

July 24, 2016

# Growing in Grace Stirred Up To Stand Strong

## 2 Peter 3:1 – 7

Peter's intention in writing this letter was to help his readers to be firm and stable and unshakeable in their faith, so that they would rest in God's unchanging love and purpose for them. He doesn't want them to be, on the one hand shaken or misled by false and erroneous teaching, or on the other hand be casual and haphazard about their calling and election. He is devoted to stirring up their faith to stand strong in the truth until Jesus comes back. In chapter one of this letter, he reminds us that the genuineness of our saving faith is proved by what it produces: namely, *goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, mutual affection, and love*. He says the truth of God's word gives us a true knowledge of God, which leads to confidence in His magnificent promises which deliver power for right living and produce a certainty in our calling and election, and inspire our hearts for His return.

In chapter two, after the good news of God's magnificent promises to those who believe, he comes down hard on those who would peddle a false narrative, a false doctrine, that would seduce us away from the truth of the gospel. He paints a terrifying description of what will happen to those who teach these narratives and abandon their obedience to Christ. And now in chapter three, Peter returns to the encouragement of chapter one; exhorting us to run after the precious and magnificent promises of God so that we will remain strong in the face of scoffers who will not obey the gospel of God; so that at the end of all things we will be found to be spotless and blameless when Jesus returns to bring us home. **13** *But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.* **14** *Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace.*<sup>1</sup>

Peter does not waste time and space in pumping his readers up with evangelical pop theology or feel-good teaching. He gives them an eternal perspective, pointing them to Jesus' return and the culmination of the ages. The goal of his instruction is that these believers would be motivated and encouraged by the truth of Jesus' imminent return. The idea is that confident expectation of a new world of righteousness in the future is motivation for us to live holy and godly lives in the present. In this last part of the letter, Peter does two things: he writes to stir up the saint's hearts to stand strong for the sure and certain coming of the Lord Jesus; and he destroys the lies that the false teachers were using to seduce the unstable and the uncommitted from the way of righteousness. *I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder*, Peter says.

Christ's coming again is powerful motivation in the life of the believer. I remember back when our youth pastor, Marcus Schmaling was staying at our house while we were away. We had told him that we were returning on a certain day, and I remember well, the utter astonishment and dismay on his face when we showed up a day early, and saw our home in all its glorious chaos and clutter. And I can still hear Marcus lament, 'I didn't think you were coming yet'. He knew we would be back. The problem was that he thought he could live like he pleased until just before we came, and then he'd clean up his act. Jesus is coming again. That is a fact. We just don't know when and we can't afford to live like hell and expect to clean it up before He returns. And on the other hand, we can't afford to live as though He were never coming back. G. Campbell Morgan, a preacher from the last century said *"To me the second coming is the perpetual light in the path which makes the present bearable. I never lay my head on my pillow without thinking that: maybe before the morning breaks the final morning may have dawned. I never begin my work without thinking perhaps He may interrupt my work and begin His own."*<sup>2</sup>

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1 2 Peter 3:13-14 ESV

2 G. Campbell Morgan, [http://preceptaustin.org/second\\_coming\\_of\\_christ.htm](http://preceptaustin.org/second_coming_of_christ.htm)

Since our Lord's coming again has such potential for spiritual motivation in the life of the believer, it is no wonder that it is one of the things the devil works so hard to deny. In the world today, not many even know, or care, much less believe that Jesus is coming back. Otherwise they'd live very differently. Unfortunately this is as true in the church as it is in the world. I think we'd all be living a little closer to the throne if we really felt the imminence of His return. It is further compounded by those in the church who teach that He is not really coming back at all. His return is spiritualized away by teaching that the significance of the Kingdom of God is Christ living within you; not that He is coming literally and physically back to establish His rule and reign on in a renewed universe. That idea removes our great hope, this great motivating factor. And it is a threat to the life, the energy, the impetus, the drive, the zeal, the passion, the effectiveness of the church in the world.

False teachers were doing it in Peter's day, and they are doing it today. One theologian this century, C.H. Dodd, wrote a book called *Parables of the Kingdom* that has influenced many contemporary theologians. *"That since the Lord did not in literal truth return on the clouds of heaven during the thirties of the first century, to expect Him thus to return in the twentieth century is to go contrary to primitive Christianity which is true Christianity."*<sup>3</sup> He teaches also that there are certain myths in the Bible – one of which is the Second Coming. *'The least significant myth is the Second Coming of the Lord and the Last Judgment,'* Karl Barth, also a well-known 20<sup>th</sup> century liberal theologian, had what he called a timeless eschatology in which the coming of Christ is no longer understood as a future literal return of Christ. But said Barth, *"It is a timeless symbol for the endless earnestness of eternity in every existential situation."*<sup>4</sup> Which is exactly the gobbledegook it sounds like.

But the literal, physical return of Jesus is clearly taught in all the pages of the New Testament. Jesus told His disciples, over and over, 'I'm coming back'; the authors of the New Testament return to the theme again and again; the angel told Jesus' followers in Acts that the same way they saw Him leave was just the way He would come back, literally, physically. But to deny His return, or minimize the coming of our Lord in preaching and teaching sucks the life out of holy living and allows men to live as they please. Dick Lucas says, *'The doctrine of the return of Christ is perhaps the most often-mentioned doctrine in the New Testament. It is the very center of God's purposes for men. We tend to see the coming of Christ, the Christmas story, as the center of everything, and the Second Coming as the completion of that. But the Bible sees the coming of Christ as the center of everything and the first coming as the anticipation of that.'*<sup>5</sup>

And it was this denial of Jesus' return that was at the heart of these guys' false teaching: **3** *knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. 4 They will say, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation."* First of all he says, 'Scoffers will come'. He wasn't predicting their coming. He was saying 'They're already here. Don't be surprised. We knew this would happen'. The mark of these men is that they are scoffers, mockers. This is the tactic that attempts to intimidate by sarcasm, scoffing and ridicule. 'You don't believe in fairy tales, do you? You're not one of those fundamentalists, are you? You don't really take the Bible literally, do you? And this is not a new problem.

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians for exactly this reason. We won't turn there right now, but it is clear from the context of 1 Thessalonians, that these believers were living in anticipation of Christ's imminent return. They fully expected Christ to return during their lifetime. But the Thessalonians had a problem because some of the people around them in the church began to die. And as they began to die, the Christians became very distressed because they had thought that everybody would be alive and Jesus would be right back. And they began to wonder and doubt the message. And they started to be worried about those that died, would they miss the return of Christ, would they miss the Kingdom, would they miss heaven? And some began to preach that He was not coming back, or that He came secretly and they'd missed it. It was to those issues and to confront those teachers, that Peter and Paul, and others began to write.

And Peter says, these guys are *'...following their own sinful desires'*. Or literally *'walking according to their own lusts or selfish desires'*. These are those we already met in chapter 2, the ones who denied the Master who bought them, who were indulging their sensual desires and trapping others with their sensuality. . It was these teachers who were denying the truth because it restrained them from indulging themselves.

3 C.H. Dodd, quoted by John McArthur in *The Certainty of the Second Coming*, February 17, 1991

4 <http://preteristheresy.blogspot.com/2008/07/timeless-eschatology-of-karl-barth.html>

5 Dick Foth, *A Study of 2 Peter*, 3:1-18, <http://resources.thegospelcoalition.org/library/talk-four-en>

They followed after their own lusts; because to follow Christ meant a denial of those lusts and death to fleshly passions; and they would rather not be accountable. Their mockery was built on their morality. **They demanded a theology that accommodated their passions.** If you believe that Jesus is coming, that He could come at any moment; and we will stand before Him to give an account of our lives; if you believe that our reward will be based on what we've done with the gift of grace He's given us; then you are going to live differently. The apostle John says you will purify yourself: *2 Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is. 3 And everyone who thus hopes in Him purifies himself as He is pure.*<sup>6</sup>

Liberal theology, and this is what this is, is not based on intellect, it is based on a desire to be your own master and avoid accountability to the Master. Liberal scholars and those who follow them, do not want so much to understand the nature and character of God as they want a God in their own image. H. Richard Niebuhr summarized the basic liberal gospel as a message that presents "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross."<sup>7</sup> There are many churches today, run by men who preach this man-centered gospel; who see Jesus merely as a good man who taught love, compassion, tolerance and inclusiveness; who reject the doctrines of hell and final judgment; and are generally uncomfortable with anything they perceive as politically incorrect. We need to understand that philosophies that oppose the truth of who God is, are not a product of intelligent reason, but are from a desire to be free of the restraints of morality and accountability.

Of this passage, John Calvin, in his Commentaries, said, 'It was a dangerous scoff when they insinuated a doubt as to the last resurrection; for when that is taken away, there is no gospel any longer, the power of Christ is brought to nothing, the whole of religion is gone. Then Satan aims directly at the throat of the Church, when he destroys faith in the coming of Christ.'<sup>8</sup> You see, the whole fabric of our faith is wrapped around the promise of His coming again. Genuine disciples of Christ are the ones eagerly anticipate His coming. **That is our hope, our deep desire and our ultimate goal and glory.** It is also our great motivation for joy, for holiness and godliness in this life. It is one of the things that will help keep us enduring to the end. It is also the thing that the enemy of our souls works so diligently to deny, and confuse and obscure; because Christ's coming again not only keeps us steadfast in hope, but it also means there will be a final accounting.

Peter says that their argument is essentially based on the material world they can see. *4 They will say, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation."* In effect the mockers will say that Jesus will never come again, because He never has. Which is a lot like saying 'I'll never die because I never have.' It is the argument that says the processes we observe operating today in the world have been around forever and nothing out of the ordinary or that cannot be explained by natural processes has happened or ever will happen. It is really an appeal to materialism, and things like divine intervention and judgment just don't happen. They are reaching back as far as they can to show that from the time the world came into being we are born, we marry, we work, we play, we die; and still there has been no final judgment, no accounting, no return of Christ; things remain the same; it is a closed system. In other words, He's not coming because He hasn't come. It was Jesus who said, '*Heaven and earth shall pass away, but My words shall never pass away.*'<sup>9</sup> They turn this around and say, '*Heaven and earth will not pass away, therefore Jesus' words will pass away.*' This is the argument of the sinner and it is the argument of the prevailing evolutionary philosophy of the world.

Evolutionists have to admit there was a beginning, yet they have no logical way to explain that beginning. They maintain that whatever processes brought all this about still operate today, and miracles, the supernatural, anything related to a God who intervenes in human affairs, are '**just so**' stories invented to cover our ignorance. What this argument does is remove God from the equation, and free us up to think whatever we like, believe whatever we want, live any way we choose, because Jesus is not coming back. There will be no final accounting. The fall, and sin, and final judgment and hell are '**just so**' stories invented by repressed and disturbed individuals to dominate others. Sensual sinners find their only hope for sin without guilt and fear in this argument.

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6 1 John 3:2-3 ESV

7 H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (1937), New York: Harper and Row, 1959, p. 193

8 John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, [http://biblehub.com/commentaries/calvin/2\\_peter/3.htm](http://biblehub.com/commentaries/calvin/2_peter/3.htm)

9 Matthew 25:35 NASB

At the heart of all these arguments is the denial of Jesus' return. It is essential for sinners to deny the return of Christ if they want to go on living like they have. And Peter is doing two things here: he's refuting the mockers and strengthening the saints. He is stirring the believers up to stand strong for His coming. 'Don't be intimidated by their ridicule; don't buy into a theology that does not deal with sin or preach self-denial and the way of the cross; don't buy into a philosophy that looks at the here and now and draws fatal conclusions about the past and the future.' The great hope of our faith is that Jesus is coming; and the great motivation for living righteous and holy lives is that Jesus is coming. If you find within yourself this morning an unbelieving heart, a skepticism about the return of Christ, know for certain that His return is sure and judgment is imminent. I would urge you by the mercies of God to repent of your unbelief and throw yourself on the mercy of the One who is to judge the living and the dead and be saved from the coming wrath.

The mockers are saying two things: Jesus is not coming back, and judgment is a myth. But Peter has an answer for them in this passage. First of all he says 'Go to the word spoken beforehand; go to the Old Testament and see what God says about this. Encourage your hearts and strengthen your grip on the truth. *1 This is now the second letter that I am writing to you, beloved. In both of them I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, 2 that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles,* Peter's main admonition to the believers is to remember. Remembering is very important. **Remembering the past helps us to live in the present and confidently face the future.** If you don't remember what God has already spoken, you will fall prey to lies and deceptions and the trickery of men.

That is what happened to the people of God over and over. In Judges we read that after the Israelites experienced the great conquests Joshua *'...there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord, nor yet the work which He had done for Israel.'*<sup>10</sup> and they were plagued by invaders who took them captive time after time. They didn't remember. So Peter says *'remember the predictions of the holy prophets'* which is a direct reference to the Old Testament. He's saying 'Go to the word of God and see whether or not Jesus intends to return and judge all things.' And the first thing you notice about the Old Testament is that it is full of references to God's judgment. Either His temporal, disciplinary judgment or His eternal and final judgment:

*'The Mighty One, God, the Lord has spoken and summoned the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting...He summons the heavens above and the earth to judge His people.'* Psalm 50:1-4 NASB

*10 For the stars of heaven and their constellations will not flash forth their light; the sun will be dark when it rises and the moon will not shed its light. 11 Thus I will punish the world for its evil and the wicked for their iniquity; I will also put an end to the arrogance of the proud and abase the haughtiness of the ruthless. 12 I will make mortal man scarcer than pure gold and mankind than the gold of Ophir. 13 Therefore I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken from its place at the fury of the LORD of hosts in the day of His burning anger.* Isaiah 13:10-13 NASB

*1 "For behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace; and all the arrogant and every evildoer will be chaff; and the day that is coming will set them ablaze," says the LORD of hosts, "so that it will leave them neither root nor branch." 2 "But for you who fear My name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings;* Malachi 4:1-2a NASB

And then he says, 'Go to the New Testament – *remember...the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles.* This is a clear reference to the New Testament. And if you read the New Testament you will find that out of the 260 chapters in the New Testament, there are more than 300 references to the Lord's return – one out of every 30 verses. Twenty-three of the twenty-seven books refer to this great event. And for every prophecy on the first coming of Christ, there are eight on His second coming. He is coming to complete the salvation of the saints, to be glorified in the saints, to be admired in the saints, to judge, to rule, to reign, forever. This is Peter's first argument – from the Scripture.

Then Peter points them to history. *5 For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, 6 and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished.* When people maintain that Jesus is not coming back and there will be no judgment – Peter says 'It escapes their notice.' Actually the Greek here means that they '**shut their eyes to the truth.**' It is a deliberate, willful ignorance because they love their sin; they love their independence; they love their lusts and they do not desire the truth and they do not want to be judged.

First of all they shut their eyes to creation. *'that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God.* They will grab any explanation as long as it does not involve God. They would rather believe that unknown organisms from unknown chemicals produced in an atmosphere and ocean of unknown composition under unknown conditions evolved by an unknown process leaving unknown evidence. Richard Lewontin, an evolutionary biologist, has said '*We take the side of science in spite of the patent absurdity of some of its constructs,...in spite of the tolerance of the scientific community for unsubstantiated commitment to materialism...we are forced by our a priori adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counterintuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated.* Moreover, that materialism is absolute, **for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door.**'<sup>11</sup>

For people to reject God, they have to shut their eyes to creation – because creation itself reveals truth about the creator. This is what Paul says in Romans 1: *18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, 19 because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. 20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.*<sup>12</sup> Men who reject God stand before Him today without excuse. They just don't know it yet. But one day they will.

Men also have to **shut their eyes to the fact that this world was once subject to a worldwide flood** that came for judgment on the same kinds of attitudes and actions that are being boasted and flaunted today. As Peter says, *'...and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished.* The evidence for this is abundant – the problem is in how the evidence is processed. If you start with the premise that there is no God – there was no divine supernatural act of creation – you are left scrambling to find a theory to fit the evidence. The fact that there are traditions of the great Flood found in hundreds of tribes in all parts of the world (all similar in one way or another to that in the Genesis record) is good evidence that those tribes all originated from the one family preserved through the cataclysm.

The fact that all the mountains of the world have been under water at some time or times in the past, as indicated by sedimentary rocks and marine fossils near their summits testifies to a worldwide flood. The fact that most of the earth's crust consists of sedimentary rocks originally formed in almost all cases under water, and every sedimentary formation appears to have been formed rapidly—even catastrophically – is causing more and more geologists to turn to a flood theory. The fact that the fossils we find have to have been preserved through a rapid and complete burial probably associated with a cataclysmic event points directly to a worldwide flood. The facts are in – they've always been in – but rebellious men refuse to accept the evidence because they do not want to be held accountable.

The fact is, is that this present heaven and earth we see today bears little resemblance to the one that existed before the flood; and to make the assumption that everything continues just as it always has is to ignore the plain facts of the case. But Peter points to the judgment of God by water in Genesis, and says, 'Just as God judged the earth before with water, here will be a final judgment, but this one will be by fire.' *7 But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.* The first heavens and the first earth were called into being by the Word of God. The present heavens and the present earth are being kept in place by the word of God, and one day they will be destroyed by the word of God; and the new heavens and the new earth in which righteousness dwells will be remade and upheld by the word of God.

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11 Richard Lewontin, Billions and Billions of Demons (Review of the *Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark* by Carl Sagan, 1997), The New York Review, p.31, 9 January 1997.

12 Romans 1:18 – 20 NASB

Which is why Peter appeals to us to remember the words of the prophets and apostles. Look to the word of God; believe the word of God. Heaven and earth **will** pass away, but His words will **never** pass away. Peter's burden was to stir the hearts of the saints up to stand strong for the Savior's return; to give them such a view of Christ that they would love His appearing. Ask yourself this question: Does the prospect of Christ's return fill your heart with anticipation or indifference? Are you living with an anticipation and longing for His return? If you are it will change the way you live. Jesus' return means both judgment and joy. Judgment to deal with those who refuse to believe; joy to fill the hearts of those who love His appearing. **The Scriptures tell us this; history points to this; eternity speaks of this and the word of God testifies to this.** Where are you with respect to Jesus' return?

This is why Jesus came the first time. The love of the Father sent the Son to rescue sinful men from the sure and certain judgment to come. *For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him. Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.*<sup>13</sup> You see, there will be a final accounting for everyone and everything. And your heavenly Father does not want you to be on the wrong side of that accounting. *The Lord is...is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.*<sup>14</sup> My fervent prayer this morning is that the Holy Spirit would not only awaken you to the reality of Jesus' soon return, but you would be counted among those who love His appearing.

*Our gracious heavenly Father,*

*Grant that we would live in joyful anticipation of the return of Jesus. Let us live as it were on the threshold of heaven, with nothing to hold us back, always expecting to see Him. Stir our hearts to live with eternity in view, and wean us from those lesser pleasures that cloud our affection for You, Lord Jesus. Do not let us be led astray by the empty arguments of rebellious men, but may the confident expectation of a new world in which righteousness dwells empower us to live godly and holy lives in the present. Fire our hearts with a white-hot passion to see You. Come Lord Jesus, come – we pray in the precious and powerful name of our soon-coming King, Amen.*

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13 John 3:17-18 ESV

14 2 Peter 3:9 ESV