Where Is the Promise of His Coming?

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...Be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us the apostles of the Lord and Savior: knowing this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts. And saying, Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation. II Peter 3:2-4.

THE UNITED testimony of the prophets and apostles was that mockers would come in the last days. Christians should remember this. They should not be bowled over by the arrogant and blasphemous denials of these men. Rather they should see in them a definite indication that the end of the age is nearing.

The scoffers follow their own passions. Having rejected the knowledge of God, they fearlessly indulge their appetites. They advocate permissiveness with total disregard of any impending judgment.

Their primary scoff has to do with the coming of Christ. Their attitude is, "Where is the promise of His coming?" They mean, of course, "Where is the fulfillment of the promise?"

But what do they mean by His coming?

Do they mean Christ's coming for His saints, which we speak of as the rapture?[1] No, it is doubtful that these scoffers know anything about this first phase of the Lord's return.

Do they mean Christ's coming with His saints to set up His universal kingdom?[2] Well, it is possible that this could be included in their thinking.

But it seems clear from the rest of the passage that they are thinking of the final judgment of God on the earth, or what is commonly called the end of the world. They are thinking of the fiery destruction of the heavens and earth at the end of the millennium.

What they really say is this: "You Christians have been threatening us with warnings about a terrible judgment upon the world. You tell us that God is going to intervene in history, punish the wicked and destroy the earth. It's all a pack of nonsense. We have nothing to fear. We can live as we please. There is no evidence that God ever has intervened in history; why should we believe that He ever will?"

Their conclusion is based on the careless hypothesis that "ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation." They say that nature invariably follows uniform laws, that there are no supernatural interventions, that there is a natural explanation for everything.

They believe in the law of uniformitarianism. This law states that existing processes in nature have always acted in the same manner and with essentially the same intensity as at present, and that these processes are sufficient to account for all the changes that have taken place.

There is a vital link between the law of uniformitarianism and the usual theories of evolution. The theory of the progressive development of living organisms from pre-existing types depends on the

supposition that conditions have been fairly uniform. If this earth has been racked by cataclysms and catastrophes, then some of the presuppositions of Darwinian evolution are affected.

For this they willingly are ignorant of, that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of the water and in the water: whereby the world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished: but the heavens and the earth, which are now, by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men. II Peter 3:5-7

It is a withering indictment of these men that they are deliberately ignorant. They pride themselves on being knowledgeable. They profess to be objective in their reasoning. They boast that they adhere to the principles of scientific investigation. But the fact is that they deliberately ignore a well-attested fact of history—the deluge.

"They deliberately ignore this fact, that by the word of God heavens existed long ago, and an earth formed out of water and by means of water."[3] The heavens and the earth were formed by the word of God; He spoke and they came into being.[4] The earth was formed, Peter says, "out of water and by means of water." We quickly confess that there are depths in this statement that we cannot fully understand. We do know from Genesis 1:2 that the face of the earth was once covered with water. Then in verse 6 we read that God made a firmament or blue sky to separate the water on the earth from the mist or cloud-cover over the earth. In verse 9, the continents were separated from the oceans; this may be

what is referred to by the expression "an earth formed out of water."

From its inception, the earth was stored with the means of its own destruction. It had water in its subterranean depths, water in the seas, and water in the clouds above. Finally God released the waters from below and above, [5] the land was inundated, and all life outside Noah's ark was destroyed.

The critics wilfully disregard this fact of history. It is interesting that the flood has emerged in recent years as the object of bitter attack. But the record of it is written in stone, in the traditions of ancient peoples, and, best of all, in God's Holy Word.

When God created the earth, He seeded it with sufficient water to destroy it. In the same manner, He seeded the heavens and earth with enough fire to destroy them.

In this atomic age, we understand that matter is stored-up energy. The splitting of an atomic nucleus results in the fiery release of enormous quantities of energy. So all the matter in the world represents tremendous explosive potential. At present it is held together by the Lord.[6] If His restraining hand were removed, the elements would melt. In the meantime the heavens and earth are being "kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men."

But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to usward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the

which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up. II Peter 3:8-10

Why then the long delay in God's judgment? Well, first we should remember that God is timeless. He does not live in a sphere of time, as we do. After all, time is determined by the relation of the sun to the earth, and God is not limited by this relationship.

To Him one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. He can expand a day into a millennium, or compress a millennium into a day. He can either spread or concentrate His activities.

God has promised to end the history of ungodly men with judgment. If there seems to be delay, it is not because God is unfaithful to His promise. It is because He is patient. He doesn't want any to perish. His desire is that all should come to repentance. He purposely extends the year of grace so that men might have every opportunity to be saved.

God waited 1200 years before He sent the flood. Now He has waited several thousand years before destroying the world with fire.

"But the day of the Lord will come . . ." The day of the Lord refers to any period when God acts in judgment. It was used in the Old Testament to describe any time when God punished evildoers and triumphed over His foes.[7] In the New Testament it is a period of time with various stages:

1. It refers to the tribulation, a seven-year period when God will judge unbelieving Israel.[8]

2. It includes His return to earth when He will inflict vengeance on those who do not know God and who do not obey the gospel of the Lord Jesus.[9]

3. It is used of the millennium when Christ will rule the earth with a rod of iron.[10]

4. It refers to the final destruction of the heavens and the earth with fire. This is the meaning in II Peter 3.

It will come as a thief—that is, unexpectedly and destructively. The heavens will pass away. This certainly means the atmospheric heavens, and may include the stellar heavens, but it can not mean the third heaven—the dwelling place of God. As they pass away with a deafening explosion, the elements will be dissolved with fire. The elements here refer to the constituent parts of matter. All matter will be destroyed in what resembles a universal nuclear holocaust.

". . .The earth and its works will be burned up." Not only the works of the natural creation, but all civilization will be consumed. The great capitals of the world, the imposing buildings, the phenomenal scientific productions are all marked for utter destruction.

Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness. Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless, we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness. II Peter 3:11-13

Now Peter turns from the scoffers to the saints. He presses home the obligations that devolve on them.

"Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness." Everything material has the stamp of oblivion upon it. The things of which men boast, the things for which they live are passing things at best. To live for material things is to live for the temporary. Common sense tells us to turn from the tinsel and toys of this world and live in holiness and godliness.

Believers should also be expectant. They should wait for and earnestly desire the coming of the day of God.

The day of God refers to the eternal state. It follows the final phase of the day of the Lord when the heavens and earth will be destroyed. The day of God is the day of His complete and final triumph. For this reason it is a day we should wait for and earnestly desire.

Notice that in speaking of the day of God, Peter says ". . .on account of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat."[11] He does not say "in which" but "on account of which." The day of God is not the time in which the final destruction takes place. Instead this ultimate judgment must occur before the day of God can be ushered in.

In verse 12, believers are urged to wait for the day of God. In verse 13 they are described as waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. This strengthens the view that the day of God refers to the eternal state when there will be new heavens and a new earth.

Peter speaks of righteousness dwelling in the new heavens and earth. In the earthly kingdom Christ will rule with a rod of iron. Righteousness will be enforced by Him. In that sense righteousness will reign. But in

eternity, there will be no need for a rod of iron. Righteousness will be at home. It will dwell. No sin will enter to mar the peace or beauty of that scene.

Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless. And account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation. II Peter 3:14-15

The truth concerning the new heavens and the new earth should have an influence on our lives. It is not only a truth that we should hold but one that should hold us. It should create within us a desire to be without spot or blemish, that is, to be morally clean. It should make us zealous to be found in a state of peace, not strife.

Finally, we are to "regard the patience of our Lord to be salvation." His delay in judgment is calculated to give men full opportunity to be saved. As we consider the multiplying wickedness of men, we often wonder how the Lord can put up with it any longer. His forbearance is astonishing. But there is a reason for it. He does not desire the death of the wicked. He longs to see people turn from their wicked ways and be saved.

Notes

1. I Thess. 4:13-18

2. I Thess. 3:13

3. II Peter 3:5 RSV

4. Heb. 11:3

5. Genesis 7:11

6. Col. 1:17 ("in Him all things hold together").

7. Isa. 2:12; 13:6, 9; Ezek. 13:5; 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11, 31; 3:14; Amos 5:18, 20; Obad. 15; Zeph. 1:7, 14; Zech. 14:1; Mal. 4:5

8. I Thess. 5:2; II Thess. 2:2

9. II Thess. 1:7-10

10. Acts 2:20

11. II Peter 3:12 NASB