



Part 8 – The Purposeful Patience of God

2 Peter 3:8-13

Since the days of the apostles, Christians have wondered why Christ has not yet returned. The false teachers seized upon this anxiety and used it as a platform to scoff at the very notion that Jesus would return to judge the world. Here, Peter helps the church to grapple faithfully with that question – Why has Jesus not yet returned?

1. Christ has not yet returned because of what God is like.

a) God is Eternal

Vs. 8 – “...with the Lord one day is as a thousand years...” – Peter is not offering a mathematical formula but a principle concerning the nature of God. In this case we are helped to reflect upon God’s eternal nature. To say that God is eternal does not mean that God is “old,” or merely that he has been around forever. Those categories necessarily exist within the confines of time. But God is over and outside of time. That is, time is the creation of God. He does not experience the passing of moments as his creation does. Therefore, from our limited and finite perspective, God’s actions sometime appear to be slow or unnecessarily delayed. Peter appeals to Psalm 90 to make his case that the Lord is not neglecting his promise. That Psalm is all about God’s relationship with time: “For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night” (vs. 4). God governs all of creation history from the position of his eternity.

b) God is Patient

Vs. 9a – “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you...” – God is not in a hurry. He never acts rashly. He is never anxious. He will fulfill his redemptive purposes at just the right time even when that seems like a long delay to us. Specifically, Peter points out that God’s patience is applied to his people (“toward you”).

c) God is Gracious

Vs. 9b – “...not wishing that any should perish but that all should reach repentance.” – Those who hold to Arminian theology claim that this verse directly contradicts the doctrine of unconditional election. They believe that Peter is claiming that God wills that every person who ever lived would be saved but that he has left the final outcome of his redemptive purposes to the free will of his human creatures. But the Scriptures never so much as suggest such a scenario.

To understand what Peter is writing we must view his words in context. Both of Peter’s letters are written “to those who are elect” (1 Peter 1:1). What is more, the “all” here in the second clause of verse 9 is modified by the “but is patient toward you” in the first clause.

“In other words, it is God’s patience *toward the believers* to whom Peter is writing that is the main idea here. We should perhaps then qualify the ‘every’ at the end of the verse in terms of this leading idea: God is patient with you, wanting everyone of *you* to repent before the end comes.”¹

- God’s grace is not a vague scattershot of kindness but a specific, purposeful act of his sovereign mercy with a divinely guaranteed outcome. As we sing in the great Isaac Watts’ hymn:

*Why was I made to hear Thy voice and enter while there’s room,
While thousands make a wretched choice and rather starve than come?*²

- The answer lies in the sovereign grace of God who did not leave us in our sin and pitiable wretchedness but chose us before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:3-11) and called us to himself before we were willing or able to seek him (Rom. 3:9-12). The Lord’s patience has a gracious purpose. Unwilling to lose a single one of his people, he delays the final judgment until the elect from every nation will be gathered into “the new heavens and the new earth where righteousness dwells” (vs. 13).

2. Christ has not yet returned because of what God is doing.

a) God is still rescuing sinners.

¹ Douglas Moo, *2 Peter, Jude* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) p. 188

² *Trinity Hymnal* (Rev. ed.) 469. [How sweet and awesome is the place | Hymnary.org](https://www.hymnary.org)

Vs. 10 – “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night...” – This is a reference to Jesus’ return in which he will “judge the living and the dead.” There are many passages of Scripture which tell us that the return of Jesus is “near” (Matt. 24:33; Rom. 13:11b; Phil. 4:5b; James 5:8b; 1 Pet. 4:7). But the Scriptures also train us to understand that Jesus’ return will be delayed (from a human vantage point) and that we will be surprised by his coming (Luke 19:11-27; 2 Pet. 3:8-9; Mark 13:32, 35; 1 Thes. 5:2; 2 Pet. 3:10). This is what is meant by Jesus’ return being “immanent” or “near.” It does not mean that he will return in the next two weeks or even in our lifetime. Rather, “immanence, defined biblically, means that the return of Christ and the culmination of history are always impending.”³ In other words, there are no other events that must occur prior to the Lord’s return. He can come at any moment.

“...the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up...” – Both the Old and New Testaments anticipate a coming day when God will judge not only his human creatures but bring an end to this present evil age (Isaiah 63:19ff; Micah 1:3-4). The entire cosmos (heaven and earth) will be purified and completely renewed at the return of Jesus.

“...and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.” – When the Lord returns to judge, all will be laid bare before the justice of God. Nothing will be hidden from his sight. No sin will go unaccounted for.

- The fact that Jesus has not yet returned is not a function of apathy or slowness. Rather it has to do with God’s sovereign purposes in redemption. He is not finished rescuing sinners. Jesus promised that the gospel will be preached to all the nations and then the end will come (Matt. 24:14).
- In Acts 18 the Lord commanded Paul to remain for a longer period of time evangelizing in Corinth explaining, “for I have many in this city who are my people” (vs. 10). When Paul and Barnabas were preaching in Antioch in Pisidia we are told that, “as many as were appointed to eternal life believed” (Acts 13:48). We could look to the Old Testament and see God’s rescue of Adam and Eve, of Noah and his family, and of his people in the Exodus. And what of God’s mercy toward the Egyptians when he used Joseph’s expertise to save them from famine? Or consider the Lord’s mercy toward the wicked Ninevites. The “delay” of the Lord’s return that we perceive is purposeful. God is still rescuing sinners and will continue to do so for as long a period of time as he sees fit.

b) God is still sanctifying his church.

Vs. 11 – “Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness” – As we see so often in Scripture, the Lord’s coming judgment is to serve as a motivation for our own growth in “holiness and godliness.” Salvation does not consist only of justification and glorification. It involves our sanctification as well. The terms translated “holiness” and “godliness” are plural, indicating the many ways in which holiness and godliness are manifest (2 Pet. 1:3-11).

- Perhaps you wonder why, instead of letting us continue on in this sinful world full of sorrows, that once the Lord saves us he doesn’t immediately bring us home to his presence? The foundational answer to that question is the same for every time we ask the Lord *why* he does what he does: For his own glory. More specifically we can safely conclude that there is something particularly glorifying to God for him to sanctify us; that there is something inherently pleasing to him and salutary for us about persevering faithfully in this fallen world. We do not get through this life in pristine condition. We will enter the new creation through many dangers, toils, and snares. But we get there because Jesus will bring us all the way home. His promise still stands: “I go there to prepare a place for you” (John 14:1-3).

c) God is completing his work of redemption.

Vs. 12 – “...waiting for and hastening the coming day of the Lord...” – “Those who disregard the future cosmos will not live well in the present one.”⁴ Notice how the Lord uses his people for the “hastening” of his return. Certainly there is mystery here but we can know that God weaves the labors and prayers of his people within the outcome of his sovereign plan.

Vs. 13 – “But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.” – Our final salvation does not take place on some ethereal plane of existence. It will be a fully embodied life in a world remade for righteousness. The righteousness that gets us to heaven is not our own but belongs to Christ and is graciously imputed to every sinner who repents. In the new creation all that is sinful will have passed away. There, “the dwelling place of God” will be with his people, those he has redeemed from every nation (Rev. 21:3-4).

³ Douglas Moo, p. 194

⁴ Thomas Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude* (Nashville: B&H, 2003) p. 389