The Second Coming of Christ
2 Peter 3:8-13

We're slowly coming to the end of Peter's second letter, and as he brings it to a close, he hasn't just got the end of the letter in mind, but the end of the world and the return of Christ. And so we're going to look at three things. Why you might doubt it - doubt the second coming of Jesus; Why you should believe it, and why believing it can change your life and give you hope and purpose when life might seem hopeless and pointless.

Why You Might Doubt It

I was recently chatting to a young guy who was considering the Christian faith. But his stumbling block was belief in the supernatural, and what the Bible taught, and it all seemed untenable and unbelievable. And one of the things I asked him to think about was *why* he thought like that. Because if he - along with multiple other people in the West - thinks the existence of God is *im*plausible, just a few hundred years ago people would have considered it implausible *not* to believe in God. And yet the evidence hasn't really changed. It's culture that's changed, and could it be that he was simply being shaped by his culture, not the facts.

But when it comes to the seeming implausibility of Christianity, arguably it's nowhere greater than in what it teaches about the Second Coming of Christ, and "You *really* believe that one day Jesus is physically going to come back?!"

Which was the attitude of the false teachers Peter's been confronting in this letter. And they were mocking the idea of Jesus' return because… it hadn't happened. Chapter 3:4: 'They… 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."'

For them, 30 years had passed since Jesus and no sign of his return, and we're 2000 years further down the line. So if Jesus' return seemed implausible then, how about now? I mean, if you're ever ordered something on-line and it's failed to arrive, the company will typically say something like 'please allow 14 days for delivery and if after that it hasn't arrived, we'll arrange a refund.' Because after a couple of weeks, if it hasn't turned up, you can safely assume it's not going to.

So how about a couple of millennia? Isn't it safe to assume Jesus isn't going to return? Isn't someone justified in doubting it?

Well, Peter says, you need to consider the facts.

Why You Should Believe It

Now, one of our family is always running late. I'll tell them, 'girls we're leaving at 7:45, and at 7:45 everyone else is ready and waiting, but said family member is still in the bathroom applying the mascara. And everyone's patience is being tested. But no one doubts she's coming. In fact, if I were to suggest leaving without her, everyone else would go, 'you can't do that Dad!' Why? Because it's not that she won't come, it's that she's just running to a different timescale.

So look at v8, 'But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.'

So when it comes to doubting the return of Christ, we can overlook something, Peter says. Something he calls a fact: that God's view on time is very different to our own.

And he's building off of Psalm 90:4 'For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night.' And if you look at the whole psalm, it's one that contrasts our frailty - that we're made of dust and will return to dust, to God's eternity, the who is 'from everlasting to everlasting' (Ps 90:2). Don't overlook that, Peter says. Don't overlook that God transcends time and everything is present to him. And we might go, '2000 years, that is *so* long.' While God thinks, 'wow 2000 years, that went quickly.' Or better still - 'that is no time at all'. You see, if you asked a colleague late Friday afternoon to get you that report and she said, 'I'll have it on your desk by Monday', you go 'great!' Or when you finish work on Friday but it seems like Monday comes round way too quickly, so 2000 years to God is like a weekend that flies by Peter says.

Why might you be in danger of overlooking that? Because sometimes the pressure and circumstances of life, or world events, or the voices around you, can seem more real, or shout more loudly, and you can begin to think, 'is this ever going to end? Is Jesus ever going to come back, *really*?' And Peter says, yes really. All this time is just a passing moment to God.

But secondly, Peter says the fact that Jesus has not yet returned is not because he's late and is not going to show, it's because he's patient. Verse 9, 'The Lord is not slow to fulfil his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you.'

Now, in the King James Version that verse reads, 'God is not slack concerning his promise.' Which should be a great encouragement to us all. Especially to my girls - God is not like Dad, he is patient.

You and I get caught in a traffic jam, and start criticising the drivers up ahead. We pick the wrong queue at Migros which is moving *sooo* slowly, and start getting frustrated. We're embedded in time and see the moments slipping away and we're impatient. But God is outside of time and so is eternally patient.

Like a child desperate for chocolate, who thinks a few minutes wait is an eternity, we want God to move faster and Peter says, 'sure, but God isn't slow.' Instead, v9 again, he 'is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.' So the very thing these false teachers are criticising God for, the fact that he hasn't yet shown up in judgment, is the very thing God is using to give them, and everyone, time to repent.

You see, when God revealed his name and character to Moses, Genesis tells us, 'The Lord passed before [Moses] and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, *slow to anger* and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness."' (Ex 34:6). God is not slow to judge or slow to save, what he is is slow to anger. Because, as he said through the prophet Ezekiel, "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?" (Ezek 18:33).

And so Peter's saying, rather than looking at your calendar and ticking off the dates and debating Jesus' return, lift up your eyes and look to the One outside of time, and trust him and turn to him.

Because his patience is not indefinite. Verse 10, 'But the day of the Lord *will come* like a thief…' So this is not Peter saying, 'let's just pretend he'll come but we all know he won't really, let's just dial down everyone's expectations.' Instead, he puts the verb - 'will come' at the start of the

sentence: ‘it will come - the day of the Lord’ as if to underline, ‘this *will* happen.’ And when it does come it’ll come like a thief.

Now, one of the reasons burglaries can be so distressing is that it’s an invasion of your home, the place where you should feel comfortable and secure. And Peter’s remembering what Jesus said, that the end would come like a thief in the night. And so people feeling comfortable and secure and at home in the world, and the years are just passing on, is not a reason for thinking Jesus will never come back, but that it could happen at any moment.

But it’s not just that you should believe, Peter says, it’s that believing it will do you good.

Why Believing It Can Change Your Life

Now, one of the criticisms levelled against Christianity is that its focus on heaven and the life to come undermines any incentive or power to change the present. As Marx said, it’s the opium of the people, drugging you, sedating you, so you don’t see the real problems and act to change them. That it creates people who are so heavenly minded they are of no earthly use. And it does it by offering you pie in the sky when you die.

But Peter says, they couldn’t have it more wrong. Because the fact that Jesus will one day return can give your life purpose for the present, and a desire to change it, and great hope for the future.

But firstly, what if you’re not yet a Christian? What impact should this teaching that God is outside of time, that he is patient and Christ will one day return, have on you? Well, as we’ve seen, Peter is saying that rather than you waiting for God to show up, thinking that he’s late or not coming, God is waiting for you, wondering why you are waiting so long to come?

Look at v10, ‘the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, *and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed*.’ Now some years ago we had a fire going in our fireplace, and one of the girls added a small branch from our old Christmas tree. And for a few seconds it crackled and there were flames as it caught fire. But as the crackling died down we began to hear another sound - a roaring sound, coming from inside the chimney, and the flames from the branch had set all the soot alight, and as the air got sucked in, the roaring got louder.

And Peter’s saying, there will be just such a roar of fire on the last day. And here, our version says, ‘*the heavily bodies* will be burned up.’ It’s an attempt to translate the word for *elements*. And sometimes it’s used for the sun and moon and stars, but also for notes on a musical scale, or for the basic elements that the ancients thought were the building blocks of the universe -like earth, air, fire and water. And so whether Peter means the literal heavenly bodies, or the fabric of the universe, his point is that, on the last day, everything will be disclosed and exposed. Everything will be laid bare before God. So repent, Peter says, while God is giving you time to.

You see far from the teaching on heaven and eternity being an excuse for everyone to carry on as they are, as if nothing is happening, the second coming of Jesus is a call to turn away from sin and selfishness and indifference to God and others, because one day something *will* happen.

But that call for change is not just for non-Christians. Verse 11, ‘Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, *what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness*.’

You see, if like these false teachers, you don't really believe that one day there's ever going to be a final judgment and instead you believe in a kind of universalism where everyone gets saved in the end, then there's really no motivation to love and sacrifice for others. Because you can get away with living however you want to live.

Now that doesn't mean that you do live like that, or even that our secular friends do. We probably all know non-Christians who are more loving and compassionate than many Christians. It's that such a world-view cannot explain why they should live like that. Why if you can get away with it you shouldn't. But the knowledge of eternal judgment, and that one day we will give an account, can.

And Peter's saying that knowing that one day Jesus will return will cause us to grow in holiness and godliness. Not arguing over the timing, or getting angry or divisive over the issues, but that we will become steadily more and more like the One who we're waiting for.

Except, there are two ways of waiting, aren't there? You can wait passively and just sits there, twiddling your thumbs, wiling away the time, or you can wait expectantly, eager to see the thing you are waiting for come. Verses 11-12, 'What sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for *and hastening the coming of the day of God*.'

Now, if the timing of Jesus' return is up to God, how can we possibly hasten its coming? I mean I thought the whole point of this is that God's sovereign, and he'll bring about the end when the time is right. Absolutely. But as in other places the Bible holds in tension divine sovereignty and human responsibility. I mean, if you're a Christian, did you freely choose to trust Christ and repent of your sins - yes. And yet, the more you go on, the more you realise that it was God who was on your case, that it was his hand behind those seeming coincidences, that there were these other people praying for you that you never knew of, that it was his Spirit calling you and giving you the faith to believe.

And so it is with Jesus' return, Peter says. God is absolutely sovereign over the timing, yet he uses human means - the quality of our lives - to bring it about. Firstly, through our prayers, that when we pray as Jesus taught, 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come…' we're not talking into the air. Pray for it to come, Jesus says. And why would he say that if your prayers didn't make a difference?

Secondly, there's our evangelism. We live in a village of farmers, and at harvest time they work like crazy, they're the first up and the last to bed. But once harvest is in, it's party time. But the party doesn't start until the harvest is in. And Jesus said, before the end comes, "The gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations" (Mark 13:10) to all people groups. But when that harvest is brought in, it'll be party time in the kingdom of God. As Peter preached in Acts, "Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus." (Acts 3:19-20).

So, knowing that one day Jesus will return will make us more holy, more godly, more prayerful and more eager to tell others about him.

But it'll also change the way you handle your stuff. Look at v12-13, 'waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the

heavenly bodies will melt as they burn. But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth.'

Now, does Peter mean that the universe is going to be totally destroyed and replaced with something else, or that it's going to be purified and restored and renewed? Well, from the second century on theologians have argued for both positions, and many of the best scholars and commentators today say it's not clear.

You see, here, Peter's language seems to imply destruction and replacement. But back in v10 he talked of the fire of judgment exposing the world and bringing stuff into the open. But how can that happen if it's all been destroyed? And in his sermon in Acts 3, Peter describes Jesus' return as "the time for *restoring* [not destroying] all things" (Acts 3:21). Plus, Jesus spoke of "the new world" that would come (Matt 19:28) - literally, the renewal, the regeneration of all things. And in Romans 8, when Paul talks of creation being set free from its bondage to decay, he's thinking in terms of transformation, not destruction. Of the universe coming into all that it was always meant to be.

But then, you get to Revelation 21:1 and John says, 'Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.' Which sounds like replacement.

So… is God going to destroy everything and start over, or is he going to come and purify and restore and renew? And probably, the best answer is 'both', that Peter and Paul and John are trying to describe the indescribable. And that God is like a skilled craftsmen, who will take the base metal of this universe and, in the fire of his presence , he will melt it and purify it and pour it out into his mould and out of this world he will create something more beautiful than we could ever imagine. Something that is just like this world and yet nothing like this world. Something that we will know has always been our home and yet it seems like everything is new.

And that should tell us two things. Firstly, it tells us that he who dies with the most toys does *not* win. It tells you that you can gain the whole world, that you can make and keep hold of your money and spend it however you like and accumulate stuff, but you cannot take it with you. You can win the world and lose your soul.

So don't. Instead, use your money and handle your stuff as those who know that they have been entrusted to you by the Master. And one day he's coming back and we will give an account for it all.

But secondly, it confronts the way we think about the environment. You see, if you're not yet a Christian and think there's no eternity, then your concern for the environment is whistling in the wind, because ultimately it's pointless. The universe will run down, and grow cold, and all your efforts will be wasted. But when you know that this world and what you do in this world and with this world matters, and that God will take this world and make something even more glorious from it, then it gives a reason for caring for it.

So, whereas secularism cannot give you any ultimate reason or point to life, knowing that Jesus will return and that there will be a final judgment can give you incredible purpose for the present, even when life seems pointless. But it also gives great hope for the future.

Look at verse 13, 'But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.' Now, it would be hard at the moment not to look at the world and wish

things were different, or to think this is not how things were meant to be. But why do you think that? Because deep down you long for a better world, for one where every wrong is put right. When the world is as it was always meant to be. In other words, you're homesick for Eden.

And Peter's saying, that day, when the curse of sin and death is rolled back, and every wrong will be righted, will come. The day when, and the place where, righteousness dwells. In fact, that vision is the great finale of the Bible, as John writes, 'And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (Rev 21:3-4).

You see, when Jesus returns and everything is made new, it won't be us or our stuff, that's at the centre. It won't even be creation or the environment. It'll be God who's the centre of all things. And when you know that, you'll begin to orient your life around him now; you'll grow in holiness and godliness.

And as you do, you'll grow in hope and joy. You see, how can you long for this day and not dread it, for fear you might not be counted good enough? Because while in his second coming Jesus will bring an end to time, at his first coming he who was outside of time entered time. And the One whom the heavens and the earth could not contain was contained in a physical body like ours. And he shared our nature, subject to time, that we might share his eternal nature. And at the cross, the One who was righteous became sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him, and so forever live with him in the place where righteousness dwells.

It's why in v8, Peter calls his first readers, and you and me 'Beloved.' Beloved by Peter, but above all, beloved by God. The God who can give you purpose and hope when life seems pointless.