



**Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for November 29, 2009  
Released on Wednesday, November 25, 2009**

**“A Hopeful People”**

**Lesson Text:** 2 Peter 3:1-13

**Background Scripture:** 2 Peter 3:1-18

**Devotional Reading:** Psalm 42

**2 Peter 3:1–13**

1 This second epistle beloved, I now write unto you; in both which I stir up your pure minds by way of remembrance:

2 That ye may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us the apostles of the Lord and Saviour:

3 Knowing this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts,

4 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 the creation.

5 For this they willingly are ignorant of, that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of the water and in the water:

6 Whereby the world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished:

7 But the heavens and the earth, which are now, by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men.

8 But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.

9 The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is long-suffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.

10 But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.

11 Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness,

12 Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat?

13 Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.

**LESSON AIMS:**

**Facts:** to show what Peter teaches us about our hope in the coming Lord and to show us how patient He is with us.

**Principle:** to realize that God is patient with His erring people and offers new hope in His coming.

**Application:** to demonstrate that God is patient with us and gives us more time to prepare for His coming.

## INTRODUCTION

Have you ever considered how much of our lives are devoted to waiting? We wait for elevators. We wait for traffic lights. We wait for the next available teller. We wait for the check to come in the mail. We wait for the rain to stop. We have special facilities devoted to waiting: they are called waiting rooms.

We also have special terminologies for waiting. We refer to being in a *holding pattern*, drawn from the language of air travel. We might refer to waiting as *time out*, originally a sports term. We push this sports analogy to say we are *playing a waiting game*, as if there is a competition when it comes to delays.

One of the most telling expressions of waiting is *killing time*. This is an odd figure of speech, for time is not ordinarily understood to be subject to death or life. Perhaps a more apt way of saying this is the sister expression *wasting time*. Unproductive waiting is truly a waste of something dear.

But is there such a thing as "productive waiting"? Something more productive than, say, reading a six-month-old news magazine in the dentist's waiting room? Today, many people fill waiting periods with chatter on cell phones. I suspect, however, that this is just a rather comfortable way to kill time, and it may have the disadvantage of wasting someone else's time.

The writers of the Bible knew a lot about waiting. Many times in the Old Testament, their advice to a suffering people was to wait on or for the Lord (Psalm 27:14). But this is not waiting in the sense of futile time-killing. Waiting for God is an expectant waiting, a waiting full of hope (Isaiah 8:17).

The two go together. We hope, therefore we wait. We wait, consequently we hope. Hopeful waiting is not wasting time, even if we are sitting on a dock beside some bay. Today's Scripture, more than any other place in the Bible, teaches us that waiting can be a joyous time if we are hoping for the glorious coming of the Lord.

## LESSON BACKGROUND

Time: A.D. 64

Place: unknown

A cardinal doctrine for the church is that of the second coming of Christ. This future event is sometimes called, in technical language, *the parousia*. This Greek word means "coming" or "presence"; it is used by the New Testament writers as shorthand for Christ's return (see 1 Corinthians 15:23; 1 John 2:28).

Some references to the second coming of Christ are very dramatic, such as these words of Jesus: "For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be" (Matthew 24:27). Other references are more subtle as part of a larger discussion: "Every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming" (1 Corinthians 15:23, as part of Paul's discussion of resurrection). The New Testament presents the second coming of Christ in the context of hope and the need for patient waiting (see Titus 2:13; James 5:7).

The first generation of Christians apparently believed that Christ would return very soon. This is why Paul taught his people to pray *Maranatha*, an Aramaic expression that means "Come, Lord!" (1 Corinthians 16:22; compare Revelation 22:20). Paul was an example of one who entertained the possibility (even the expectation) of being alive to meet the Lord when He returned: "we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thessalonians 4:17).

Although Jesus promised to come again, He said that He was not privy to the information regarding *when* (Mark 13:32). As time went on, the church began to understand that this return might not occur as soon as people hoped or expected.

Christians came to realize that the second coming of Jesus was delayed, although this “delay” is only from a human perspective. God knows exactly when He will act in this mighty way. Even so, Peter did not want his readers to follow the ignorance of the scoffers. He taught his readers significant truth about God’s timing and His patient plan for salvation.

### **FOCUSING ON THE TRUTH (2 Peter 3:1-2)**

#### **1. What was Peter’s purpose in both of the letters he wrote to the people? (2 Peter 3:1)**

Peter understands that he can talk about the church’s past like very few others in his generation. This puts him in an important position to be able to ground his readers in the timeless truths of the faith. Peter did not claim to be writing some clever new truths to the people under his care. As we read in last week’s lesson (cf. 2 Peter 1:12-15), a big part of Peter’s job was calling his readers to remember.

When times are tough, we are apt to fall into a type of mental numbness. We may stumble from one day to the next like religious zombies, our spirits seeming to be more like the undead than the truly living. It is during such periods that we must remember the great blessings of the past and the powerful promises we have for the future.

#### **2. From what source did Peter say he was drawing his teachings? (v. 2)**

Peter was not just concerned that they remember what he had taught them. He wanted them to embrace and continue to profit from the teachings of all of Scripture (2 Pet. 3:2). This is an important verse for our understanding of the connection between the Old and New Testaments. For Peter, the *apostles* are carrying on some of the same functions as the *prophets* of old. Both groups communicate the authoritative Word of God. Both groups are messengers of hope, promising the comfort of God for the faithful.

Just as ancient Israel faced its various crises, so in Peter’s day does the church. The message of hope is unchanged: God is in control and has not forsaken you. He hears you when you cry out (Psalm 18:6).

### **CONFRONTING UNBELIEF (2 Peter 3:3-7)**

#### **3. What core belief of the early church was under special attack and by whom? (v. 3)**

Peter said that in the last days there would be those who would mock the truth, particularly the truth of Christ’s second coming. Mockery is an oft used way of attacking another person. While it may be physically nonviolent, heartless ridicule can crush the spirit. The church of Peter’s day is not in any position of social power or respectability. First-century Christians are able to endure their tormenters, at least in part, because of their hope that Christ will return for them. Peter understands that when the critics of the church begin to mock this core belief, they can send the believers into despair. Rather than ignore this problem, Peter confronts it head-on.

*The last days* for Peter is not some fuzzy future era. Those days are his own days and ours—the era of the church. Earlier, Peter had talked about “these last times” (1 Peter 1:20). John affirms “it is the last time” (1 John 2:18). The writer of Hebrews speaks of “these last days” (Hebrews 1:2).

A characteristic of this time is the presence of *scoffers* (compare Jude 18). There is a reason behind their mocking: they walk *after their own lusts*. In other words, they are completely irreligious, have no respect for the sacred, and ridicule the faith of others. This mean-spirited disrespect has caused them to attack the core beliefs of the early church.

#### **4. What methods do modern scoffers use to ridicule Christian faith? How do Christians unwittingly give the scoffers more ammunition to do this? How can we do better in this regard?**

Sometimes the ridicule is seen subtly, as in the unbeliever who rolls his eyes when someone makes a statement of faith. At other times, the ridicule is overt, as in the boisterous voice, the poisonous pen, or the arrogant TV show that taunts Christianity openly.

The portrayal of Christians as ignorant and/or mean-spirited is another method. The fact that some Christians *really are* ignorant and/or mean-spirited doesn't help our cause! Christians must be careful to be neither of those. One way to cure ignorance is more Bible study. Meditating on the example of Jesus can melt away an attitude of mean-spiritedness (read the book of John).

#### **5. What did unbelievers choose to believe about the created order? (v. 4)**

Peter offers us two hints as to the identity of these scoffers: (1) they have a sense of *the fathers*, meaning the ancestors of past generations, and (2) they have a tradition about *creation*. We cannot be certain, but this seems to point to the Jewish background of these opponents.

The basic charge of the opponents seems very contemporary: *all things continue as they were*. The teaching of modern atheistic materialists is similar. Those folks claim that the universe's processes can be explained by physical matter and energy interacting without reference to any outside (spiritual or supernatural) influence. These mainstream scientists seem to take pleasure in ridiculing anyone who would believe in a divine act of creation.

Yet Peter knows that belief in Christ's second coming in glory requires the expectation that everything will change radically in a cataclysmic way. To assume that things will pretty much stay the same from now on is to deny the possibility of Jesus' second coming.

#### **6. How did Peter rebut their argument? (vs. 5,6)**

The Jewish identity of the mockers becomes clearer now, because Peter argues with their use of Scripture. He reminds them of two momentous events: the creation of the dry *earth* from the watery void (Genesis 1:2, 9) and the flood of Noah's day (Genesis 7:17-22). In both cases, these were acts of God, accomplished simply *by the word of God*.

The critics of Peter's day apparently knew the Old Testament; so their ignorance of the facts that refuted their complacency was willful, rooted in their desire not to believe the truth. They chose to push out of their minds that God Himself created the heavens and the earth, speaking them into existence, and in the process disrupting natural occurrences in a major way!

#### **7. What does Peter teach concerning the current state of the universe? What will eventually happen to the present heavens and earth? (v. 7)**

Peter goes on even further to teach that the current state of the universe (*the heavens and the earth*) is sustained by the *word* of God (compare Hebrews 1:3). There is nothing necessarily permanent or eternal about the current state of the universe. The current heavens and earth will exist only until the final *judgment*.

This fate of the universe results from sin, from the need to judge the *ungodly*. Their judgment will be that of *perdition*, meaning "destruction." Although Peter does not make a direct connection, he surely has the scoffing deriders of the faith in mind here.

God had promised not to destroy the world again by means of a flood (Gen. 9:15). The judgment to come will be by means of fire. A great purging and cleansing will one day be unleashed.

### **REAFFIRMING CHRIST'S COMING AGAIN (2 Peter 3:8-10)**

#### **8. Why has God not yet brought ultimate judgment? (vs. 8,9)**

In case the believers were being affected by the scoffing they were hearing, Peter, alluding to and building upon the words of Psalm 90:4, reminded them that what seems like a long time to man is not so to God. His timetable may be very different from ours. Also behind the language in 2 Peter 3:8 is the implicit assumption that all of time is under His control and direction.

God's relationship with time highlights the fact that it is His nature to be patient as He directs the course of history. So what man might interpret as God being slow and loitering about what He has said He will do is really His patient forbearance toward His wayward creatures.

Peter did not want his readers' confidence in God's promises to be shaken. He wanted them to realize that the waiting period before judgment is a mark of the gracious God they knew so well. That is why in 2 Peter 3:9 he focused on his readers with the word "usward," meaning "toward us." He will not prematurely bring judgment and keep any of the people who would trust in Him out of His kingdom. That would be contrary to His will and character. He wants to see all who would be made willing by His grace come to Him. He desires to see them change their direction and turn to Him.

#### **9. How did Peter describe the manner of Christ's second coming? (v. 10a)**

Peter describes the second coming of Christ as the "day of the Lord." This was a widely used expression for judgment in the Old Testament and then, in the New Testament, for Christ's second coming (1 Thess. 5:2).

*The Lord* will return with no advance alarm, no two-minute warning. He will come *as a thief* who uses stealth and surprise (see 1 Thessalonians 5:2; Revelation 3:3; 16:15). For Peter, this is tied to those who need to repent. The time to repent is now, because there is no way to predict how much time remains.

The time will come when judgment will be held back no longer. And when it does come, it will happen suddenly and unexpectedly, like the coming of a thief. Then those who mock God's supposed slowness will face a terrible shock.

#### **10. Why did Peter go into such elaborate detail about the old world's passing? (v. 10b)**

As noted earlier in verse 7, God promised Noah that He would never again destroy the earth by water (Genesis 9:11). This time *the heavens* and *earth* will be destroyed by being *burned up*. This is utter, complete destruction, with no recovery by simply drying out. Peter pictures this as a mighty, supernatural event as characterized by a *great noise*. The purpose of this destruction is the same as the flood, though: to destroy the ungodly. There will be no escape for them (Revelation 6:17).

The severity and thoroughness of the judgment also contrasts with the seeming lack of activity of the present time. All the things that seem so important now will melt away. All of the achievements that make men so proud (their works) will disappear. The noise will be overwhelming. There will be a great, purifying purging of wickedness. It will then be clear that the world indeed does not always continue forever in the same way!

### **LIVING IN THE LIGHT OF CHRIST'S COMING (2 Peter 3:11-13)**

#### **11. What should be the attitude and behavior of God's people in light of the coming judgment? (vs. 11,12)**

In light of the fact that everything in this world will disappear, the believer should not be tempted to live for these things.

Peter's conclusion, then, is to advise his readers how to live. In the antique English of the *King James Version*, the word *conversation* has a broader sense of "one's entire manner of life," not just speech patterns. This manner of life must be governed by a desire for *godliness*. Peter says, "Quit messing around. You know what kind of person you *ought* to be, so go ahead and *be* that kind of person!"

In addition, Peter's readers are to live expectantly (v. 12). This is not to be a joyous anticipation of the judgmental destruction of the world, but for what will happen after that: we should be looking forward to the glory that awaits when Christ comes again. This longing for the full manifestation of God's kingdom is a frequent theme of Scripture (cf. Titus 2:12-13; Heb. 11:9-10,13-16).

The term "hasting unto" (2 Pet. 3:12) has been variously interpreted. It could mean "earnestly desiring," as in wishing something would come quickly. But it could also mean we should act in such a way that it actually hastens Christ's coming. Even if it does not mean precisely that, it may well mean we are to do those things that are most in keeping with what we know to be God's kingdom purposes. That shows our eagerness for Christ's coming again.

## **12. What is the great hope the believer looks forward to? (v. 13)**

After the destruction, God will follow up by creating *new heavens and a new earth*. These will have no place for ungodliness. It will be the home of *righteousness*. This is a snapshot version of the marvelous picture we find in Revelation 21 and 22, where the glorious city of God is presented. As Peter's friend John portrays it, "the first heaven and the first earth were passed away" (Revelation 21:1). The ungodly will be excluded (21:8; 22:15). The scoffers of the faith will be no more, and we will be with God forever. This is our final, ultimate hope.

### **PRACTICAL POINTS**

- 1.** We will never find contentment until our minds are focused on Scripture (2 Pet. 3:1-2).
- 2.** Scoffers need to see God's work in our lives, for they refuse to see it in history (vs. 3,4).
- 3.** We should never allow present experience to determine our view of God's plan (vs. 5-7).
- 4.** Since God is patient with sinners, we certainly should be (vs. 8,9).
- 5.** Knowing God's future plans will help us live godly lives in the present (vs. 10,11).
- 6.** For Christians, the future is not to be feared but desired (vs. 12,13).

### **CONCLUSION**

For two millennia now, Christians have been exposed to theories about the second coming of Christ. Most theories agree that it will involve a general resurrection of all the dead and a final judgment of all men and women. It will be the final "day of the Lord," where all injustice is reversed and sin and death are conquered. As to the timing and sequence of events involved in Christ's return, there have been many competing schemes proposed. There is widespread lack of agreement on these matters.

In trying to come to grips with this important issue, we should recognize a certain tension of ideas. On the one hand, the second coming of the Lord is imminent, meaning "could happen at any time." It has been so for nearly 2,000 years. On the other hand, Christ might not return for another 2,000 years or more.

That second idea should cause us to be careful! Think about all the wrong guesses there have been so far to predict the date of Christ's return. Some reading this will remember the booklet *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988*. It was wrong. But undoubtedly there are more theories yet to come. We are reasonably certain that the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ took place in AD 30. Surely, then, there will be those who predict that His second coming will be in AD 2030, just a few years away. We can already imagine the proposals of the importance of a "double millennium"!

We must realize that Christ may come this evening or not for another 10,000 years. It should not matter to us, for our future is secured by our faith in Him. Our hope in the Lord is not futile. Christ may or may not return in our lifetimes; it doesn't matter. In the future, "so shall we ever be with the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:17).

### **PRAYER**

Eternal God, we are befuddled by the constraints of time. If and when we doubt, may You both forgive and strengthen us. May we live with joy at the prospect of the return of Your Son. May our waiting for that event be an expectant, hopeful waiting. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

### **THOUGHT TO REMEMBER**

Hope as you wait. Wait as you hope.

### **ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON**

Next week's lesson is "[The Lineage of David.](#)" This lesson will begin a new unit that will look at how the birth of Christ fulfilled prophecy. Study Ruth 4:13-17 and Matthew 1:1-17.

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