

A Window Into the Future

Eric C. Coher

2 Peter 3:10-13

In our text this morning, Peter picks back up on this thought in verse 7 – the certainty of future judgment. God created the world by his Word (Genesis 1:3, 2 Peter 3:5), He upholds the universe by the word of His power (Hebrews 1:3), and by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly (2 Peter 3:7).

Though Peter does give us some details as to what the Day of the Lord will look like, we need to understand that his intention here in the text is not necessarily to give us a detailed sequence of events, but rather to impress upon our hearts the need to be right with God before this day comes. The thrust of Peter's argument in verses 10-13 is how we should live in the present in light of future realities.

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. 2 Peter 3:10–13

1. THE RETURN OF CHRIST SHOULD BE UNDERSTOOD PRIMARILY AS A JUDGMENT EVENT.

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. (v. 10)

Listen to how the Old Testament Prophets referred to the day of the Lord:

Isaiah 2:12 – It is a day that is against all that is proud and lofty...

Isaiah 13:6 – It is a day of destruction...

Isaiah 13:9 – It is a day of wrath, fierce anger, and the destruction of sinners...

Ezekiel 30:3 – It is a day of clouds and a time of doom for the nations...

Joel 2:1 – It is a day of trembling...

Amos 5:18 – It is a day of darkness...

Obadiah 1:15 – It is a day where the deeds of man will return on his own head...

Zephaniah 1:14 – The sound of the Day of the Lord is bitter, the mighty man cries aloud there...

Zephaniah 1:15 – It is a day of wrath, distress, anguish, ruin, devastation, darkness, and gloom...

I want you to notice four specific things from the text here in verse 10:

A. Jesus' return in judgment is certain and inflexible.

But the day of the Lord will come...

Though the return of Christ may seem delayed because God's perspective of time is different than ours, and though He is patient, giving men sufficient time to repent, not wishing that any should die in their sins, make no mistake, the "day" is coming. What is the "day of the Lord"? Simply stated, it is the day that Jesus will return to judge the world in righteousness. This "day" might be better understood as a multi-staged event.

A careful study of biblical prophecy seems to reveal that the day of the Lord will come in two distinct phases over a period of time. Let me give you a brief window into the future. We, believers, are waiting for the rapture of the Church when Jesus will remove the Church from the world. This is separate from, and not to be confused with, the second coming of Christ. Jesus isn't returning to the earth when He raptures the Church; rather, we will meet him in the sky. I believe this event is imminent and could happen at any moment – are you ready? Speaking of the rapture, Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17:

For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.

The rapture is followed by a seven-year period known as the tribulation. Jesus said that this period of time will be characterized by distress such as has been previously unknown (Matthew 24:21). There will be death, hardship, and innumerable calamities and natural disasters. The dysfunction and destruction as a result of sin will be seen clearer than ever during these difficult days. The seven-year tribulation is divided into two 3.5-year halves with the second 3.5-years being designated as the "great tribulation". It's during this time that the antichrist will rise and lead many astray.

The day of the Lord (second coming) that Peter refers to in verses 10 is the event that will bring the seven-year tribulation to a close. This is the *first phase* of the day of the Lord – the day that Jesus, along with the glorified church will return to the earth. Jesus will defeat the Antichrist in a great battle and then he will judge the nations who are gathered before Him (Matthew 25:31-36). John writes of Jesus' second coming in Revelation 19:11-16:

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.

After Jesus defeats the Antichrist and judges the nations, the glorified church and those who came to Christ during the tribulation will enter into Jesus' 1000 year millennial reign on the earth. Though only the glorified Church and those who came to Christ during the tribulation will initially populate the millennial Kingdom, many will be born during the millennium who will not come to faith in Christ. At the end of that thousand-year reign, Satan will be unleashed for a short time to lead one final rebellion and thus the *second phase* of the day of the Lord will commence. The judgment at the end of the tribulation served as a preview of the final White Throne Judgment that will take place at the end of Jesus' millennial reign. At the end of His millennial reign, Jesus will defeat Satan once and for all, judge every unbeliever according to his deeds, and consigning them all, Satan and the unrepentant to the eternal lake of fire. This judgment will conclude with the destruction of the universe (literally uncreation), but God will gloriously preserve the righteous through that destruction and usher the redeemed of the Lord into the day of God and the long-awaited new heavens and earth. This is our great hope as believers!

While there is a lot that will take place in the future, some of which is clear and some of which is more difficult to understand, what we need to be settled about is the *certainty* of God's future judgment. In Acts 17:30-31 Paul said, "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, *because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness* by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

B. Jesus' return in judgment will come suddenly and without warning.

Peter tells us that Jesus' return in judgment is not only certain and inflexible, but it will catch many off-guard. He says, "The day of the Lord will come like a thief." It's probable that Peter was drawing on Jesus' words in Matthew 24:42-44 where Jesus told his disciples, "Stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

Similarly, Paul wrote to the Thessalonians and said, "For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape" 1 Thessalonians 5:2-3. Jesus' return in judgment will come uninvited, unannounced, and unexpected, and as a complete shock to those expecting "peace and security".

December 7, 1941 was an unexpected day in US history. It's the day that Japan launched a surprise attack on American soil at Pearl Harbor. Shortly after sunrise on Sunday, December 7, 1941 hundreds of Japanese fighter pilots descended on the American naval base at Pearl Harbor near Honolulu, Hawaii. Though the base had adequate equipment for detecting such an invasion, the American forces there were caught completely off-guard. When an Army radar operator saw the blips on the screen and reported them, an officer said, "It's probably just a pigeon with a metal band around its leg." At that time the attacking planes were just fifty minutes away. At 7:55AM the first wave of the attack began. Ships were sunk, planes were destroyed, and 2300 men were lost their lives. Like a thief in the night, were caught completely unaware.¹

So it will be when Jesus returns. He will come like a thief in the night. Those who thought that they could somehow avoid his coming or who dismissed the clear biblical warnings as mere "metal bands around pigeons feet" will be caught completely by surprise.

C. Jesus' return in judgment will bring unrivalled cosmic destruction.

While we aren't told precisely *when* the Day of the Lord will come, we are told, at least in part, *what* will happen. Peter says, "And then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved." What a picture. How are we to get our minds around this? Suffice it to say, when Jesus returns he is coming to vindicate the glory of His name and to do so, He will rid the universe of every remaining particle of sin. The entire universe will disintegrate in a moment of cosmic "uncreation" at the sound of His voice.

¹ David Helm, *1&2 Peter and Jude: Sharing Christ's Sufferings* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 259.

Peter says, “The heavens will pass away with a roar. “ The word “roar” is onomatopoeic – a word that sounds like what it describes (Boom, splash, drip, sizzle, squirt). It is used only here in the New Testament, but elsewhere it is used to describe the sound of arrows whizzing, birds’ wings rustling, a river at flood stage, thunder, or the crackling of fire. The crackling sound of fire fits in light of the fact that the heavenly bodies are to be burned up.

Isaiah says, “All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree” Isaiah 34:4. Think for a moment about the sound of a tape measure being rolling up. We have a context in our minds for certain sounds, but we cannot begin to fathom the sound of the universe being rolled up like a scroll. God destroyed the ancient world by flood and He is going to destroy our present world by fire. Water cleans, but fire purifies.

D. Jesus' return in judgment will be devastating for those who have rejected Him...

Peter says, “The earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.” There are a good number of textual variants here: Exposed (ESV), Burned up (NASB), Disclosed (HCSB), Deserving [of] judgment (NLT), Laid bare (NIV)... The point is clear, there will be no place to hide on that terrible day. Every thought, motive and deed will be exposed and there will be no hung jury. This is a terrifying picture.

And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. John 3:19–20

Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God. 1 Corinthians 4:4–5

And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account. Hebrews 4:13

Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?” Revelation 6:15–17

2. THE RETURN OF CHRIST SHOULD MAKE A DISTINCT DIFFERENCE IN THE WAY WE LIVE.

Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! (v. 11-12)

A. Our waiting should be filled with the diligent pursuit of holiness and godliness.

Paul says, "What sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness." The whole of a Christian's life should be brought under these two headings – holiness and godliness. It's interesting to note that while the phrase "*what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness*" sounds like a question, is actually an exclamation in the original language. Peter is saying, "How astoundingly excellent you ought to be!"²

What does it mean to be holy? Holiness is the way that we should live - separate from sin. It means to be pure. We'll look at verse 14 next week, but take a look at it for a moment. Peter writes, "Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these (promise of a new heaven and earth), be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace." This is certainly a vivid contrast to the false teachers of whom Peter said, "They count it pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are blots and blemishes, reveling in their deceptions." (2 Peter 2:13). The word revel has the idea of sinful indulgence. While those who reject Christ take pleasure in their sin, Christians are to be diligent in the pursuit of holiness.

Why do people put water filters in their homes? The answer is pretty simple. They don't want impurities in their water. They don't want to consume the "stuff of earth". In the same way, as Christians, we should want to be pure and thus by God's grace filter out of our lives the sin that the world loves. In Titus 2:11-13 Paul reminds us how we are to live as we wait for Christ. He says, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ."

The word translated "sort" or "manner" actually has the idea of being exotic, out of this world or foreign.³ We are aliens and strangers here – not part of the world's system. Paul reminds us, "Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" Philippians 3:20. While we wait, we are to be pursuing holiness. Peter reminds us, "Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct" 1 Peter 1:14–15.

²John MacArthur, *2 Peter and Jude*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 2005), 138.

³Warren Wiersbe *The bible Exposition Commentary Ephesians – Revelation* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 1989), 466.

What does it mean to be godly? It means that we are to be growing in reflecting the character of our Creator. Godliness refers to the spirit of reverence that should permeate a Christian's attitude. Peter opened his letter reminding us that God's divine power has granted to us all things pertaining to life and godliness (1:3)! He also included it in the list qualities that we are to be diligently pursuing in verses 1:5-7 – virtue (moral excellence), knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection, and love. How are you doing at reflecting the character of your creator?

B. Our waiting should be characterized by attentiveness and eager anticipation.

Peter says that we are to be growing in holiness and godliness, but we are also to be, "Waiting (looking) for and hastening (earnestly desiring) the coming of the day of God." Here is the important principle: What you are *looking* for will have a significant influence in what you are *living* for! I am counseling two couples right now that are engaged to be married. It's amazing to see them eagerly looking to and earnestly desiring their wedding day. Their anticipation changes the way they live. The same should be true of us as believers. We are awaiting a heavenly wedding!

What does Peter mean when he says that we are to be hastening the coming day of God? Is he saying that our actions play a part of God's timing as He sums all things up in Christ? Well... Yes and no! Yes in the sense that the same God who ordains the end also ordains the means to the end, and as believers we are a part of God's sovereign means for bringing this present world to its conclusion. But *no* in the sense that our actions can change God's predetermined day of judgment. Remember, that day is fixed! Paul said, "He has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead" Acts 17:30–31.

I think Peter's words here have to be understood perspectivaly. That is, we "hasten the day of God" from our perspective by fulfilling the pre-conditions of Christ's return, namely the preaching of the gospel to all the nations (Mk. 13:10), the repentance of the full number of the Gentiles who must come in before the end (Ro 11:25). Evidently Peter believes that God will sovereignly use the diligent pursuit of holiness and godliness by believers to fulfill these conditions and thus "hasten the day of God".

The day of God – While some scholars believe the Day of the Lord and the Day of God to be synonymous, I think these are two separate days that speak of two distinctly different events. The Day of the Lord is a judgment event. The Day of God on the other hand commences right after the destruction of the heavens and earth and the final judgment. I believe the Day of the God to be a referent to God's glorious recreation of a new heaven and new earth and ushering the redeemed into the eternal state.

3. WE ARE LOOKING FORWARD TO A NEW HEAVEN AND EARTH WHERE JESUS REIGNS IN RIGHTEOUSNESS.

But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. (v. 13)

God has promised re-creation! The word "new" is the word *kainos*, it means to be new in quality, not new in chronology. In other words, it is not going to be like anything we've ever known before. This is what we, and all of creation, have been groaning for (Romans 8:22-23). A world without the presence of sin - a re-created Eden!

When Peter says, " A new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells," the Greek has the idea of righteousness settling down to be at home, to take up permanent residence. The new heavens and new earth will be a place in which righteousness is no longer a stranger, a world in which righteousness is no longer a wanderer, a world in which righteousness is no longer a foreigner, a world that is the home of righteousness' permanent and perfect existence!⁴

Everything that is ugly and painful and foul will be removed. There will be no more sickness, no more disease, no more death, no more crying, no more suffering, no more sorrow. There will be no more temptation, no more selfishness, no more pride, no more arrogance, no more deceit, no more foul motives, no more frustration, and no more fickleness of heart. There will be no trace of sin and therefore no encumbrances to our eternal worship of the King. That's what we're made for and that's what we should be anticipating! Praise God for His wonderful promise. Let's let holiness and godliness characterize our lives as we wait!

⁴ John MacArthur has a wonderful sermon that I commend to you for further study!
<http://www.gty.org/resources/sermons/61-26>