

Putting Things in Order

By David H. Roper

I heard recently of a man who was rummaging around in the attic of a house he had just purchased. He found an old trunk and when he opened it up saw a genuine old genii lamp. When he rubbed it, out popped the genii, who granted him one request--he was a stingy genii. Being a very astute businessman the finder came up with an idea. He asked for a copy of the "San Francisco Chronicle" one year from that date. He was interested in the financial page, naturally.

He got the paper, opened it to the page with the stock market reports, and was running through in his mind the killing he was going to make in the market, when he glanced at the opposite page. It had an obituary column containing the notice of his death.

This kind of tale puts in perspective, I think, what does and what does not matter. During the Middle Ages the monks had skulls on their desks which were inscribed, "*Sumus moribundus*" (we are destined to die). They kept the skulls there as reminders of the transiency of life, the certainty of its end. It helped them gain the right perspective and focus on life.

Perhaps we need something like that to keep our thoughts focused in the right direction. Second Peter 3 does that, I think, and I would like you to turn to this chapter with me. If you recall, the emphasis in chapter 1 is on the message of the apostles and the prophets. Peter describes the process by which we receive the truth that sets us free. In chapter 2 he describes the alternative to truth, i.e., the message which comes through false prophets and false teachers, and the results of that teaching. He describes the deeds of these false teachers and tells us something of their destiny. Then from verse 10 on to the end of the chapter, he describes their moral character. The last verse sums up his emphasis in this chapter (verse 22):

It has happened to them according to the true proverb, "A dog returns to its own vomit," and, "A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire."

The point Peter is making is that these false prophets are devoid of the divine nature. They have a sensual nature. We were told in chapter 1 that the apostles received the divine nature, the nature of Christ, having submitted themselves to the lordship of Christ, and by their message we can come into the same relationship. The nature of the false prophets is sensual, and Peter describes them as sows returning to wallow in the mire after washing.

I used to have a pig. Actually, it was a very famous pig. This sow had the heaviest litter of pigs in the state of Texas. For several years I would take her to the Texas State Fair and exhibit her in all her glory. Before we took her there, we would take her to the back lot, take a hose and scrub brush, and clean her off. She was a Duroc pig and was supposed to be a kind of wine color. But for some reason this pig was yellow, so we would use cordovan shoe polish to darken her.

She had a lovely pen with clean straw--I even slept there with her when we were at the fair. At the end of the week we would bring her home and turn her loose in the lot, and you know exactly what she would do. She would wander over to the nearest mud puddle, close her eyes, and roll over and over in it. That was sheer ecstasy for her, to return to the mud, because that was her nature. I expected that of her so I was never disappointed when she did that because that is what pigs do. No amount of talking to her or pleading with her or trying to convince her that she was really Mr. Clean would have done any good. She was a pig; she acted like a pig so she was true to her

nature.

Now, that is the point that Peter is making in chapter 2. These false teachers are true to their nature. Though they may look good superficially, and though their message may appear to be Christian in its import, it is not, because false teachers will not submit themselves to the lordship of Christ. Eventually, that unsubmitted nature will declare itself and you can see them for what they really are.

Peter brings these two elements together in chapter 3 and puts them into sharper focus for us. He directs our attention to the message of the prophets and the apostles which affirms the second coming of Christ. He talks about the message of the false teachers, which is basically a denial of this. He begins with a brief introduction:

This is now, beloved, the second letter I am writing to you in which I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, that you should remember the words spoken beforehand by the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior spoken by your apostles.

The point of this introduction is that we should take seriously the message of the prophets and the apostles which is to follow. It is no light matter. It cannot be disregarded. He links together the message of the prophets and apostles as he has done before--we saw this earlier in the book--because, in Peter's mind, and in the minds of all the apostles, their message was equivalent to the message of the prophets; there was no difference, they were all saying the same thing.

But, more significantly, in this introduction Peter links together the message of Jesus Christ with the message of the apostles. He says, "This is the command of the Lord and Savior spoken by the apostles." That is, what the apostles spoke was what Jesus said. Peter is saying again what we have seen a number of times throughout the book: that Christians are, by definition, people who have submitted themselves to Christ and to the message of his apostles. Therefore we cannot call ourselves Christians unless we are willing to submit ourselves to Scripture.

Now, we may have problems with Scripture--there are areas of Scripture that none of us understand and even issues we may struggle with. But, essentially, we have to be willing to submit ourselves to the Word of God if we are going to call ourselves Christians. We are not free to say we are Christians and then live as we please. We simply do not have that liberty. That is the point Peter makes at the outset. "It is important that you understand," he says, "that what I am saying is not a piece of good advice; this is an apostolic witness to the truth, and it has the same authority that the word of Jesus would have."

Peter approaches the subject of the second coming of Christ in two ways. He speaks first of those who would deny it (verses 3 to 9); then he gives a declaration of it (verse 10); and then our duties in light of the coming of Jesus Christ (verses 11 to 18). First, the denial of his coming:

Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, and saying, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation."

He tells us three things. First, when this will occur. This will take place, he says, during a period designated as the last days. Now, he is not thinking of some far-off time, as we often use that expression. He is not thinking of the period of time just prior to the coming of Jesus Christ. THESE are the last days, the days we are living in. That is the consistent witness of the New Testament. The writer of Hebrews says in the introduction:

God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son...

On the day of Pentecost, Peter referred to what was occurring (the outbreak of tongues and prophecy) as "that which was predicted by the prophet Joel." Joel had said that in the last days these things would take place. In other words, Peter says, Pentecost occurred in the last days. These are the last days, during the period between the first and second comings of Christ, and we can expect a continuing line of apostasy that parallels the proclamation of

the apostles.

If you want further demonstration of what Peter is talking about, turn to the little book of Jude.

Jude wrote after Peter and frequently quotes him. He says in verse 3:

Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to all the saints. For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

Now, that is a quotation from 2 Peter, chapter 1. Jude says it has already happened. When Peter made this prophecy it was yet in the future, but Jude says it has occurred. Verse 4 says, "Certain persons HAVE crept in unnoticed." Then again, in verses 17, 18 and 19, he says:

But you, beloved, ought to remember the words that were spoken beforehand by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ; that they were saying to you [and here he is quoting Peter], "In the last time there shall be mockers, following after their own ungodly lusts." These are the ones who are causing divisions

Those presently at work in the church, Jude says, fulfill the prediction that Peter made. This is also our experience. What Peter predicted is occurring today. These are the last days.

The second thing Peter tells us is something about these men. He describes them as mockers, i.e., they will laugh at the truth; they will not take it seriously; and they will follow their own lusts. That is a term we have seen a number of times in 2 Peter, describing people who are basically sensual. They think of life in terms of what they can touch and taste and eat and drink and smell. That is what they live for. They have no contact, no interest, in spiritual things.

And thirdly, he tells us something of their message, in verse 4. They say, "Where is the promise of his coming?" That is, they deny what the prophets assured them would take place. Throughout the Old Testament the prophets look at history in terms of two great periods. There is this present evil age, and there is the age to come and the event that will usher in the age to come is the second coming of the Lord. The Lord is the one who is coming back to set things right. That is the continuing message of the Old Testament.

Peter says they will deny that message. They will say he is not coming, and the evidence that they will give is that ". . . since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation." That is, God has never intervened in history. We live in a closed, naturalistic universe, governed by cause and effect.

That is very contemporary. That is the way most people today outside of Jesus Christ are living their lives. Whether they state it as a philosophical principle, or simply believe that way, that is the basis upon which most people live. Peter says that this will be the basis of their denial that God is coming back. Now he answers their argument (verse 5 to 9):

For when they maintain this, it escapes their notice that by the word of God the heavens existed long ago and the earth was formed out of water and by water, through which the world at that time was destroyed, being flooded with water. But the present heavens and earth by His word are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient towards you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.

He rebuts the argument in two ways. First, he appeals to history, which is a good place to begin. Someone once

asked Oliver Cromwell how he would educate his children and his answer was, "I would first begin by teaching them a little history." It is important to know what men have done in the past, and how God has worked in history in the past. This is what Peter does.

He goes back to the event that they ought to recall: the flood story. There is at least one time in history, Peter says, when God did intervene. That was when the flood occurred during the time of Noah. God created the world out of water, i.e., he brought the dry land out of a watery chaos; that was the process he used to shape the world, and water was the agent God used to destroy the world. So, Peter says, here is one exception to your absolute. Here is one time in history when God did intervene. And, he says, there is another event, yet future, when God will use another means--not water, but fire, to destroy the earth.

That is what Peter means in verse 7, when he describes the present world as being reserved, or preserved, by His word, for fire, ". . . kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men." So he reviews one historical event when God did break into history in order to bring about judgment.

But he does not leave the matter there. He goes on in verses 8 and 9 to appeal to God's character. Basically, what he is doing in these verses is explaining why God delays. Why is it that God allows evil to go unchecked? Why is there so much wickedness and sorrow and distress and evil in the world? Why doesn't God do something? Who has not asked that question at one time or another?

Well, Peter tells us why. It is not because God is slack. He is not asleep. He is not unmindful of our circumstances. God is delaying because he is waiting for people to respond to him. The point Peter makes in verse 8, when he says that "...with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day," is that God's clock does not operate on the same basis as ours. It is not dependent upon the rotation of the earth, and the orbit of the earth around the sun. God's clock is determined by the redemptive process.

God wants to save the world, although it might seem that he is not interested, if we judge by history, by the events of our lives, and by the contemporary situation. That is not true; God is delaying because he is waiting for people to respond to the truth. But, Peter tells us, the day of the Lord will come. He gives us, in contrast to the denial of his coming, the word of the apostles, their declaration that God's promise of his coming is going to be fulfilled (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 revealed.

The margin note in the New American Standard Bible has "discovered" for the words "burned up," which are in the text. The world will be shown for what it really is. Peter says that the world is like a great time bomb, ticking its way toward inevitable destruction. It is only a matter of time. It is all going to blow up some day; it is going to burn.

The word that Peter uses that is translated "destroyed" means "to separate something into its component parts." Now, I am not a scientist, so I may not be describing this thing accurately, but it seems to me that what he is saying is that the molecular bonds are going to be loosed, so that the whole universe will be separated into its smallest possible particles. It is all going to be dissolved. That is his point.

That may not appear to be true, on the face of things. It may appear that history is grinding its way relentlessly on, that nothing ever changes, but the facts are that a time is coming, after God has waited an indeterminate period of time, when he will act in judgment. The earth and its works (the world as we see it, touch it, feel it, taste it, the world of the seen and the empirical, the sensual world) will be burned up. Everything that is attached to this world and is a part of its works, everything that most people put their minds and their money on, is going to be burned up.

A couple of months ago, my son barged into the bedroom in the middle of the night and shouted, "Dad, our neighbors' house is on fire!" I jumped out of bed and opened the front door. A blast of heat came at me. Across the street our neighbors' house was going up in flames. Firemen were able to save part of it, but the living room, kitchen and garage were totally destroyed. I thought of their beautiful, irreplaceable antiques. They were gone, just like that!

The fire illustrated for me the truth of this statement: things don't last. Things are revealed by being dissolved, by being burned up. The things that people put their time and money and efforts into frequently are gone in a flash. Certainly they will be gone when Jesus Christ comes back.

Now, that is the point. The knowledge that all these things are going to be burned up some day ought to totally change our perspective on life. What do we give ourselves to, in view of that fact? It ought to change our attitude toward our clothes, our furniture, our houses, our buildings, our land, our cars, all the things that we invest our time and money and effort and thought in. As stewards we certainly ought to take care of them, but Peter's point is: let us not become preoccupied with them, because they are all going to burn up some day. How do we react when a piece of furniture gets gouged, or a favorite dress gets torn? That is Peter's appeal, and that is why he goes on in verses 11 and following to describe our duties, in light of the certain coming of the Lord.

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

Do you see what he is saying? Those of you who were here last Sunday night heard Joni Eareckson say the only thing we are going to take into heaven is character. Everything else is going to be burned up and since all these things are going to be dissolved, what kind of people ought we to be—not what should we do. God is not concerned about our activity; he is concerned about the quality of our lives, the character that we exhibit, the character that we are building now.

What matters is that we be godlike, conducting ourselves in holiness. Those are the things that matter.

Now Peter divides what he describes here as holy conduct and holiness in two ways. He tells us first what perspective we ought to have in life, and second, what our practice ought to be (verses 12, 13):

... looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, on account 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.

Twice in this passage he says we are looking for something. In verse 12 we are looking for the coming of the day of God; in verse 13 we are looking for new heavens and a new earth.

What are you looking for? What am I looking for? What do we long for? Peter says the only right perspective, in view of the destruction of all things, is to look for the time when Jesus Christ himself is going to come back and set things right. Do not expect anything here to satisfy you, or to go right, or to meet your needs fully. Only the coming of God is going to set things right. He says to look for that event, long for it. "Set your affection on things above," Peter says, "not on things below. Get your sights aligned and look at the right thing. Look at spiritual reality, what God is doing and what God is going to do to set things right in this universe."

Secondly, as a part of that perspective, as we are looking for the coming of the day of God, Peter says we are hastening his coming. That is, we actually have something to do with bringing to completion God's redemptive purpose. As I live a godly life people are going to be drawn into a relationship with Jesus Christ, and the result is that I will help bring his program to a close. I can hasten his coming by my behavior.

Then in verses 14 and following, he describes the practice they ought to follow, in understanding this principle.

Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace,

spotless and blameless, and regard the patience of our Lord to be salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction. [Peter is simply saying that Paul agrees with what he is saying, although Paul is harder to understand!] **You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, be on your guard lest, being carried away by the error of unprincipled men, you fall from your own steadfastness, but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory, both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.**

In light of the certain coming of Jesus Christ, four practices are given here in the form of commands. In verse 14, "Be diligent to be found by Him in peace"; verse 15, "Regard the patience of our Lord to be salvation"; verse 17, "Be on your guard lest you be carried away"; and verse 18, "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." These, then, are the priorities; the really important things in life; the things that matter.

First, he says, be restful. "Be diligent to be found [when He returns] in peace." The world is filled with frenzy. Peter says, "Don't let them catch you up in their frenzy. Do not be feverishly casting about for something in this world to satisfy you. Be diligent to be found by Him, resting in Him, spotless and blameless." That is, do not let the world tar you with its brush. Do not let it affect you with its philosophy. Be different. Be peaceful and restful, quiet in heart, knowing that God is at work to accomplish his plan to bring salvation to the world.

Secondly, be hoping. "Regard the patience of our Lord to be salvation." That is, instead of seeing what appears to be the lack of God's intervention in the world as a sign that God is not there, see it in terms of his patience. He is waiting for people to come to him. That is why he is not acting in observable ways. Therefore you should not be despairing or discouraged, anxious about the way your life and our nation and history is going. Do not be negative; be hopeful, be positive.

A couple of months ago a friend was telling me about his grandfather who used to live along the Potomac River. One winter the river froze solid. His father was trying to get across the ice, and he was afraid it would break, so he was on his hands and knees, edging his way very carefully. He went right out in the middle of the ice, feeling his way along. Suddenly, he heard this clatter. He turned around and looked. Down the side of the hill came his grandfather in a wagon with a team of horses, driving them furiously across the river, over to the other side! What a great illustration of the way we ought to be living life! We ought to be charging ahead, not living tentatively and fearfully and timidly, but hopefully, aggressively.

Thirdly, he says, "Be on your guard lest, being carried away by the error of unprincipled men, you fall from your own steadfastness. Guard what you have. Guard the apostolic word. There will be attacks from every quarter on this word; guard yourself from them. Check out everything that you hear, on the basis of this word. This is our authority.

Finally, in verse 18, "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." We are not only to guard ourselves; we are to grow. Grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. That is the environment in which we grow. Everyone knows that you grow best where there is both a body of knowledge and an acceptant, supportive and encouraging atmosphere.

That is what Peter says we have. We have the Word of God with which to occupy ourselves, which leads us to a knowledge of Jesus Christ. Not only do we have the knowledge available to us, we have the grace, God's supportive environment, his love, his forgiveness, his encouragement, his assurance. We could not help but grow in an environment like that!

I can look back on classes that I have been in, where the teacher was immensely knowledgeable, but he was such a threat to me that I never learned anything. I remember one teacher who used to prowl around the classroom like a lion, leaping on people. I used to go into that class terror-stricken for fear he would call on me. I did not learn a thing.

Some people think of God that way. But that is not true. He is gracious, he loves us, he cares for us, he provides the kind of supportive environment of forgiveness and love that we need to grow in. So Peter says: keep on growing. You have every inducement. Now these are the duties that are given to us, in light of the Lord's coming. And he is coming to set things right.

Most of you have heard my little limerick:

The world had a hopeful beginning,
But man spoiled his chances by sinning.
We trust that the story
Will end to God's glory;
But at present the other side's winning.

But that is not true. Those who know Jesus Christ are on the winning team. I know because I have read the book! The last chapter, the book of Revelation, tells us that Jesus is the Overcomer. He has won! We are on the winning side. He is coming back to set things right, and in the light of his coming, Peter tells us what the priorities are. We are to be restful. We are to be hopeful. We are to be watchful. We are to be fruitful. Those are the duties that Peter calls to our minds, as we look forward to the certain coming of Jesus Christ.

Our gracious Father, we thank you for the climate that we have to grow in. It is a secure and encouraging atmosphere and environment. We thank you that you are the one who makes possible a dynamic, growing relationship. Thank you, Father, for telling us the truth, and giving us an opportunity to know it and live in it and abide by it. We thank you in Jesus' name, Amen.

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