

Dr. Dave Mathewson, Where is His Coming?

Session 3, Delay of the Parousia in the Teaching of Paul

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This is Dr. David Mathewson in his teaching on the question, Where Is His Coming? Session 3, Delay of the Parousia in the Teaching of Paul.

We looked in the last lecture at the teachings of Jesus and the Gospels and looked at a handful of statements that could be taken to suggest Jesus was mistaken in predicting his second coming, in predicting the end of the world, his coming at the end of history, but then was wrong because it didn't happen. But we suggested other explanations for that that were more preferable and didn't entail seeing Jesus as a mistaken prophet or something like that.

What I want to do now is move on to Paul's letters and ask the question, well, if Jesus was not mistaken in predicting the end, what about Paul? Paul says a number of things in his letters as well that could be and have been taken to suggest that he was likewise; Paul thought the end was going to take place, thought Jesus was going to return right away, yet he didn't, and therefore Paul was mistaken. I want to look at some of those. Before we do, I want to say something briefly about the book of Acts.

I don't want to look at any specific text in Acts, but to draw an observation on kind of the structure of the book and the book as a whole and one verse in particular and how that might relate to the issue of the delay of the parousia. The book of Acts actually begins where Luke ends. Luke ends in 24, verse 29, with a promise of the coming spirit.

Now that command is repeated again, a call for the disciples to wait for the promised spirit. Now that command is repeated again in Acts 1, verse 5, and verse 8, and then Acts 2 is its fulfillment as the spirit is poured out. What I want to draw your attention to is the structure of the book as indicated in Acts 1:8. Acts 1:8 could kind of be seen as an introduction to or a rough plan, a ground plan of the entire book where Jesus tells his disciples to wait to receive the promised spirit.

Then he tells them they will be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and then finally to the ends of the earth. The rest of the book of Acts could be seen as an unpacking of that of how the gospel begins in Jerusalem, especially in Acts 2, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. It spreads to Judea, ends up in Samaria, and eventually extends to lesser and lesser Jewish territories to embrace Gentile territories. It eventually makes its way to Rome by the end of the book.

Now, what I want to draw your attention to is the point that this seems to require that Jesus doesn't come back immediately, or at least it almost seems to allow for at least a period of time for this to happen. I rely on Craig Keener's excellent Acts commentary, where he argues that the ends of the earth are not just Rome. Acts 28 does end with Rome, but according to Keener, that is probably not the end of the earth.

It's the beginning of the end of the earth. But Acts 1:8 seems to envision something even more widespread. So, my point is not that Acts 1:8 demands a long period of delay.

It certainly does not envision a 2,000-year delay, but the point is Acts 1:8 and the whole plan of Acts does seem to allow for and maybe even hint at a period of time-lapse, a period of delay that is necessary for the gospel to spread to all nations. Without again telling us how long that might take place, how long it is necessary, and when it will finally reach the ends of the earth, Acts doesn't tell us. But it simply indicates God's plan for spreading his kingdom, his promised kingdom, spreading the gospel to eventually embrace the ends of the earth whenever that takes place.

So, Acts 1:8 and indeed the entire plan of Acts seems to permit and even hint at some period of time necessary for this to take place, which would also then suggest that New Testament authors did not think Jesus had to come back immediately within their lifetime. But there could very well be some kind of delay. So, having said that, let's move on to Paul's letters.

Again, there are a number of texts in Paul that we could look at. I only want to look at two or three of them that are the lengthiest and are good examples of, and perhaps the most problematic, when it comes to the issue of the delay of the parousia and whether Paul thought, as one of the major New Testament authors, whether Paul thought that the end was going to come in his lifetime and then was mistaken. The text that I want to focus on, first of all, is found in 1 Corinthians 7. In 1 Corinthians 7, we find Paul addressing an issue raised by the Corinthian church, a number of issues relating to sexuality, marriage, and singleness that Paul branches out into.

And the section that I want to focus on is verses 25 through 32. And here's what we read: Now about virgins, I have no command from the Lord, but I do give an opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy, is faithful. Because of the present distress, I think it is good for a man to remain as he is, that is, single.

Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released or divorced. So, if you're married, just because I'm saying this, don't look to get divorced. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife.

However, if you do get married, you have not sinned. And if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But such people will have trouble in this life, and I am trying to spare you.

This is what I mean, brothers and sisters. The time is short. So, from now on, those who have wives should be as though they have none. The strange marriage advice, those who weep as though they did not weep, those who rejoice as though they did not rejoice, those who buy as though they didn't own anything, and those who use the world as though they did not make full use of it.

For this world in its current form is passing away. I want you to be without concern. The unmarried man is concerned with the things of the world, things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord, that is the unmarried man.

But the unmarried man is concerned with the things of this world, how he may please his wife. What I want to do is not address Paul's understanding of marriage and all that it involves and how we understand some of these instructions, but I want to focus on three key phrases that have often been used to suggest that Paul thought the end was going to come, the end of the world, the second coming of Christ was going to come in his lifetime immediately. But then obviously he didn't, so Paul was mistaken.

The first one is this phrase, the present distress that you find in verse 26, because of the present distress. What is the present distress? Some have taken the present distress as a reference to the second coming; that is, the second coming of Christ is the distress, that is, it will bring about distress in the form of judgment for those that aren't prepared or something like that. So, it could be a reference to the second coming.

It could be a reference to something that was happening in the first century, such as a famine or some kind of persecution that the Corinthian Christians were experiencing. The fact that it's called present probably suggests that it is something that the Corinthian Christians were experiencing at that time. It probably does not refer to the future or the second coming of Christ, but I think it's difficult to pin down exactly what Paul was referring to.

Is there one specific event, or maybe he's just talking about the normal troubles, including persecution and famines, that they may experience, but maybe just the normal suffering and troubles that life brings? And because of this, his advice is why make that more difficult by being married. Again, he's not discouraging marriage or saying it's wrong or don't do it, but he's simply putting things in perspective because of the present distress.

So at least this language of present crisis or present distress as a reason for being single is probably not an eschatological reference to the second coming of Christ or

the end of history, but is something that the Corinthians were experiencing in the form of trouble or difficulties just as part of living life in the present that they were experiencing. So, it's not a prediction of the end, at least that one. But certainly, the second phrase is, that the time is short in verse 29.

This is what I mean, brothers and sisters. The time is short. Now, certainly here, if anywhere, Paul thinks that there's not much time left before Jesus Christ returns and brings history to an end. And so is Paul predicting an end that never came, and therefore, he is mistaken? Actually, it's important to understand this word short.

The word short is a word in Greek that is a participle that means shortened or compressed. And what Paul is actually referring to then is that I think, given this perspective that we've been looking at, the first coming of Christ already inaugurated the end-time kingdom and that the readers were living in the end. In fact, later on in chapter 10 and verse 11, I believe Paul describes the Christians in Corinth as those upon whom the end of the ages had already come.

They were already living in the end times. And so because of the first coming of Christ, they're simply waiting for the wrap-up of that, the consummation of that. They're not waiting for the end, they're already in the end, but they're waiting for the end to the end, in a sense, the consummation of that period.

So, given that perspective, I think Paul is saying that due to the first coming of Christ, due to the fact that the end of the ages has already arrived, due to the fact that you're already living in the end times, that provides a different perspective on time. Now, you're to see time as shortened and compressed. You're to see it from a different perspective.

You're to see it in a sense of urgency. The issue is not how much time is left. The issue is this new perspective that should be your view of time-based on the fact that you're already living in the end.

That Christ has already come to inaugurate his kingdom and the end times. That should cause you to view time from a different perspective, as compressed, as limited, as not going on as normal. Time is not going to continue as usual.

Time is not going to continue as normal. You can't view time as normal because the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ have now changed the way you view time. It's not to be seen as going on indefinitely or going on as usual.

But now, the fact that time is compressed creates an urgency for the people of God to live life in view of this new perspective on time. That Christ could now come back at any moment since time is compressed. So again, you see, Paul's point is not to

predict how close we are to the end, to say how much time is left, to say there's only a little bit of time, or to try to predict that Christ is going to come back in his lifetime.

It's more about providing a new perspective on time. Time now is compressed and shortened based on the fact that we already live in the end. Because of the death and resurrection of Christ, that should fundamentally change the way we look at time and should bring about a sense of urgency in living life responsibly.

That seems to reflect Paul's concern in addressing the Christians in Corinth, especially in relation to issues of marriage. There's one other phrase, and that is, the world is passing away, in verse 31. Again, one could understand this as Paul thinking that there's not much time left.

The world is on its way out, and it's going to pass away soon, brought to an end with the coming of Christ. But instead, I think the implication of this is brought about once more by the fact that the kingdom of God has already arrived. We're already living in the end.

Jesus' death and resurrection at his first coming has already inaugurated the end. That is, if the kingdom of God has already arrived, that must mean that this present world is already passing away. Notice that he says the form of the world is passing away.

The idea of form, according to Anthony Thistleton in his commentary on 1 Corinthians, is that the external structures of this world are slipping away. That is, the current social and economic structures and institutions of this world are on the way out, and therefore, Paul's point is that they should not dictate and determine your values, your living, and what you do. So, once more, when he says this present form of this world, the structure of this world, is already passing away, Paul doesn't say how long that's going to take place.

Paul does not say how soon it will finally take place. He's only interested in saying it's already in the process of passing away because Jesus' death and resurrection have already inaugurated the end time. We already live in the end.

That must mean, then, that this present world and its structures and institutions and values are already on the way out, without Paul telling us how long it will take before it finally reaches its dissolution. So, once more, Paul is not predicting the end with any of these statements, the present distress, the shortened or the compressed time, or the world passing away. But instead, in light of the coming of Christ, he's trying to get his readers to see their world in a different way, from the standpoint and perspective of the arrival of the end in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and what difference that should make in the way we look at time, and then the difference that should make in the way we live out our lives.

So, 1 Corinthians 7 does not provide any justification for concluding that Paul thought Jesus was coming back to bring an end to the world and therefore was mistaken. In the next text, we'll kind of move in order. The next text I want to look at is found in 1 Thessalonians 4 and 5. We alluded to this text already.

This is the passage that is often read, especially in chapter 4, verse 13, close to the end of the chapter, and is the section of verses that we often read at funerals, the famous resurrection passage. And what I want to draw your attention to is Paul's wording in 15-17. Now, I don't want to go into a lot of detail as to why Paul said these things, what problem was he addressing, what issue was he addressing, but Paul's main concern is to basically show those who have already died are not going to be at a disadvantage when Christ comes back.

In fact, he says they will be raised first, and then those who are alive will be raised to meet the Lord in the air. So, those who have already died amongst the Corinthian believers and in the other age are not at any disadvantage when Christ comes back. They will be fully raised.

But the verses I want to draw your attention to are found in verses 15-17 of 1 Thessalonians 4. And here they are. I'll read verse 14. Now, what I want to draw your attention to is the word we, that first person singular.

Paul seems to include himself and his readers among those who will be alive when Christ comes back. And the language he uses here is the language of the coming or the parousia of Jesus Christ. There are a number of parallels here with Matthew 24, which is clearly referring to the parousia or second coming of Christ, I think.

So, Paul is not referring to some secret rapture or some other event. He's referring to the coming of Christ at the end of history. But Paul seems to include himself in this group by saying, we who are alive.

So, did Paul think he would be alive when Christ returned? And then he was wrong? Some people conclude that and say later on, after living a few years, later on in some of his later letters, he changed his mind and thought he knew he was going to die. But here, Paul thought he was going to be alive in Christ's return. But then, obviously, he was mistaken because Christ did not come back.

And Paul then was actually, as tradition has it, martyred for his faith. So, how do we understand this? Let me make a couple of observations. First of all, notice 1 Thessalonians 5:10. Paul says this: back up and read verse 9. For God did not appoint us to wrath, his end-time wrath and judgment, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.

In other words, just a few verses later, Paul entertains the possibility that he might be asleep or die. And his readers might be asleep. Being asleep is a euphemism for death.

So, it would be inaccurate to say that Paul says we who are alive meant that Paul thought he was going to be alive in Christ's return. Just a chapter later, in chapter 5 and verse 10, he entertains the possibility that he might not be alive in Christ's return. And that's his point.

Whether we're alive or asleep or dead, we'll still be with him. So, I think 1 Thessalonians 5.10 leads us to believe that Paul is not predicting that he will indeed be alive because he admits in 5:10 that he very well might not be when Christ returns.

And his readers as well. So, Paul does suggest the possibility of being alive at the Parousia in chapter 4. But in chapter 5, the possibility that he might not be. A second point to make is that Paul seems to think that he could very well be alive at the Parousia.

There's no reason to doubt that. With that language, how should you take that? He seems to think he could be alive very well. But remember, Paul thought he was already living in the end.

Paul was already living in the end times because the end-time resurrection had already occurred. That is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And all that needed to follow was the resurrection of his people.

So, because he was already living in the end, the final resurrection could take place at any time, even in Paul's lifetime. Again, he's looking at time from that compressed, shortened perspective.

Back in 1 Corinthians chapter 7. The third thing I'd like to draw your attention to is we probably shouldn't take that too precisely. Maybe we should take it more generally, just kind of we Christians. Again, Paul certainly does not predict that he and his readers will be alive when Christ comes back.

Maybe we shouldn't take that too precisely and exactly, but see it more generally. We Christians who are alive when Christ comes back. The final thing that I want to draw your attention to is, especially in light of passages like 1 Thessalonians 5.10 that we just read, where Paul doesn't know whether he's going to be alive or dead when Christ comes back, is since Paul does not know the time of Christ's return, he simply places himself in the only category possible.

That is, since he's alive, we who are alive. Especially if we take this into account more. We are generally Christians who are alive. So, Paul thinks that he will be alive when Christ comes back.

He's not sure because chapter 5.10 qualifies it and tells us he could be dead as well. He's not sure whether he'll be alive or dead. So, he writes to those who are living and who are alive and could very well see the parousia, who are awaiting the parousia of Christ, which could happen at any time.

So, again, Paul's addressing, including himself, but addressing readers who are alive, awaiting the parousia of Christ, for whom it could happen at any moment, and writes as if they could be alive when he returns while still qualifying it in chapter 5.10 with the fact that they might not be. He simply does not know. So, Paul is not wrong and did not predict the coming of Christ or the end of the world that did not transpire, and therefore, he was mistaken.

But with the rest of the New Testament authors, he shares the perspective of the end, that the end times have already been inaugurated. With the death and resurrection, the end has already begun, and Paul sees things from that perspective. And so, Christ's second coming to bring the end to its consummation, its conclusion, could happen at any moment.

And he addresses his Thessalonian readers as if they could be alive when Christ returns and includes himself, though recognizing in chapter 5.10 that he may not. They could die before Christ comes back. But whether they're alive or dead, they will be with him, with Jesus Christ.

But hopefully, he will come in their lifetime, without Paul saying that he must or necessarily will. So, once more, at least on those verses, Paul is not wrong. He has not predicted the end that has not come, but is doing something very different.

Especially in this context, writing not to predict the end, but to encourage Christians in Thessalonica who have lost their loved ones. That brings us to the next book, and that is 2 Thessalonians. And I want to focus on chapter 2, 1-12.

2 Thessalonians 2:1-12, and let me read those verses. Now, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, that word coming is parousia, which is consistently used for a reference to the coming of Christ at the end of history, what theologians call the second coming. Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers and sisters, not to be easily upset or troubled, either by a prophecy, by a message, or by a letter, supposedly from us, alleging that the day of the Lord has already come.

So, verse 3, don't let anyone deceive you in any way. So, the problem is that the Thessalonian Christians thought that the day of the Lord had already arrived. The day of the Lord is an Old Testament term that is used to refer to a future day when God would intervene in history, bring judgment to his enemies, and bring salvation to his people, and the Thessalonians thought that day had already arrived.

That time of God coming to set up his kingdom, to bring judgment and salvation, that is, the end of the world, had already come. They thought they were in the day of the Lord. Verse 3, don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction.

He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called God or object of worship so that he sits in God's temple proclaiming that he himself is God. Don't you remember that when I was still with you, I used to tell you about this. And you know what currently restrains him so that he will be revealed in his time, for the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, but the one now restraining him will do so until it is taken out of the way.

And then the lawless one or the man of lawlessness will be revealed. The Lord Jesus will destroy him with the breath of his mouth and will bring him to nothing at the appearance of his coming. The coming of the lawless one is based on Satan's working with all kinds of false miracles, signs, and wonders and with every wicked deception among those who are perishing.

They perish because they did not accept the love of truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a strong delusion, so they will believe a lie, so that all will be condemned, those who did not believe the truth, but delighted in unrighteousness. And what I want to draw your attention to is what Paul is doing here.

Paul is going to try to dissuade the Thessalonians from believing that they are already in the day of the Lord. And the way he does that is to point to certain things that have not yet happened that have to happen before the day of the Lord arrives. In other words, Paul's logic is this.

Certain things have to happen before the day of the Lord arrives. Number two, those things haven't happened yet, so the conclusion, number three, the day of the Lord is not here. The Thessalonians should not think they are in the day of the Lord because these things that Paul is convinced has to happen before it can come, the day of the Lord can come, have not yet happened.

So, the Thessalonians should not think they are in the day of the Lord. Now, what are those things that the author points to, or that Paul points to? There are three of

them. The rebellion in verse 3, and then the man of lawlessness, is referred to in verses 3, 6, and 8. And then the removal of the restrainer.

The restrainer, the one holding back the man of lawlessness that is restraining him. Once the restrainer is removed, the man of lawlessness can be revealed. Paul is convinced that none of those three have taken place yet.

They still have yet to happen. Therefore, the day of the Lord can't arrive until they happen. So, the Thessalonians should not be deceived into thinking they are already in the day of the Lord.

Now, what are those things? The first one is the rebellion. What is the rebellion? Is this something local? Is it widespread over the entire earth? Is this rebellion religious? Is it political? Is it by Christians or non-Christians? Who's going to start it, or what's going to start it? Paul doesn't tell us. Now, before we look at this one and the others just briefly, the other two events that Paul is convinced have to take place, it's important to realize verse 5 throws kind of a wrench into the works.

When Paul says, Don't you remember that when I was with you, I used to tell you these things. In other words, Paul is not going to spell out all the details. He's already told them these things, so he only needs to remind them.

Unfortunately, 2,000 years later, we're in the dark and trying to figure out what Paul meant by these things. Unfortunately, he had already told them. The Thessalonians knew, presumably, what he was talking about, as did Paul.

And now, we are not privy to much of the information, so we can't be absolutely certain. So, what was this? Even some apocalyptic works, such as 1 Enoch in chapter 93 and verse 9, anticipate a widespread apostasy. Jesus himself, back in Matthew 24, taught that the love of many would grow cold.

That very well could be what Paul had in mind. But the main point I want to make is that Paul is making whatever it is precisely, and Paul is convinced it hasn't happened yet. Number two, the man of lawlessness that's going to be revealed.

The fact that he's going to be revealed suggests that he's not. Paul said the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, but the man of lawlessness has not yet been revealed. Again, reading this, it's difficult to tell to what extent Paul is using apocalyptic language. Is the man of lawlessness an individual? Is it symbolic of a force that animates the entire world? Is the temple that he sets himself up in, is that a literal temple? Or again, is that just symbolic of the fact that the man of lawlessness, whoever or whatever it is, will oppose God and will oppose God's people and worship of God? And this is just a symbolic way of saying that.

It's difficult to tell exactly what Paul has in mind. But again, the main point is that Paul is convinced the man of lawlessness has not yet been revealed. So, the day of the Lord can arrive.

Gordon Fee says we are left with a large amount of guesswork. And he's probably right, especially on this one, but all three. Then, related to the man of lawlessness, the restrainer has to be removed.

And there's been all kinds of debate: who in the world or what in the world is this restrainer? Some options are, it's the Roman Empire, it's the general principle of law and order, it's the gospel, the spread of the gospel by Christians, it's the Holy Spirit, it's Satan. Some have even suggested and argued for Michael the Archangel, based on Daniel 10 and verse 13 and Daniel 12 and verse 1. So, take your pick. Again, the problem is that Paul, according to verse 5, has already talked about this with them, and he assumes they know what they're talking about, so he sees no need to spell it out in detail.

And we're the ones that struggle to make sense of this. So, what I want to suggest then is that, and what I want to focus on, even if we can't figure out precisely what or who these things refer to, Paul's point is that they haven't happened yet. Paul does not say whether he thinks they could still happen in his lifetime.

Maybe things could have escalated in his lifetime so that these could have taken place. Paul doesn't say that there's going to be a delay for 2,000 years, but at the same time, certainly, Paul is allowing for some delay. Lest they think they're already in the day of the Lord, or maybe we should say, lest we take his language back in 1 Thessalonians 4, we who are alive, lest we take that too seriously, we need to balance it out with the statements here, that Paul thinks Christ might not come back right away.

Because there are certain things, whatever they are, that have to happen before Christ can come back. And they haven't happened yet, excuse me, they haven't happened yet, so Paul is convinced that the readers are not in the day of the Lord, and Christ is not necessarily going to return immediately. So, one other thing I want to say is when you relate 1 and 2 Thessalonians together, as far as how they relate within the broader canon of the New Testament, we could say that 1 Thessalonians reminds us that Christ could come back soon.

Even within our lifetime, we who are still alive and who remain will be caught up in meeting him in the air. But 2 Thessalonians balances that out by reminding us that there could be some delay. There are certain things, at least in Paul's day, that have not yet happened, that have to happen before the day of the Lord can arrive.

And even then, Paul isn't saying as soon as they happen, immediately the day of the Lord will arrive, but his whole point is, that the Thessalonian readers, and presumably we, should not be too quick to look at this or that, and say, well Christ's coming must be right around the corner. Paul is convinced that there could be a delay because certain things have not yet happened that must happen before Christ can come back. Much like the teachings of Jesus' parables, of the unfaithful steward, and of the five wise maidens, the unfaithful steward was not prepared for the master to come back sooner.

The five foolish maidens were not prepared for a delay. In the same way, these two books remind us we need to be prepared for either scenario. We need to be prepared for either perspective.

Christ could come back soon. He could come back in our lifetime. We who are alive.

But, the fact that Paul says there are certain things that have not happened, and the very fact that we don't know exactly what they are, reminds us that there could be some delay before Christ comes back. God's people must be prepared for either scenario. There are other passages in Paul that we could look at, but those I think are the major ones.

Once more, I would conclude by saying that nothing that Paul says leads us to believe that he thought that Christ was going to come back immediately, in his lifetime, in his readers, that Christ had to come back, and therefore he was wrong. Yes, Paul thinks that Christ could come back very well. And he reminds his readers of that.

He himself lives his life in light of that. But at the same time, he stops short of predicting that Christ necessarily will. In a text like 2 Thessalonians, the possibility of some delay is even entertained before Christ comes back.

And calls his readers to be prepared for either. Now, we've looked at Jesus' sayings, a lot of them, and concluded that nothing that Jesus says leads us to believe that he was predicting the end and was wrong. We've looked at Paul's letters and Acts as a whole, and we've seen that nothing there should lead us to conclude that Paul predicted the end of the world, or the coming of Jesus, and was in his lifetime, and was mistaken.

What about the rest of the New Testament? Well, in the section of the next lecture, we will look at a number of passages in what are known as the general epistles, a kind of Hebrews through Jude. Also, in the book of Revelation, we'll begin to look at the book of Revelation and look at a number of statements in those books that have often been taken to suggest that Jesus was mistaken. But before we do that, I want to introduce the general epistles by looking at one text in particular that does something different than all the other texts.

That is a text that is unique, because it addresses the issue of delay. It actually addresses the issue: why hasn't Christ come back right away? Does that mean he's not coming back? Does that mean God's failed in his promises? How should we understand that? How should we reckon with that? And that text is 2nd Peter, chapter 3, verses 8 through 10. Once more, I want to read those to you, and then we'll just unpack a couple of verses and a couple of statements in those verses.

But 2nd Peter, chapter 3, 8 through 10. Dear friends, don't overlook this one fact. With the Lord, one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day.

The Lord does not delay his promise, as some understand delay, but is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord, will come to pass like a thief. On that day, the heavens will pass away, with a loud noise, and the elements will burn and be dissolved, and the earth and the works on it will be disclosed.

What we need to understand is why Peter wrote this. Peter is one of the books, the numerous books, in the New Testament, that addresses the issue of false teachers who have infiltrated the church or who are in danger of influencing the people of God. And when you read 2nd Peter carefully, it becomes apparent that the main problem is these false teachers were calling into question whether God was actually going to come in the future and judge.

And they were actually concluding, He's not. And they were pointing to different arguments to prove that Jesus isn't going to return to judge, and therefore, you can live however you want. You can indulge in any sexual immorality, or do whatever you want because there's no judge coming in the future for whom you'll be responsible.

What Peter 2 does is he basically goes through and dismantles the arguments of the teachers to show that yes, indeed, God is going to return and judge. Jesus is going to return and judge. Therefore, it does matter how you live.

And in chapter 3, in these verses we've read, in chapter 3, this is part of one of Peter's arguments against the false teachers. And their argument may have gone along the lines of something like this. Well, history has gone on for some time.

History has continued as usual, Christ has not come back, God has not intervened to judge, so He's not going to. He's delayed. In other words, they're pointing to delay.

The fact that God has delayed, the fact that His promise of His future coming to judge, hasn't transpired yet, that must mean that He's not going to return. So, the false teachers, were actually pointing to the delay, of the promise of God's coming,

through Jesus Christ, as proof that God wasn't going to judge. Therefore, the readers can do what they want.

And what Peter is going to do, in these verses, I think, is he's providing a reason, a rationale, for that delay. To show, the fact that God has delayed does not prove He's not going to come back. There's a reason why He's delaying.

And here's Peter's response. His response is actually two-fold. Verse 4 of chapter 3, actually, summarizes the issue.

Where is the coming that He promised? That's what the false teachers were saying. Where's this coming He promised? It hasn't happened, so it's not going to happen. That is, there's been a delay.

Now, Peter's going to give a rationale, an explanation for the delay. It comes in two parts. The first one is in verses 5 through 7. Basically, Peter's response is this.

God had intervened in the past when He made creation when He created all things, Genesis 1 and 2, so you better believe God can intervene again in His creation to bring about judgment. But then, the response we're interested in is found in verses 8 and 9, and even 10. There are two parts to that first.

First of all, the first one is a thousand years is like a day, and a day is like a thousand years to the Lord. Now, what does He mean by that? How does that explain delay? There have been a number of ways to describe this. Some have thought these verses suggest that God does not see time.

God does not experience a sequence and ordering of time. He sees everything as one eternal present. God is outside of time.

He's not limited to time. He's not bound by time. He doesn't see time and experience the way we do.

So, this almost becomes kind of an ontological statement of who God is and what He's like. However, I'm not convinced that is what the author is saying. Notice he says a thousand years is like a day.

Not that a thousand years is simply equal to a day, and a day a thousand years is if God doesn't tell time and doesn't know the difference between a day and a thousand years. It's all the same to Him because He's the eternal God, and everything is just one eternal moment for Him. Instead, I think it's best to understand it this way.

I owe this observation to Richard Balcom. A retired New Testament professor from the University of St. Andrews. He says the way to understand this is not that God is

eternal and He doesn't see time, but God sees time from the perspective of one who is eternal.

One that stands at the beginning and the end of history. One who sees the entirety of history at once. That is the perspective from which He sees time in contrast to the limited perspective of human beings.

In the United States, at least, I believe the typical lifespan life expectancy is roughly around 80 years, give or take a couple of years. In different countries around the world, that may be very different. But the point is we tend to see time from our limited perspective of 50, 60, 70, 80 years.

Maybe if you're lucky, you'll make it to 90 or 100. A few people do. But that's still not very much, given the span of history.

The point is when we look at history from our limited perspective of 80 years, give or take a few, a delay seems fairly significant. Whereas God sees things from the perspective of one who is eternal and stands at the beginning and the end of time. And what appears to be a delay to us is not one to Him.

It's not because He doesn't see time and everything is just in a moment to Him. It's simply because He does not see time from our limited human finite perspective. He sees time.

Yes, He can see time and sequence, presumably. But He surveys time in its totality. He sees the beginning from the end.

And so, for what seems to be an intolerable delay to us is nothing to one who sees all of history from the perspective of one who is eternal. It stands at the beginning and its end. It's not a delay to Him.

That's the first part of the answer. The second part of the answer that Peter gives is delay actually gives humanity a chance to repent. If God came back immediately and judged, that would bring an end to any opportunities to repent.

So, the fact that God delays and does not come back right away is part of His plan to simply give humanity a chance to repent. Now, that probably does not provide all the reasons for delay, but it's certainly a significant one. That God is giving humanity a chance to repent.

In His sovereignty, in His wise purposes and sovereign plan, He has chosen to respond to humanity and give them a chance to repent. Therefore, He delays coming back immediately because if He did, that would mean an end to opportunities to repent. That would mean judgment for those who fail to believe.

So, Peter 2 Peter then provides the most sustained explanation for delay by suggesting, first of all, that God does not see history and time from our limited, finite human perspective, with a lifespan of around 80 years. Instead, God sees all of time from the perspective of one who is eternal, who stands at the beginning and the end. And to us, from our small, limited, finite perspective, what seems like an intolerable delay is really not.

Second, the reason for the delay is God is indeed giving humanity a chance to repent. The text doesn't tell us that God is responding to repentance and saying, well, not enough people have repented. I'll keep delaying it and putting it off until it happens.

But it certainly does tell us that God is delaying His coming in response to the need and His desire to see humans repent and come to a saving knowledge of Himself. So, at least 2 Peter 3 suggests that delay was part of the understanding of Christ's return, that Peter himself did not think Christ had to come back immediately. For those who did think that Christ was going to come, the fact that He did not come back immediately meant that He was not going to come back at all, which prompted Peter to give a reason for why the delay.

And so, this must be factored into our understanding of how we think about the return of Christ. Even the New Testament authors now seem to understand that there could be some delay, that Christ might not come back immediately, and Peter provides an explanation as to why that delay. In our next lecture, we will look at a handful of much shorter references to the soon return of Christ in Peter and James, and then we will move on to the book of Revelation and consider some of its statements that seem to point to the soon return of Christ.

This is Dr. David Mathewson in his teaching on the question, Where Is His Coming? Session 3, Delay of the Parousia in the Teaching of Paul.