

How Can We Deal With Our Own Doubts?

Series: Living Godly In A Corrupt World!

by Ron R. Ritchie

Looking through my files last week I found an article from the San Jose Mercury News (dated March 7, 1981), which will be helpful to us in our study on the second coming of Jesus, from the apostle Peter's second letter. The article is headlined, "Signs point to Second Coming in '81, says Pastor." These "signs," which were identified by a pastor in the Los Angeles area, were widely quoted in this part of the state. The news item quoted him as saying, "there is no time to become involved in non-essential things because our Lord is coming very soon . . . The time has come to let out all the stops and go for it! I'm convinced that the Lord is coming for his church before the end of 1981. . . We're getting close to the Tribulation and the return of Jesus Christ in glory. All the pieces of the puzzle are coming together."

The article continued, "[this pastor] believes God will set into motion the biblically based "seven-year cycle" leading to the rise of the Antichrist, to the great Tribulation, to the rapture. He refused to set a precise date, acknowledging that there are a lot of "ifs" involved in his calculations. "I think things are moving on schedule," he said, "but it should be remembered that it is written that no one knows the hour Christ is coming, although Paul did say we would know the time of the seasons and that we [Christians] are not the children of darkness and that that day should not take us unaware."

As I have said, this article was published in 1981, four years ago, but Jesus has not returned. News articles like this have two effects. They are, first, wonderful source material for the mockers of Christianity. Mockers love these pronouncements because they make Christians look foolish. Secondly, such articles, published year in and year out, take their toll on the Christian community: some Christians begin to doubt the second coming will ever happen.

How can Christians deal with doubts about the second coming of Jesus? All of my 52 years I have heard reports about his imminent coming, but he obviously has not come yet. Sometimes I ask myself what is going on. How do we deal on the one hand with the fact that he has not yet come and on the other hand with the fact that Scripture says he is coming again in great glory and power?

Recall that one of the questions asked by the mockers and quoted by Peter in chapter 3 of this letter was, "Where is the promise of His coming?" This question was put in such a way that they were inferring, "There is no Christ. Jesus was not the Son of God. He didn't die, he didn't rise from the dead, and he's not coming again." Yet many of the Christians of that first century day knew Christ during his physical life on this earth. Some of them even had experience of both his visible and invisible presence during the 40-day period following his resurrection, when he appeared and disappeared at will among them. And today we as Christians experience his spiritual presence in our daily lives.

But what about his second coming, when he will again physically appear on earth? That is the question the Christians of Peter's day, and Christians in our day, too, are asking. Has something gone wrong? Can we believe what we have been taught from the scriptures? How do we deal with this whole issue? Peter answers all of these questions by telling us to first,

1. Review God's Plan of Redemption

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 toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. 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.

In 3:5 Peter warned believers that they should not buy the argument of the false teachers because it was based on a false premise. These teachers held that nature had remained constant since the beginning of creation. God had not and would not violate the laws of nature, they taught. He had not in judgment invaded time and space in the past and he would not do so in the future. But Peter responded to this argument by saying that something had willfully escaped their notice. The God of heaven and earth, he said, the God who had blessed mankind with water and rain had in the Flood taken these very blessings and turned them into a flood of judgment upon ungodly humanity. Peter's contention is that since God had thus overruled his own natural laws in the past, he will certainly do so in the future. But this time instead of judgment by water, judgment will be by fire: "The present heavens and earth are by His word being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men" (3:7).

Thus the first principle which the apostle wants to impart to his readers is that God is not held captive by time. In verse 8 Peter seems concerned that the mockers were perhaps causing Christians to have doubts about the second coming. It had been more than 30 years since his resurrection. Where is he? they wondered. Despite the fact that the prophets spoke about his coming again (as did Jesus himself many times, most notably in the Olivet Discourse and in the Upper Room), spurred on by the mockers, some believers were having doubts. They had fled the mystery religions to which they were formerly enslaved. Now, as Christians, they were daily faced with the pressures of living in a corrupt society. For them, the second coming of Jesus was something they looked forward to very much.

Peter calms their doubts by saying, "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." Here Peter quotes Psalm 90, "For a thousand years in Thy sight are like yesterday when it passes by" (verse 4). Yes, man is held captive by time, having but 70 or 80 years to live on this earth. That is why David wrote, "Lord, make me to know my end, and what is the extent of my days. Let me know how transient I am" (Psalm 39:4). But God is not held captive by time. He created time. But he does not live in the realm of time so he is not limited by it. For instance, at his transfiguration, Jesus stepped out of time as we know it and appeared together with Moses and Elijah. After his resurrection he appeared and disappeared at will.

God is outside of time, yes, but he uses time to his honor and glory. He said to the prophet Isaiah,

"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Neither are your ways My ways," declares the Lord. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts."
(Isaiah 55 8,9)

God is infinite and eternal, while man is finite and temporary. God is greater than man's concept of him.

"Where is the promise of his coming?" demanded the mockers. Peter responds, "Listen to me: God promised it; that settles it." It is not for us to know, however, the times and seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. God uses time, but his watch is set at daylight "saving" time. Galatians says, "When the fulness of time came, God sent forth His Son . . . in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law" (Gal. 4:4,5). We use clocks and calendars to keep track of hours, days and years, and God does too. But concerning his second coming, as we see in Matthew 24 and 25, for us the key is to observe and discern the moral conditions of the times we live in--not clocks and calendars.

So don't worry, Peter says, setting forth the second principle (verse 9), "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness . . ." Things are right on schedule. In light of these believers' circumstances God might seem slow, but in fact he is not. He promised to come back, and he will keep his promise.

Here from Scripture are some examples of how God has kept his promises, although he appeared to the individuals involved to be slow about doing so. God promised Abraham a land for his inheritance, but that promise could not be fulfilled for 400 years after it was made. The Ammorites who were given all those years to repent, were living on the land that was promised to Abraham; thus the promise was not fulfilled in the

patriarch's time but during the life of Joshua, his descendant. God promised Abraham a son. Abraham, long since past the child- conceiving stage of his life, was incredulous, and Sarah his wife laughed, but 25 years later Isaac was born to them. God promises Moses and David a Savior, but Jesus did not appear on the scene for two thousand years following the death of Moses. God through Jesus promised the gift of the Holy Spirit upon his church. Fifty days after Jesus had ascended into heaven, on the Day of Pentecost, the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit.

We should not expect that God will act according to our time-frame, according to our expectations. He calls us to live by faith and to believe him when he says Jesus is coming again. And when he comes this time, the whole world will be aware of it. He will not be coming as the Child of Bethlehem, the Nazarene, or the One hung on the cross. He will be coming in power and glory to rule in justice and righteousness.

In the immediate context of these verses it is thrilling when you realize why Jesus' coming appears so slow: His apparent delay is a sign of his patience toward man: "[He] is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (verse 9). God is long suffering toward rebellious mankind. "There is none righteous, no, not one," Scripture says. Men are "dead in their trespasses and sins." Everyone deserves hell and eternal separation from God. But, says Peter, "God is patient . . . not wishing for any to perish . . ." God held back his judgment in the flood for 120 years while Noah preached righteousness. God was patient in judging Sodom and Gomorrah. God was patient with Israel for 1,500 years. God was patient toward Paul, "the foremost of sinners." And God is patient toward you and me!

Further, the Lord's apparent delay is a sign of his love for humanity: He wants "all to come to repentance." While God is always willing to save man, however, man by his free choice does not always wish to be saved. God's heart is fully expressed in those oft-quoted words from John 3:16: "For God so loved the world . . ." John 3:17 says, "For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through Him." Through Ezekiel God said, "'Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked,' declares the Lord God, 'Rather than that he should turn from his ways and live?'"

But the Lord will not delay forever. For the ungodly, a day of judgment is coming. Man has the choice to repent of his view of Jesus, to change his mind, based on the truth as it is revealed in Scripture, and turn from his sins. As the apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, ". . . God our Savior desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, one mediator also between God and men, the man Jesus Christ" (2 Tim. 2:4,5).

But these mockers were challenging believers, saying that Jesus was not coming again. In these verses, then, Peter is seeking to encourage Christians in two areas. First, the apparent delay in Jesus' second coming is due to the loving and patient heart of God; and second, this apparent delay should be regarded as an opportunity to spread the good news about the gospel to friends, neighbors and strangers alike, the good news of the love of God and the mercy of God toward people who should be in hell. As the apostle says, "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness.. ." He is right on schedule. He wants Christians to use the time he has given them to his honor and glory, to discover their spiritual gifts and spread the good news of him.

In his first letter Peter wrote, "The end of all things is at hand." Knowing this, Peter exhorts Christians in four areas. First, "be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer"; second, "keep fervent in your love for one another"; third, "be hospitable to one another"; and fourth, "as each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another" (1 Peter 4). That is the normal Christian life. That is what we should be doing when Jesus comes again: praying, loving, being hospitable, and using our spiritual gifts. Our Lord doesn't want us sitting on our roof tops, dressed in white, while we wait for him. Practice these four things; that is Peter's word while we wait for Jesus to return.

A woman came to me for counseling a few months ago and brought a friend with her. As we talked, her friend accepted Jesus as her Savior. The first woman was so delighted that she went home and led her two sons and her daughter to the Lord. Later she discovered that her other daughter had also come to Christ; and then she led her husband and two neighbors to the Lord—all within six months! A little later she led another neighbor to Christ, and two weeks ago she called me to say she had led her mother to Jesus! This woman knows that Jesus is coming again and so she thinks this is normal Christian living! She is exercising her spiritual gift,

which is what Peter says we should be doing.

In verse 10, Peter reveals that the Lord will return in power. There is coming "the day of the Lord," "the day of Yahweh," "the day of the wrath of Jehovah." "That day," spoken of by the prophets, by Jesus and by the apostles, is the day of God's decisive intervention into history for judgment and universal restoration. It will be a time of terror for the ungodly, but a time of joy for the godly. Peter is advising his readers that they need to watch for this day, to prepare for it and not be misled by the false teachers.

Ever since the day of Pentecost Christians have been living in the "Age of the Spirit." At the beginning of the next age, "the Day of the Lord," covering a period of 1,000 years-plus, our Lord will come as an "invisible" thief and remove the body of Christ from the world. Under the rule of the anti-christ, the world will experience the "abomination of desolation" in the temple at Jerusalem. The world will enter into conflict, with Israel as its center, culminating in the battle of Armageddon. Then the Lord will return visibly to earth in power and glory and deliver his Jewish remnant from their enemies and set up his Millennium rule. This will be followed by the great white throne judgment, when all the ungodly of every generation are judged. Then "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." The word for "roar" is the word that describes the sound of an arrow in flight. Everything will disappear in a flash when God finally deals with things which are decaying. This is also a picture of how God deals with the things of the flesh. He will begin again and make all things new.

God's plan of redemption is moving right on schedule and heading toward its conclusion. In this "age of the Spirit" he is calling out a people for his name's sake, people who are deserving of hell, and redeeming them as they place their faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. All is leading up to the visible manifestation of the second coming of Jesus in power and glory. So remember that God is not held captive by time, He is not slow about His promises, and He definitely will return.

How can we deal with our doubts? We must review God's plan of redemption, and we must

2. Review God's Call to His People

2 Peter 3:11-13:

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

First, Peter calls believers to a life of godliness. History as we know it will be swallowed up in judgment. Life as we know it on this earth will be destroyed. The world system and all its values are winding down, passing away. So in light of this truth that we are the people of God, it follows that we should reflect the character of God. And that is possible because we have by faith in Christ become partakers of the divine nature. We are channels of the divine power, having "escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust." Thus our ambition should be to please the Lord.

Our conduct should be "holy," Peter says. That is, we should be set aside for God's intended purposes. I Thessalonians 4 gives us a clue where we should start: "This is the will of God, your sanctification, that is, that you flee sexual immorality." These Christians lived in a corrupt world but they were not corrupted by it. Christians need to make conscious moral choices about what they see, hear and read. There are 16 million pornographic magazines distributed every month in this country. There are 15,000 adult bookstores; 70% of the movies made are "R" rated; 1,300 full-length X-rated movies will be made this year to add to the thousands already on the market for home viewing; cable and pay-TV bring more porn into our homes. Do not think for one minute that all these things are not taking their toll on the hearts, minds, and morals of the Christian community. Despite all this corruption and evil, God empowers us by his Holy Spirit to remain faithful to his calling; and the motivating factor for us is the anticipation of his second coming.

In these verses there is also a call to faithfulness. Peter says we should be "looking" (verse 12). Christians should, in a sense, have one eye on the heavens, looking for the coming of the Lord, and another eye on the earth, looking for opportunities for good works which will bring glory to God. They also should be looking for signs of the breakdown in moral conditions spoken of in Matthew 24 and 25, thus "hastening the coming of the day of God." Jesus asked, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Somehow our spiritual walk of faithfulness has something to do with speeding up the day of God. As we depend on him to provide the power to develop our spiritual gifts, as we walk in good works, witness and disciple, encourage, pray for and love one another, all of these things help towards "hastening the coming of the day of the Lord."

Then in verse 13 there is a call to hope. "According to His promise," Peter says, "we are looking for new heavens and 7 new earth, in which righteousness dwells." Isaiah prophesied the same things: "Behold I will create new heavens and a new earth . . ." (Isaiah 65:17). These will not be new as to form, rather they will be different in nature than the old. As Revelation says, "He that sits on the throne said, 'Behold, I make all things new'" (Rev.e 21:5). These are pictures of what God is doing in our lives. We even get a taste of the new heavens and the new earth because, according to 2 Corinthians, Christians are "new creatures in Christ," we are "ministers of a new covenant.'

And we are being prepared for". . . new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells." It will literally be "heaven on earth," for God will dwell there with his people. It will be Genesis 1 and 2 all over again! The perfect God will have created a perfect home filled with redeemed people willing to serve their Creator and enjoy him forever. And this God's name is Jesus!

A dying friend said to me last week, "I was hoping I would be alive and well when Jesus returned." But there are some verses of Scripture that suggest that when we die that will be for us the second coming, that we will all arrive in heaven at the same time.

Here I would like to quote a wonderful paragraph from the pen of Dr. Arthur C. Custance, which he wrote in 1981 in expectation of his own "journey out of time into eternity." (Dr. Custance died just a few days ago, on October 22.) Here is the Postscript from his book, *Journey Out of Time*:

Let me close with an expression of personal faith. Paul tells us that "Christ in us is the hope of glory" (sol 1:27). I am convinced that this is true, almost inconceivable though it is. I cannot examine my own soul without despairing of the state of it. Though I have walked with the Lord for almost fifty years, I do not yet see--except upon very rare occasions and then only in a very tentative way--that I am a better person than I was when I first became a member of the blameless family of God. Yet those few brief moments of clearer vision assure me that there is indeed a seed of new life that is bearing everlasting fruit in my heart as the Lord Jesus Christ, my Saviour, finds ways and means to re--form (one could almost say reincarnate) Himself in me as a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). For this is the source of my new life (Gal. 2:20). This, and this alone, is my hope of glory: Christ in me. It is the assurance of Paul and it is the hope of every child of God.

When I find myself in his wonderful presence, it will not be as a miserable wretch, apologizing before God for my ragged soul that would seem scarcely worth the price of its purchase. No, it will be a glorious new me! It will be a perfected spirit (with all that belongs to the old sinful self buried and done with for ever) reunited with a resurrected body made like unto his "glorious body" (Phil. 3:21) to form in some wholly satisfying way a new yet identifiable Arthur C. Custance. But because that name represents the old person and not the new, that name, like the old person it represents, will no longer be used or even remembered. I shall have a new name (Rev. 2:17). This is the promise of eternity . . . a glorious new nature worthy to behold the Lord in his glory and to form a part of his royal court.

Meanwhile, I do not look for the Lord's return and the glory that shall be revealed as an event coming long after I depart from this scene. I look for it the very moment I am called home to be with Him. And I have every confidence of joining Him with all the saints who have gone before me and with all who shall come after me. This is my expectation: and this will be my

fulfillment. What a day of rejoicing that will be!

What comforting words for those of us still living in this time-frame, that our Lord is not held captive by time. Yes, God has indeed prepared some marvelous experiences for those who love him.

Meanwhile, as we are living in this corrupt society, let us remember that this world is passing away. There is no salvation in man's works. Let us be salt and light until he returns. Let us keep looking for the "day of God."

I don't know if Jesus will return in the 1980's, but I do know that he is coming again. How can we deal with our own doubts? We can deal with them by reviewing God's plan of redemption, and reviewing God's call to his people.

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