

THE DAY OF THE LORD WILL COME LIKE A THIEF

2 Peter 3:1-18

Key Verse: 3:10

“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.”

The world we live in is overflowing with bad news. Recently we heard about sudden natural disasters—like the mudslides that buried many people in Washington state. And then there have been acts of violence, such as the stabbing of 20 people in a Pennsylvania school, and the fatal shooting of three soldiers in Fort Hood, Texas. There is a threat of war in Ukraine. While these things are happening, many people bury their heads in virtual reality, going from one petty pleasure to another, lost in aimless distractions. Life seems to be a joke. A person is here today and gone tomorrow. The world seems to be a jungle full of accidents and random violence. But this is not new. Where is justice? Where is God? Does God intervene in the universe?

Hebrews 1:3 says that Jesus sustains all things by his powerful word. The world could not continue for even one more day without God’s intervention. These days we see many signs of the end of the age. Yet, God is always at work in the midst of them. Jesus said, **“My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working”** (Jn 5:17). But this does not mean that perfect justice is carried out in this world. Many injustices still occur. We wonder why the Lord does not resolve injustices immediately. It is because the Lord is patient. However, someday, as he promised, Jesus will come again. At that time he will carry out his perfect justice and establish a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. Jesus’ second coming is not a vague, escapist dream. It will really happen. So we have to believe Jesus will come again regardless of the chaotic condition of the world. Believing this impacts our world view and practical lifestyle greatly. In today’s passage we want to learn how the Lord is patient. Also, we need to learn what our ultimate hope is, and what lifestyle we should cultivate while we live in this world.

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I. The Lord is patient (1-9)

Peter begins this chapter by writing in verse 1, “**Dear friends.**” This is repeated in verses 8,14,17. “**Dearly beloved,**” might be a better translation. It indicates deep affection and respect. Though Peter was a great apostle, he was not condescending; he was very humble. His heart was tender and warm toward his fellow believers. He was like a loving father talking to his beloved children. He learned from Jesus who loved his disciples like his friends. This kind of friendly love should characterize relationships with fellow believers, our children, and our Bible students. As the Apostle Peter speaks to us with this tender affection, let’s listen to what he says.

First, remember God’s word (1-2). In verse 1, Peter reminds believers, as he did also in his first letter, of Jesus’ promises and teachings in order to stimulate them to wholesome thinking. Why was this so important? When we allow bad images or evil thoughts to occupy our minds and hearts, we become sick both in body and spirit. But when our thinking is rooted in God’s word we can be healthy, pure and sincere. That is why Peter repeated gospel truth again and again. We tend to forget in the afternoon what we held on to in the morning, especially gospel truth—that is, Jesus’ incarnation, life and ministry, death and resurrection, ascension and sovereign rule, and his second coming. The gospel truth is so deep, like the ocean. It is hard to fathom how deep the world’s oceans are. Recently, a Malaysian airlines jet crashed in the Indian Ocean. It has been very hard to discover because the water is so deep—about three miles, or five kilometers. How can anyone go into that deep water? But the gospel truth is deeper still, deeper than the deepest ocean. So we always have something more to learn, and it is good for us to be reminded of it. Verse 2 says, “**I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles.**” Here the apostles represent the New Testament and the prophets the Old Testament, and Peter puts them on par as equals in terms of spiritual authority. Both are vehicles of God’s sacred truth, like two wheels on a bicycle. The Old Testament foretold the coming of Christ. In the New Testament the apostles bring to people the message of Christ. Christ is the center of the Old and New Testaments. Ephesians 2:20 says, “[God’s household] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.” As we read the Old and New Testaments we should always remember Jesus Christ. The moment we

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remember Jesus, all the darkness leaves our hearts and we have peace and joy, light and life, truth, love and grace. We find the strength to live as God's children and to overcome the world.

Second, by God's word... (3-7). Among all the words of God that we should remember, Peter mostly emphasizes the promise of Jesus' second coming in this letter. So Peter defends this truth against the poisonous influence of scoffers. We must understand that in the last days scoffers will come. Here "the last days" refers to the time from Jesus' ascension to his second coming. We don't know how long this period will last. Some people say that these days are the last days of the last days. What is the scoffers' problem? They want to justify living by evil desires, so they try to destroy the truth that Jesus will come again. They say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation" (4). They claim that nothing ever changes and everything just keeps on going as it always has, based on their knowledge of their times and their father's times and their grandfather's times, and beyond that they do not know. A generation comes and a generation goes and still things are just the same: the world is full of problems and injustice and life is hard and burdensome. They conclude, "What can we do but indulge in pleasure?" So their motto is, **"Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die"** (1 Cor 15:32).

After exposing their motive, Peter points out the fallacy of their argument based on the teaching of God's word. He said in verse 5: **"But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens came into being and the earth was formed out of water and by water."** God created the heavens and the earth by the words of his mouth. When God said, **"Let there be light,"** there was light (Gen 1:3). When God said, **"Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water,"** it was so (Gen 1:6). Whatever command God gave was fulfilled exactly as he said. God's word is the power that created all things. If scoffers admit that God is the Creator, they must submit to him. To avoid this, they deliberately forget that God created all things by his word. Apostle Paul says that although God's eternal power and divine nature are clearly revealed, men suppress this truth by their wickedness, and are without excuse (Ro 1:18-20). Verse 6 talks about the flood of Noah's time. It was God's divine intervention in human history to judge the wickedness of mankind. This is an historical fact that no one can deny. Then in verse 7, he makes his point: **"By the same word the present**

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heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.” The word of God that brought the world into existence and that brought watery destruction on the wicked of Noah’s day will bring fiery destruction on the world that exists today and on its wicked people. God never lies. God does exactly what he says he will do. God already foretold judgment by fire. We should take his word very seriously.

Third, don’t forget this one thing (8-9). In the course of holding on to God’s promises, there is one thing we should not forget. Although we may forget our username and password, our spouse’s birthday or anniversary, there is one thing we should not forget: God is patient. With the Lord, a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day (8). God’s view of time is different than ours. God stands above time and can look down the corridors of history to see the end from the beginning. In light of his eternity, a thousand years are like a day. Some Chicago people are marking this year as the 100th for Wrigley Field. But that is just one tenth of a day to God. On the other hand, we are very confined to a small period of time. We expect our dreams to be fulfilled and problems to be solved within the time that we have. When they are not, we become very frustrated and impatient. With this concept of time, some people misunderstand that God is not keeping his promise because he does not punish injustice immediately. But we need to understand why the Lord seems slow. It is because he is patient with people, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance (9).

If God was not patient, most of us would not be here. Many have testified that only because God was patient could they come to repentance. This is why we are so thankful for God’s patience. Usually we ask God to be patient with us, but do not want to be patient with others. Some people are patient with their Bible students, but not with their children or their spouse. We need to learn God’s patience with our children, not to mention our Bible students. In many cases impatience is the root of conflict. Although a relationship is built up over many years, with much sacrifice, one act of impatience can break it in a moment. Proverbs 14:29 says, “Whoever is patient has great understanding, but one who is quick-tempered displays folly.” Patience is a great virtue. Proverbs 16:32 says, **“Better a patient person than a warrior, one with self-control than one who takes a city.”** Apostle Paul explained that patience is a key ingredient in love, saying,

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“Love is patient” (1 Cor 13:4). To be patient is not the same as being passive. It is overcoming oneself and waiting positively with hope like the father of the prodigal son. The father never gave up or forgot his son who had gone astray. Rather, he was waiting and waiting every day expecting his son to return. God is our Father. He does not want anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. This is why God is longsuffering in his patience. Apostle Paul explained this, saying, **“All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people”** (Ro 10:21). Let us learn God’s longsuffering patience in our painful, practical realities of life. Amen.

II. Look forward to the day of God (10-18)

Although God’s judgment is delayed because of his great patience, it will not be delayed forever. Let’s read verse 10. **“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.”** The expression **“the day of the Lord”** appears frequently in the Old Testament. Usually it refers to a day of God’s judgment. For example, Isaiah 13:9 says, **“See, the day of the Lord is coming—a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger—to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it.”** When the day of the Lord comes, no one can withstand it. Here, **“the day of the Lord”** is God’s final judgment, which is the most dreadful event in history. The heavens will disappear with a roar. Jesus said, **“...the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken”** (Mt 24:29). The elements of this world will all be destroyed by fire, as we have seen in part through volcanic eruptions or atomic bombs. All human achievements, culture and civilization will vanish, including the Willis Tower, the John Hancock Building, all cell phones and i-pads and fancy cars, dollars, credit cards, precious gems, entertainment awards, sports trophies, and the like. They will all melt like butter in a frying pan. Everything that people have done will be exposed—even the darkest and most secret things. There will be no place to hide. This is the culmination of human history. It will happen suddenly, unexpectedly, like the coming of a thief. Thieves do not make appointments. They come at the most unexpected time. Likewise, we don’t know when Jesus will come again. That is why we should always be alert. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought we to be (11a)?

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First of all, we ought to live holy and godly lives (11b). The day of the Lord affects the world view and lifestyle of Christians. If there is no final judgment we don't need to struggle against temptation and sin. But on the day of final judgment, we will have to give account of what we have said and done and thought. Jesus said, **“But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken”** (Mt 12:36). Hebrews 4:13 says, **“Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”** Everything is recorded in Jesus' video machine, which is flawless and never runs out of space. When we realize that Jesus watches over us like this, we have a clear reason to live holy and godly lives.

Secondly, we live looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth (12-13). The day of the Lord is a day of judgment to the ungodly. At the same time, it is the day of victory and reward for the godly. All the heavens and the earth will disappear. But a new heaven and a new earth will be newly created by God. Our bodies also will be resurrected and made new. Our bodies will be spiritual, glorious, honorable, and imperishable (1 Cor 15:42-44). We will never be vulnerable to temptation; we will never become tired or sick. There will be no tears, no sorrow, no mourning, no conflict, no pain, and no death (Rev 21:4). New heaven, new earth and new body—everything will be new because God makes it new (Rev 21:5). It will be a perfect paradise. Peter says it is, “where righteousness dwells” (13). This is our ultimate hope. We are looking forward to this. As we look forward to this, Peter urges us to make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with Christ (14). If we are found doing something wrong, it will be very embarrassing. But when we are found doing something good, it is time to receive God's reward. So we have to make every effort to be found right with God, whatever we do.

Peter said, **“Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him”** (15). In regarding the patience of our Lord as salvation, Paul wrote the same gospel truth that Peter did. Peter acknowledged Paul's letters as divinely inspired. But some ignorant and unstable people distorted Paul's letters (16). They distorted the freedom that the gospel gives to be freedom to

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sin. They misused God's grace to justify their sinful lifestyles. This kind of blatant distortion of Scripture led them to destruction.

Thirdly, grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (17-18). Peter concludes his letter with both a negative and positive exhortation. In light of the warning that he has given against false teachers, he urges us to be on our guard so that we may not be carried away by the error of the lawless. The **“error of the lawless”** refers to licentiousness—that is, indulging in sin as though it is acceptable to God. Both Peter and Paul clearly taught that Christian faith leads to a godly life; it is not a justification to sin. Apostle Paul always emphasized to live by faith alone and by God's grace alone against legalism. But at the same time, he warned believers not to abuse God's grace and Christian freedom. So he told the Galatians, **“Walk by the Spirit...keep in step with the Spirit”** (Gal 5:16,25). Peter's positive exhortation is to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (18a). Peter used the words **“grace and knowledge”** together. There is a certain basis of belief that never changes: Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior. Christian life has a firm foundation, and upon this foundation we can grow endlessly, especially in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We should experience the wonder of God's grace and the knowledge of God and Jesus Christ. God's grace and knowledge are deeper than the oceans, higher than the mountains, and wider than the horizon. The best way to defend the gospel teaching and to resist false teaching is to grow spiritually in God. When we are growing in God's grace and knowledge, we are happy, and we will surely be ready to meet Jesus when he comes again.

Let us learn God's longsuffering patience. Let us hold on to our ultimate hope of new heaven and new earth. Let us grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.