they see no reason to further their education for improving themselves and for getting better jobs and that type of thing.

This attitude has been existent among the youth for decades. There was an over-emphasis on prophecy and an over-speculation as well. I believe that Mr. Armstrong said that about one third of the Bible is prophecy, and I agree with that, but that does not mean that you speak about it ninety percent of the time when you are in your home. That is what has happened I think.

Even pagans and atheists find a certain, almost intolerable, quality in a life without a goal. When we have stripped the doctrine of the second coming of Christ of all its surface imagery, the tremendous truth it conserves is that life is going *somewhere*—and without that conviction there is nothing to live for. But, there *is* something to live for; and it is good and abundant beyond our wildest imaginations.

I John 3:2-3 Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.

I cannot imagine what Jesus Christ is as completely as God, but I sure want to be like that.

II Peter 3:12 . . . 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?

Can we really hasten the coming of the day of God? The Greek word translated "hastening" means "to urge on diligently or earnestly; by implication, to wait eagerly." Peter speaks of the Christian as not only eagerly awaiting the coming of Christ, but as actually hastening it on.

Partly, Peter seems to say, we can hasten the coming of the day of God by not moaning at its apparent slowness, but living in its light. If God is delaying His coming by our sins as II Peter 3:8-9 implies, then we encourage Him to come by changing our lives in obedience to Him.

When we pray, "Your Kingdom come," we are asking God to intervene in that final climactic way; but we are also committing ourselves to live as His subjects. The prayer for God's return is a courageous one, because only those who are striving after holiness would dare to want the coming of the Day of the Lord.

We have to be careful, though, that we do not desire the calamity of people in the world from an attitude of vengeance. Proverbs 17:5 warns, ". . . He who is glad at calamity will not go unpunished."

We also hasten the day by our verbal witness of Jesus Christ in the way that we live and speak.

Matthew 24:14 And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.

There must be a witnessing to the world of the coming Kingdom of God before Christ will return. Peter preached this message in Jerusalem, and the Two Witnesses will preach that message, but we can also declare that message by our own lives as we live God's way of life.

Acts 3:19-20 Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, 'and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before.'

Jesus taught that it is within the control of God either to shorten or to lengthen that interim period as He wills. Peter tells us that we are going to have a new home, a home of righteousness. We are to be looking forward to this brand new heaven and earth, and to begin to live a life now that shows how much we are preparing for it.

II Peter 3:12-13 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.

Peter is not saying that God is going to abandon His creation. God made a good world, but placed it under a curse of judgment because of human sin. He promised that creation would be renewed and restored, and so even today creation is eagerly waiting that moment when God's people will rule the world in God's way.

Peter links God's promise of "new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells," with holy conduct and godliness. The cosmic re-creation actually involves individual Christians. This hope of a new heaven and a new earth should inspire us and drive us on.

We have to make every effort to be ready for our new home. This does not mean spending all day dreaming about it or trying to plot its arrival, but being ready in terms of ordinary, everyday, standard Christian living. What kind of people should we be?

II Peter 3:11, 14 Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, . . . Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless;

To be found by Him in peace means that we all have to get along together in peace. If we are having contentions, fights, and disagreements how can we be found by Him in peace? Being without spot and blameless is a tall order to shoot for, and we cannot do it on our own, we need, and have to have, God's Holy Spirit. As you recall, to be blameless was a requirement of both sacrificial animals and the sacrificing priesthood. Anything that was devoted to God was to be absolutely perfect, and we should be devoted to God.

Although "without spot" or "spotless" are not Old Testament terms, and it is difficult to catch the precise difference between the two words, they became a natural pair; and in the Greek of I Peter 1: 19, Peter uses them to describe the absolute perfection of Jesus Christ in His death.

Ironically, the false teachers have been described by Peter as blots and blemishes. Once again, we are being told to contrast ourselves with those who face God's judgment, to distance ourselves from them, and to be as unlike them as possible. They will have no place in the new home of righteousness, because they are or will be judged unrighteous.

The first prayer that Peter made for these Christians was that "grace and peace" would be theirs (II Peter 1:2). Here he says that we should be at peace with God. If we are confident in our relationship with God we know that He is who we obey, and that His patience means salvation. Trusting Him, all is well, because we know that nothing exposed on that Day can damage us at all. Our looking forward will be over, and we will receive our rich, warm welcome.

In conclusion, Peter tells us certain things about the Christian life.

1. The Christian is one who is forewarned. That is to say we cannot plead ignorance. We know the right way and its rewards; and we know the wrong way and its disasters. We have no right to expect an easy way because we have been told that Christians must suffer with Christ. We have been warned that there will always be those who are ready to attack and to pervert the faith. To be forewarned is to be forearmed; but to be forewarned is also a sobering responsibility, because he who knows to do right and does wrong is under a double condemnation.

2. The Christian is one with a basis for life. We should be rooted and founded in the truth. There are certain things of which we are absolutely certain. Our faith in God is steadfast. There is a certain inflexibility in our life; there is a certain basis of belief that, "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."
3. The Christian is one who has a developing life. Our inflexibility is not the rigidity of death. Every day we must grow in grace and knowledge—we must continue to produce the fruit of the Holy Spirit. It is only on a firm foundation that we will grow.

As we can all obviously see, life in this world is not going as it did. We know this because God has given us discernment of the times. And, so we see clearly that immorality, theft, and lying, as well as the breaking of the other commandments of God, has become more blatant, deliberate, and unashamed.

When Peter wrote his second epistle in 60 AD, Jerusalem was on the verge of exploding into violence and chaos. Just before the Temple was destroyed in 70 AD the Christians were being blamed for incitement of violence in Rome. Peter was amazed that the church was falling spiritually asleep because of the distractions and rumors of wars in the world.

The church was aware of Jesus' Parable of the Ten Virgins who all spiritually slumbered and slept. The ten virgins parable applied to them then, as does Peter's epistles, because when the Temple was destroyed it ended a time period in history for them. But, this parable, and Peter's epistles, are especially directed at this end time.

You would think that with all that was going on in the world at that time that they would have been charged with enthusiasm and energy. But many were just waiting it out—producing little or no growth, similar to today. Not everyone in the church was doing that, and similarly not everyone today is non-productive. There are many in the church who are productive and hard working and producing fruit.

Had every church member just been biding his time, the church would have died out, or God would have had to raise up children from stones to do His work. In contrast to many of the brethren, the apostles were passionate about what Christ had revealed to them.

Luke 3:7-11 Then he said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." So the people asked him, saying, "What shall we do then?" He answered and said to them, "He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise."

John the Baptizer's answer was a way of saying "serve one another with loving kindness." That was the principle that he was expressing there. How do we do that, being so widely scattered? The first thing that comes to mind is prayer. Do we pray for the brethren, especially those who are going

through severe trials? Well we do, but how often do we, and do we do it fervently? Do we pray for inspiration of the spoken and written messages by the ministers and others who help us to understand our responsibilities in God's church?

Does griping and complaining about people in the church support or hinder the work that God is doing through His church? Of course it hinders. To hinder God's work is to be against God! It is to be antichrist!

Luke recorded that John the Baptizer told the multitude what is expected of them: "bear fruits worthy of repentance." Those who profess repentance are highly concerned to live like dedicated and loyal children of God. If we profess repentance without following it up with spiritual fruit, we cannot escape the wrath to come. The fruits of repentance will show whether it is sincere or not. We show God that we have changed our perverse way of thinking by the evidence that we have changed our way of life.

Second and third generation Christians (that is, you sons and daughters of long time church members) take note of what I am about to say:

Be careful you do not make excuses for not fulfilling your duty to repent of what you are doing wrong, by saying to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father' (v. 8). Do you know what that means? It means do not say to yourself, "my parents are members of God's church, so I am already a 'shoe-in' for going to the place of safety, and for making it into the Kingdom of God." Wrong! You will not be going anywhere if you do not "bear fruits worthy of repentance." What good will it do you, to be the children of godly parents, if you are not trying to be godly yourself?

If it is so important for our children not to ride on the coattails of their parents, how much more essential is it for we adults not to rest on our earlier laurels. We cannot allow ourselves to think that the spiritual successes we have had in the past will carry us into the Kingdom of God. In God's Kingdom He will have people who have been active Christians, not has-been Christians.

I might add that the younger children, as long as they are obedient to their parents, are still sanctified by God under their parent's sanctification. They are set apart for that special purpose and protected. But that is if they are obedient to their parents. So, obedience, trying to live a godly life, is important for everyone of every age.

For Christians there is no standing still. If you snooze, you lose. Our Christian walk must be a dynamic, purposed move ahead all the while building upon what we have previously learned in the church.

Galatians 6:8-10 For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life. And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.