

BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: 2 Peter: Hope Filled Living in a Culture of Despair

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Every one of us has something deep in our soul that longs for something different, something more. There is something deep within us that cries out and says, “Please tell me this is not all there is. There’s got to be something more!”

That’s what we want to talk about. If you have a Bible, turn with us to 2 Peter Chapter 3. Peter is writing to people whose lives as Christians have become very difficult. They’re on the beginning threshold of persecution. Shortly after this letter is penned, both Peter and Paul will be executed by Nero and these people are headed for much more serious persecution. So, if you’re writing to bring hope to a group of Christians who are heading into the face of real persecution, what do you say? The consistent theme of both 1 and 2 Peter has been that we find our hope in the return of Christ and the ushering in of the new Heaven and the new Earth and the ultimate fulfillment of our salvation. In Chapter 3, Verses 8 and 9, he reminded us that God is not slow or tardy in His return, but rather He’s gracious and merciful, long-suffering and patient, and every day that Jesus waits is one more day that someone can receive His gift of salvation. But do not misinterpret that. It does not mean that Jesus is not coming back. He picks it up then in Verse 10:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. (*NASB, 2 Peter 3:10)

So, the day of the Lord is a phrase taken from the Old Testament prophets, picked up by Jesus, picked up then by Peter, regarding the return of Christ and the judgment to follow. Jesus told Peter directly that Jesus will come as a thief. Nobody knows the day or hour; suddenly Jesus appears... returns. It says in that day the heavens will pass away with a roar. There are several terms in this verse that are disputed, and it’s really hard to figure out exactly what is meant. The heavens are one of them. What is meant by the heavens? Some people think the heavens is a reference to the sky, the clouds, the stars, the moon, the planets, and that’s possible; that might be what it is. Others think—and I would be more on this page—that the heavens are a reference to the spiritual realm. Right now, today, Jesus literally, bodily, physically dwells somewhere, and He rules from there—and we refer to that as the spiritual realm. If you have loved ones that die in Christ, they go to this place. Now we tend to think geographically—like it’s out there somewhere. I don’t think that’s too likely. I think it’s more likely a different realm—a spiritual realm. There is quite a bit in the Bible that I think would affirm that. But there is coming a day when that separate realm between this Earth and the physical, and the spiritual realm will be done away with, and they will come together where Jesus will literally, physically, bodily rule on this Earth, and we’ll be together forever.

I think that's what he's saying—that division will one day pass away with a roar. This is not the roar of a lion. This is a roar like a wind makes. Here in the Midwest we'd say it's the sound a tornado makes when it comes through. And the elements—again a very discussed term—probably just the components of all of that will be destroyed with intense heat and the earth and its works will be burned up. The earth is more obvious; works I think is referring to all those towers of Babel that we the people have built. It's our own monument to ourselves and our desire to be our own god. These things will ultimately be wiped out...destroyed...removed in preparation for the restoration and the new Heaven and the new Earth.

So, if you think about a forest fire, you think about all the brush and all the cover the forest fire goes through, and everything is exposed; everything is opened up; everything is visible. Here in our area a lot of people burn their fields. The same thing happens. Everything burns away and the ground is kind of opened up and everything is exposed or revealed. That would be the consistent message of Scripture—that, at the end of the day, everything is laid bare; it's opened up; it's discovered, and its subject to the judgment of God. There are none of these terms in Peter that mean to be annihilated. Whether it's destroyed or passed away, none of these terms mean that, and I think it's important we don't go down that path.

Verse 11 then:

Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness,

So, if that's true, how should we live? The obvious answer is: if we know, at the end of the day, all of the monuments to ourselves, all of our attempts to build our own kingdom on Earth are all going to be destroyed and wiped away, why would we live for that? The answer is, "Well, we shouldn't." We should live in holy conduct. The word holy means other than. We should live other than the rest of the world who don't understand that. That phrase what sort of people is an interesting phrase. It primarily roots back to the idea of identifying foreigners in the land. So, someone would ask, "What sort of person is this?" and typically the answer was in reference to where do they come from? Are they Roman; are they Egyptian; are they Jewish? You also had a similar usage of the term when Jesus was on the boat with the disciples in the great storm and Jesus calms the sea and the response of the disciples is, "What sort of man is this?" That exact same phrase—basically asking, "Where does this guy come from?" So, you think about in 1 Peter, Peter told us that as children of God, we are aliens and strangers on this earth because our citizenship is in heaven. So, if that's true and if we know how the story ends, what sort of people ought we to be other than the rest of the world?

The idea of godliness is one of those abstract, spiritual-sounding terms, but we saw this in Chapter 1 in this very practical kind of process of growth that Peter laid out for us. He talked about the importance of moral excellence which is that decision, "I want to be a Christ follower; I want to travel this path," which then is followed by knowledge. Knowledge is, "I need to then know what's true," which then leads to self-control which leads to perseverance which leads to godliness which leads to love. So, godliness is basically living out the truth with self-control and perseverance, and Peter is just rescoring that here in the text.

Verse 12: ... looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, (Vs. 12a)

A very interesting phrase there; looking for is like with great anticipation...anxiously looking for and awaiting. In the New Testament there are three tenses for salvation: past tense, present tense, and future tense—have been saved, am being saved, will be saved. I would say, by and large, we primarily emphasize the past tense. People talk a lot about, “I was saved when I was ten; I was saved three years ago.” We often talk about it in past tense terms. The term we use the least is future tense, and yet in the New Testament it’s the exact opposite. The tense that’s used the least is the past by an overwhelming margin. What’s used the most is the future tense. If you are persecuted, if you are beat up, if life is really hard for you as a Christian, where do you find your hope? Your hope is not in this world. It’s not the idea that things are going to work out and get better. It is understanding that ultimately Jesus is coming back and our salvation will be fulfilled—and that is the hope of the Gospel. So that is what Peter is saying and seems to be saying, in some way that’s kind of hard to understand—that if we’re diligent about accomplishing the mission, we can actually hasten His return. It’s kind of like if you’re weary and tired of the pain and suffering of this world, let’s be about the mission; let’s get the job done and hasten His return. How exactly that works, no one has any idea, but it does seem to be what the text is implying.

...looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. (Vs. 12-13)

This is talked about more in Revelation Chapters 21 and 22—this idea of Jesus returning and ushering in the new heaven and the new earth. What kind of a place is it? It’s a place where righteousness lives. It’s a place where things are made right again. It’s critically important to understand we’re not just talking about life after death. We’re talking about redemption; we’re talking about restoration; we’re talking about a place where that which is destroyed by sin and death is returned—it’s redeemed; it’s made right again!

So, there’s kind of a core theology around this that we need to talk about a little bit. There are those that believe that at the end of the story the Earth is destroyed—annihilated—and God basically creates a new Earth and the story goes on from there. It would be my opinion that if that’s our theology, we basically are saying that sin and death win Round One, but God will win Round Two, and I do not believe that is the theology of the New Testament. It is regeneration...rebirth...renewal and restoration. It’s a place where things are made right again. When Jesus was talking to His disciples in Matthew Chapter 19, He is talking specifically about His return, and He says to His apostles that they will reign with Him when He returns and He says, “You will join Me in the regeneration.” When Paul is writing to the Romans in Romans Chapter 8, he says, “All creation groans and it awaits the redemption, the renewal of all creation.” Creation is not waiting to be annihilated. What would be the hope in that? But rather, instead, the redemption, the restoration, the renewal of the Earth as God intended it to be.

It’s helpful to think of the terms that Peter just used, the terms used in Revelation 21 and 22, and then the terms used for our salvation. So, think about 2 Corinthians 5:17...therefore if anyone is in Christ, you are a new (what?) a new creation. Old things are (what?) passed away; all things become (what?) new. All of that language is right here in Peter in referencing the Heaven and the Earth. Think through the story. When you trusted Christ as Savior, you were not annihilated. You were reborn—it’s regeneration. “I’m made new and whole again, and this is a process I’m in to reach its fulfillment—the fulfillment of my salvation at the return of Christ.”

You have this beautifully illustrated in the resurrection of Jesus. When Jesus arose from the dead, it was His literal, physical, bodily resurrection of the body that He bore on the cross. He even showed the disciples the nail prints in His hands and the scar in His side. It was His resurrected body and we are told that is the first fruit—the prototype of our resurrection and the redemption to come. In 1 Corinthians 15 we are told very clearly that when the resurrection happens, it is this body that was placed in the grave that is literally, physically resurrected from the grave. Then it is changed—this mortal put on immortality! It's this body redeemed and perfected back the way God intended it to be. My body is not annihilated, and a new body is created. This body is resurrected and changed. All of that is a picture of the full story of the regeneration, the redemption, the restoration, the renewal of the Heavens and the Earth in such a way that God says everything that was destroyed by sin and death is made right! As God's ultimate declaration, "I win Round One;" "I win Round Two." "I win!" That's a core theology of the Scriptures. Even the terms themselves speak of this.

In the Greek language, there are two different words for new—new Heaven, new Earth. One of those words is *kainos* which means qualitatively new. We would probably use the word renewal. The other Greek word is *neos*, which is a word that means quantitatively new. We would probably use the phrase brand new. In 2 Corinthians 5:17, in 2 Peter, in Revelation 21 and 22, it's always *kainos*. It's not brand new; it's renewed; it's restored; it's redeemed; it's made whole again. When Jesus speaks in Revelation 21 and 22, He says, "I make all things new." He doesn't say, "I make all new things." The significance of that is everything that sin and death has taken away from you in this life is ultimately given back and restored. The hope of the Gospel is not just life after death; it is so much more comprehensive than that.

Verse 14: Therefore, (so therefore, in light of this) beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless,

Again, if we know this is true, how shall we live? We should live in peace. This is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word *shalom*. We should live with our souls flourishing. We should live with a sense of wholeness, a sense of rest, that this world is not the end of the story. This world does not win. What sin and death has done to me does not win. Someday God makes it right and the story is full and complete and whole, and I know that. Therefore, it motivates me to live spotless and blameless.

I'm sure many of us have heard someone say, "Someone is so heavenly minded, they're no earthly good." I would suggest to you I have never in my life, ever met anyone that is so heavenly minded, they're no earthly good. The problem is we're not heavenly minded enough, and that's why we're often no earthly good. It's because we're living for the things of this world. It's because we're building our own kingdom here. It's because we're trying to find our hope in this world, believing somehow, it's going to be different; somehow, it's going to get better; somehow, it's all going to work out. And then when we are deeply disappointed, once again we are discouraged and saddened and in despair, and we lose sight that the hope of the Gospel is that Jesus is coming back, and He's going to bring a new heaven and a new earth, and God is going to restore that which has been lost or taken away from us because of sin and death.

Arnie: Excellent message Bryan. For the believer, the future is full of hope, isn't it?

Bryan: Yeah, absolutely it is. We get glimpses now. These are our best moments in life, but they're just glimpses of the fulfillment to come. And He's promised to make all things new. And for us as believers, the future is absolutely glorious.

Cara: I think we all have earthly hopes, but as I get older and things are taken from me, and I see that the things of this Earth are kind of these fleeting things, I feel like my hope is becoming more and more grounded in this future with Jesus. And that really affects how I live.

Bryan: Yeah. So, the more heavenly minded we are, then the more things on Earth are clarified. That's why the return of Christ was so critical to the early church. I mean, think about writing to a group of people heading into persecution, and what is the message you're going to give them that gives them hope? And the answer is Jesus is coming back and the future is glorious.

Arnie: I remember at one of our lunches, I was running by some of our research with you and I was talking about this concept of evangelism by daily discipleship. And you said, well really Arnie, it's working on your own salvation. So, Bryan, can you talk more about this, about salvation as being past, present, and future? Because sometimes working on your salvation sounds works-based, earned, you know, and I know you're not about that, but can you help me get that concept down better?

Bryan: Yeah, so it does get confusing. So, one of the best ways to understand it is biblically, our salvation is talked about with past tense, present tense, future tense. So, I was saved and that's my conversion. I am being saved from the power of sin and the things of this world. And one day will be ultimately saved. That's the fulfillment of my salvation. And what's interesting is we mostly talk about past tense. When we talk about salvation, it's, I was saved [a done deal] five years ago, but that's the least talked about in the New Testament and the one we talk about the least is the most talked about in the New Testament. And that's future. When life is hard and you're being persecuted and it's hard to figure out what in this world is going to bring hope, the Great Hope of the Gospel is the fulfillment of the salvation to come.

Arnie: So why do you think so many Christians get hung up on timelines for the future? I wonder what Peter would think about that.

Bryan: Yeah, I kind of wonder too. As a matter of fact, I'm pretty sure the New Testament writers would be confused by a lot of what we do with End Times theology. I think people like it because they're curious. It's mysterious, feels like we're predicting the future, maybe gives us a sense of security, if we know exactly how the events are supposed to happen. But I think all of us could agree that the number one focus in the New Testament related to this is the return of Christ. He is coming back. And that is the reason for our hope.

Cara: Peter seemed really concerned that the believers of that time were going to give up. He's really encouraging them and he's reminding them what they have to live for. I think that's a message we need to hold on for right now.

Bryan: Absolutely. So, for every believer, no matter what, people are going through difficult circumstances, people are discouraged, they're disappointed, they're battling diseases. They have to hang onto the fact that the future for us as believers is spectacular. That God will give us what our souls long for, and He will deliver us to a world beyond what we can even imagine today. And the amazing thing is because it's on the basis of God's grace, not on the basis of our

performance, it's equally true on our worst days as it is on our best days. So, our future is full of hope and it's glorious.