

Dr. David A. DeSilva,

2 Peter and Jude

Session 3

The author comes at last to tackle head-on the questions that the rival teachers have been raising, but not before framing their arrival in ways that will discourage trust in their message as well as their goodwill. The coming of these skeptics was not unforeseen. Beloved, already I'm writing this, a second letter to you, in which letters I am stirring up your sincere minds by way of reminder to hold in remembrance the words spoken ahead of time by the holy prophets and the commandment of the apostles the Lord and Savior sent to you.

First, knowing this, that scoffers will come in the last of the days with their scorn, walking in line with their own desires and saying, Where is this promised coming? For since the fathers died, all things are continuing in the same way from the beginning of creation. What Jude had recited as a tradition handed down by the apostles to his congregations in the last time there will be scoffers going after their own godless desires, our author places directly on the lips, as it were, of Peter, who may indeed have historically been an important source of this particular warning. Here, however, the particular target of these scoffers is the apocalyptic hope of the early church that Christ would come again in judgment and in power to usher in God's eternal kingdom in the human sphere.

Once again, this suggests that the skeptical Christian teachers had themselves been won over to some extent by the Epicureans' arguments against fearing divine retribution. One major argument in their arsenal was the slowness with which the gods appear to visit penalties upon the wicked if they ever got around to it at all. Speaking in the voice of one who had been won over by Epicurus, Plutarch writes, the delay and procrastination of the deity in punishing the wicked appears to me the most telling argument against divine providence by far.

His slowness destroys belief in providence. Experience appears to these skeptics also to have shown the Christian hope to have been empty since the generation of Christ's apostles had passed without any sign of Christ's coming again, as he had promised. The theme of reminding or calling the audiences to remember returns here in 3.1-4. We might recall its appearance earlier in 1.12-15. And this is significant.

It alerts the audience once again that what they are hearing in this letter is not new material, but rather part of the apostolic message that they had embraced when they came to faith. They had committed then, as it were, to the whole mystery of faith, Christ crucified, Christ risen, Christ coming again. The skeptics in their midst are the innovators, challenging what the hearers had received as divine revelation, and they ought, therefore, to recover their stability in their faith as they remember this former commitment, not allowing themselves to be swayed by those rival teachers who had themselves failed to remain stable in the faith.

The author continues to reach deep into their shared scriptural heritage to ground them afresh in their core convictions. For they, that is, those who are raising questions about a judgment and a second coming, they intentionally overlook this, that heavens and earth were established long ago out of water and through water by God's word, on account of which the world, as it was then, was destroyed, being overwhelmed by water. And the present heavens and earth are being stored up by the same word, being kept for a day of judgment and the destruction of the ungodly people.

The author recalls the cosmology reflected in Genesis 1, according to which God, when creating the heaven or the sky, had to make room for it by dividing the waters such that there would be waters above and waters below the dome of the sky. Then God gathered the waters below the sky into bounded places to make room for and create dry ground, earth. By the first century, such a view of the cosmos, particularly the idea that there were waters above the sky and that heaven was some sort of material dome, had long been abandoned.

Nevertheless, it was strategic for the author to recall these details since that which was brought forth from the waters by God's word, which depended upon God's word for its very existence, could certainly be deluged again by water by God's word, as proved to be the case, according to sacred history. The author's point, of course, is that there is no force more powerful or reliable than God's word, since creation itself depends upon that same word. Thus the word spoken by God through God's prophets about the future dissolution of the cosmos by fire as in Isaiah 66, 14 to 16, and Malachi 4, verse 1, and the preparation of new heavens and new earth as in Isaiah 65, 17, would also prove more reliable, more solid than the cosmos itself, something the skeptics willfully overlook, according to our author.

The events of Genesis 6 through 9 provide a historical precedent that renders this expectation entirely credible. By the first century, the conviction that God would destroy the inhabited world a second time and by fire had become widespread among the Jewish people. Josephus, for example, relates the tradition that Adam predicted, quote, that the world was to be destroyed at one time by the force of fire and at another time by the violence and quantity of water.

The idea of a cosmic conflagration was also held by the Stoic school of philosophy, though there this conflagration was part of an endless cycle of creation and destruction. Our author adheres to the more linear view promoted in Jewish circles. After the coming conflagration, an unbounded eternity in a renewed creation would follow.

The author adds two additional considerations in support of the apostolic faith that include a firm expectation of a decisive future intervention in human affairs on God's part. Indeed, our author might not have been all that surprised to learn that the end would still not have come almost 2,000 years later. He almost anticipated this as he wrote, but don't lose sight of this one thing, beloved, namely that in God's experience, one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as a single day.

The Lord does not delay the promise as some people reckon a delay, but he is showing patience toward you, not wanting anyone to perish, but all to come to repentance. And the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a great rush,

and the elements will disintegrate as they are burnt up, and earth and all the works in it will be left exposed. The first consideration is drawn from the distance between God's experience of time as an immortal, eternal, timeless being and our experience of time as mortal, finite, time-bounded beings.

The fact that it can be heard to derive from authoritative scripture, namely Psalm 90, verse 4, lends even more weight. There we read, a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it passes by. The Jewish author of the Book of Jubilees, an expansive paraphrase of Genesis 1 through Exodus 14, usually dated to the early second century BC, also appealed to this same text to deal with the perception of a different delay in divine punishment.

That is, to answer the criticism that Adam and Eve did not, in fact, die on the day that they ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge as God had threatened in Genesis 2:17. The author of Jubilees finds the solution in connection with Adam's death at the age of 930 years and God's experience of time. And so in Jubilees we read, Adam died and he lacked 70 years from 1,000 years.

For a thousand years is like a day in the testimony of heaven, and therefore it was written concerning the tree of knowledge, in the day you eat from it, you will die. Therefore, he did not complete the years of his day because he died in it. Slowness is relative, but it is also salutary that this is the case.

The alleged delay of the day of judgment means that there is yet space for repentance, for reconciliation with God, for righteousness to take root in one's life. Every day that the end does not come is a sign not of God's sluggishness or lack of commitment, but of God's mercy and love for sinners. Plutarch, a Greek essayist with a bent toward philosophy active in the early second century A.D., would offer a similar consideration as he also sought to answer Epicurean criticisms of the traditional belief that human beings are accountable to the divine.

After drawing attention himself to the different ways in which human beings and deity, for whom any length of human life is but nothing, experience time, Plutarch writes that, quote, God reserves his penalties for the future and awaits the lapse of time out of gentleness and magnanimity. He does this to make room for repentance, the delay of punishment being a period of grace. The author of Wisdom of Solomon, a Hellenistic Jewish work from around the turn of the era, also found God's slow, incremental driving out of the Canaanites before the Hebrews to be a sign of God's merciful patience.

Though you are unable to destroy them all at once by dread wild animals or your stern word, judging them little by little, you gave them an opportunity to repent. Although you are sovereign in strength, you judge with mildness and with great forbearance; you govern us, for you have power to act whenever you choose. This is especially interesting insofar as the scriptural account provides a much more practical motive.

God drove the original inhabitants out little by little so that the land would not become overrun by wild animals, causing gaps in the land's productivity. Of course, the apostle Paul had also taught that the non-appearance of the day of judgment was a consequence of God's kindness and an opportunity to align oneself with God's righteousness today, an opportunity not to be lightly valued. So in Romans, we read, Do you despise the abundance

of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you to repentance.

The fact that the day of the Lord has not yet arrived is not a sign of God's lack of concern with the injustice and wickedness of human beings. Rather, it is a consequence of the character of the God who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Nevertheless, the author affirms that day will come.

He uses the image familiar in early Christian circles of that day coming like a thief, unexpectedly, without warning, potentially catching people off guard to their disadvantage. Jesus himself was remembered to have used this image in a parable at the end of Matthew 24. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into.

So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him. Paul brought this image into his admonitions to the Christians in Thessalonica. You know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.

While people are saying peace and safety, destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. We will hear it once more in the voice of Jesus as a warning inserted into the narrative of the pouring out of the seven libation bowls of God's wrath in Revelation 16.

Look, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who continues to watch and to keep his garments in order that he might not walk about naked and his shame be exposed to view. Our author uses vivid language in chapter 3, verse 10 to describe how, with great suddenness on that day, this very present and seemingly eternal material cosmos will come to nothing at the visitation of God.

The last clause presents some textual challenges, in large measure because scribes had some difficulty understanding the author's meaning and were moved to provide their own clarifying changes. The best reading appears to be, and the earth and the works done in it will be found or discovered, that is to say, will be exposed to view in full disclosure, as it were, before the judgment seat of God. Scribes were uncertain which of the readings would be found to be the best or clearest, so we find manuscripts that will not be found due to the earth's having passed away, and still other manuscripts dispensing with the verb found altogether in favor of the verb burned up, or combining the two, will be found destroyed.

Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus, two important early complete texts of the New Testament, in fact almost the whole Bible from the fourth century AD, Codex Sinaiticus and Vaticanus agree that the verbal image that the author seeks to invoke here is of all earth's inhabitants and the deeds they have performed standing before God's scrutiny, in God's presence unmediated and unfiltered by the sky and intervening heavens that were typically held to provide a veil, a curtain as it were, between us and the unbearable brightness of the presence of God's glory. On that day, however, we will know precisely and fully the glory and power of the one whom we have honored or the one whom we have despised. Conviction and conduct go hand in hand for our author.

He has not been defending a mere theological dogma that calls only for mental assent. He has been reaffirming an essential compass point for the successful navigation of the challenges and opportunities of this life. What effects does looking ahead to the horizon of God's future interventions have upon our current course of life? With all these things being destroyed in this manner, what kind of people ought you to be in holy conduct and piety, looking forward to and even hastening the appearing of the day of the Lord, on account of which the heavens will be destroyed by being burned up and the elements dissolved by burning, as we look forward to new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells, according to his promise? Therefore, beloved, while you look forward to these things, make every effort to be found spotless and blameless in him in peace, and consider the patience of our Lord to be salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul wrote to you, according to the wisdom granted him, speaking about these things as indeed in all his letters, in which there are some things difficult to understand, which the unlearned and unstable distort to their own destruction as they do all the remaining scriptures.

You then, beloved, since you have foreknowledge, guard yourselves so that you may not fall from your own stability by being carried away with the error of lawless people, but continue to grow in the favor and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to whom is glory both now and unto the eternal day. For all his focus upon the future, upon eschatology, to use standard theological labels, the author shows no interest in speculation concerning the timing of Christ's coming, the signs that might precede God's judgment, whatever end-time narrative might unfold in whatever number of last years. His interest lies entirely in what impact looking ahead to that horizon has on the here and now.

What would become a creedal conviction, he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end, acts as a focal lens that brings clarity to the present moment. What matters now is aligning oneself with the holiness that God has always sought in God's people. What matters now is piety or godliness, a much-lauded virtue among people of Greek, Roman, or Jewish backgrounds.

It signifies giving God God's due, the attentiveness that God merits, the honor that God merits, the obedience and service that God merits. Given the relative value of the present creation, which is destined not to last, and the relative value of that with the new creation, which will last forever, the most intelligent investments we can make in the present are those that lead us further toward becoming the kind of people that will find themselves at home in that realm where righteousness is at home. One cannot help but recall the map that the author laid out in the opening paragraph of the body of his letter.

Looking back upon Christ's cleansing us of our past sins, and looking ahead to God's intervention to bring this new order of things, sorry, to bring this present order of things to an end and make room for God's new order, it is clear what we would most advantageously occupy ourselves with. Moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, endurance, God-centered living, love for the sisters and brothers God has given us in Christ, and love for all that reflects and embodies God's love for them. The author appears to be familiar with a number of Paul's letters beyond the one, Romans, that actually speaks about God's desire that people should repent as the reason behind God's patience and forbearance.

In many of Paul's letters, however, the apostle does urge his audiences to make every effort to be found spotless and blameless in him in peace. Indeed, he frequently sets blamelessness on the day of Christ's visitation as a principal goal toward which his converts are to continue to strive. Thus, for example, he writes to his friends in Philippi, this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

And he prays over his converts in Thessalonica, may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. In light of this emphasis shared by our author and Paul, it is tempting to try to infer just how the author believed others to have been distorting the import of Paul's letters in a direction destructive of their spiritual well-being and that of others. One possibility would be the distortion of Paul's message that Paul had combated himself.

As he writes in Romans 3, or as we are misrepresented and as some claim us to proclaim, should we do wicked things in order that good things may come of it? Indeed, Paul seems eager to demonstrate over the course of Romans chapters 3 through 8 that his proclamation of God's favor toward all apart from a person's status under the Torah does not make room for sin or even for indifference in regard to investing oneself in just and good works. As he writes in Romans 6, are we to continue in sin so that grace might be all the more abundant? Heck no. If James 2 verses 14 to 26 is a response to Paul's proclamation at all, it is a response to some third party's misrepresentation of that gospel or the wrongheaded inferences some third party has made.

For Paul and James themselves would have been in complete agreement concerning the necessity of faith manifesting itself in loving, righteous actions to be faith at all. And Paul must warn believers in Asia Minor in Ephesians 5, know this with certainty, that no sexually immoral person or impure or covetous person who is an idolater has an inheritance in the kingdom of God and of Christ. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for on account of these things, God's wrath is coming upon the offspring of disobedience.

The skeptics whom our author opposes are also guilty, our author believes, of trying to make room for sin and self-indulgence in the lives of Christians with empty words of their own. Some scholars have made much of our author's mention of Paul's letters alongside the remaining scriptures or the rest of the scriptures, suggesting that this is a sign that 2 Peter was in fact written well into the second century after Paul's letters have been collected and elevated to a status of sacred scripture alongside the books of the Hebrew Bible. While this possibility cannot be ruled out, I would be hesitant to hear this passage so formally.

With the new outpouring of the Spirit and the certainty of God's presence in the midst of the new communities of faith that had sprung up around the Apostles, I do not consider that it would have taken long at all for congregations to share, collect, and venerate the pastoral letters that constituted the legacy of the Apostle to the Gentiles. I would also be wary of assuming that the term scriptures is reserved for texts that have undergone some sort of formal process of vetting for canonical status rather than carrying a looser sense of identifying formationally foundational documents such as the Apostle's letters would have

been, and all the more after his death. The last verse succinctly captures the author's twin admonitions for his audiences.

On the one hand, since they have been forewarned concerning God's forthcoming intervention and the stakes involved, they must give careful attention to guarding themselves. They are encountering a certain breed of skeptics now. They will encounter other self-styled teachers challenging other aspects of the faith handed down once and for all to the future.

It is imperative that they not allow themselves to be moved by these waves of error and innovation from their position of stability in the faith and in the practice of the way of life into which the faith has initiated them. We might think again of the opening paragraph in chapter 1, verses 3 to 11. Positively, the author calls them to grow in the favor and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

This favor and knowledge are probably not to be heard as the direction in which growth takes place, but rather as the means, the instrument, or the manner in which growth takes place. It is the growth, the fullness of the transformation that Christ's favor toward us empowers and that our knowledge, both about Christ and of Christ, guides and shapes. In the end, that is the only pursuit that will have mattered.

Today, it is the pursuit most to be kept in view and given priority since all these things will come to an end. Thank you for joining me for this course on 2 Peter. While we have left the question of authorship open, two scenarios emerge as the most likely options given the data of the letter itself.

The first is that Peter, knowing that his death was approaching, authorized a trusted associate to give written expression to his defense of belief in the Lord's coming again and God's intervention to hold human beings accountable and to renew God's creation so as to answer the objections of skeptics who are seeking to dislodge these convictions and reinvent the Christian message and thus to sustain believers' momentum in the trajectory of transformation along which the gospel message seeks to impel them. The contents are ultimately traceable to Peter, though the form of expression owes a great deal to his unnamed associate. The second is that a Christian leader concerned to defend the gospel and the trajectory it supports against these same skeptics resurrects the voice of Peter to bring his authority to bear against them.

Even in this scenario, the contents remain essentially apostolic. The emphasis on the transformation of character and ethics, fueled particularly by the expectation of divine judgment, aligns well with the greater apostolic witness. The incorporation of material from Jude assures the apostolicity of the second chapter.

The reminiscences of the transfiguration and its significance, the warnings against innovative teachers, and the proclamation of God's final interventions in the life of this world are also clearly rooted in the apostolic tradition and quite possibly with Peter himself. Whichever scenario one finds to be the more probable, one thing emerges as certain. Second Peter presents a strong and eloquent defense of the apostolic gospel against the objection of skeptics who had wished to trim away some of its elements that appear to them less rational and enlightened.

Genuine disciples of the apostles and defenders of their proclamation have had to take upon themselves this task in every generation of the church's history. And 2 Peter has modeled several elements and strategies that have been incorporated into every responsible and successful defense of the apostolic gospel since. He hears the objections raised by those skeptical of the faith and formulates reasonable and compelling answers to them, rooted in the scriptural tradition and its revelation of the character of God.

He lays out the ethical consequences both of following the revised gospel and of persevering in the contours of the apostolic gospel, demonstrating why the second path is both more noble and advantageous. And he gives fresh expression to the apostolic gospel in such a way as answers the underlying concern that made room for the innovator's version of the gospel in the first place. In this case, a formulation of the gospel that could hold its own as a reasonable philosophy productive of widely recognized virtues.

In short, in Second Peter, we witness the birth of apologetics. Second Peter offers a compelling vision for the Christian life between redemption and final salvation. He fixes two compass points firmly in our minds.

The first is our redemption by Jesus Christ, the forgiveness of our sins that was gained for us at such cost to the very Son of God. The second is the dissolution of the present heavens and earth by the very Word of God that created it all in the first place, and the appearance of all of us and all that we have done with the lives God gave us before God's scrutinizing gaze. He bids us navigate our course through this life day by day, every day, with reference to these two fixed points.

Remembering our cleansing from past sins, we continue to move forward in the new life that Jesus has opened up for us along the path of growth in virtue, such as the author lays before us in chapter 1, verses 3 to 11, bearing the fruit for which Jesus sowed his blood upon the soil of our lives. Bearing in mind the future in which all humanity's accountability before God will be manifest and in which God prepares a new creation in which righteousness will have a home, we continue to move forward in the new life that Jesus has opened up for us along the path of growth in virtue that will meet with God's approbation in that future. And 2 Peter is a particularly important word for many Christians who think that a profession of faith is the be-all and end-all of the path of deliverance that God has opened up for us to hear.

For second Peter, like Paul, like James, like Jesus himself, reminds us that our coming to faith is the equivalent of trusting the one who promises to lead us along and empower us for an evacuation route that will lead to ultimate safety, to salvation, if we have the faith to follow him all the way.