

## Why Christ Has Not Returned

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2 Peter 3:8-9

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Peter has been laboring in Chapter three to uphold the inflexible reality of God's future judgment. In the first 7 verses we have seen that there are no shortage of mockers and scoffers. There always have been and always will be those who look to poke holes in God's revealed truth. Peter writes to declare that mockers can mock and scoffers can scoff, but their suppression of the truth does not impede the inflexible future judgment of God in the slightest. God has intervened in past history, He is actively involved at this very moment, and He will again intervene as His redemptive agenda concludes in the soon return of Christ.

The task that Peter undertakes in verses 8-9 is to give a clear answer to the question that the scoffers raised in verse 4, "Where is the promise of His coming." They falsely assumed that the perceived delay in God's judgment meant that He had either forgotten what He had promised, was incapable of carrying it out, was indifferent, or had just abandoned His plan. Peter not only counters the scoffers' argument, but he also gives great hope to us as believers as he explains why Christ has not returned yet. Peter points us first to the *timelessness* of God's nature and secondly to the *tenderness* of God's character. Peter, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, pens these words:

*But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. 2 Peter 3:8-9*

### **1. CHRIST'S RETURN ONLY SEEMS TO BE DELAYED BECAUSE GOD'S PERSPECTIVE OF TIME IS INCALCULABLY DIFFERENT THAN OURS. (v. 8)**

*But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.*

I love the fact that Peter can systematically dismantle the teaching of the false teachers, he can go toe to toe with mockers and scoffers, but when he turns his attention to the church, He is a gentle and loving shepherd. "Beloved," Peter says. Those of you who have been redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, "Do not overlook this one fact." What Peter is doing here is what any faithful shepherd should be doing – impressing truth on the hearts of his sheep. Peter knew the best way to combat error and false teaching is to be steeped in the truth.

As Peter sets out to answer the scoffers' question in verse 4, "Where is the promise of His coming," the first truth that he wants to remind us of is the eternal nature of God. The fact that God has no beginning and no end means that His perspective of time is radically different than ours. Everything we do as created beings is governed by time. From the moment we breathe life's first breath, the clock is ticking. Our days are numbered. Albert Barnes says, "Man has but a short time to live, and if he does not accomplish his purposes in a very brief period, he never will. But it is not so with God. He always lives."<sup>1</sup> People see time against time, but God sees time against eternity. In other words, time as we know it is of no consequence to God. God has eternity behind Him and eternity before Him. As hard as this is for our finite minds to understand, God sees the past, the present, and the future without distinction – all time is equally present before God. The first truth that we need to understand as we seek to answer the question, "Where is the promise of His coming," is that God is neither limited by time as we are, nor does he measure time according to our standards.

Just how different is God's perspective of time than ours? Peter says, "With the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day." Peter borrowed this analogy from Moses. In Psalm 90 Moses contrasts the eternality of God with the fleeting and transient nature of human life. In Psalm 90:1-2 Moses writes about God, "Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God." Moses goes on in verses 3-6 to draw the distinction between the eternality of God and the temporal nature of human life. Speaking of man he says, "You return man to dust and say, "Return, O children of man!" For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night. You sweep them away as with a flood; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning: in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers."

Because our days are so short, we don't even have a good contextual box in our minds for 1000 years. It's hard for us to conceive of 100 years ago or 100 years from now let alone 1000. But Moses and Peter say that 1000 years ago was like yesterday to God and 1000 years from now, if Jesus should tarry, will be like tomorrow. When we see the sinful decay of the world and our hearts groan, "Come, Lord Jesus," we need to remember that from God's perspective it's only been a couple days since He left. The gap in our understanding of God's view of time and ours can be illustrated, albeit imperfectly, by the gap in a child's understanding of time and an adult's understanding of time. We learned early on that it was unfruitful to tell our children that we were going to visit Grandma and Grandpa (Mimi and Peeps in our house) more than about 48 hours in advance. Though their understanding of time is maturing, they don't have a context for a week's worth of time. When we told them that we were going to go to Mimi and Peeps' house a week in advance they would ask us daily, "Are we going to Mimi and Peeps' today" or "What time are we leaving for Mimi and Peeps'?" The same is true of long car rides – are we there yet? What Peter is saying here is that God's view or perspective of the length of time is vastly different than our view.

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<sup>1</sup>Albert Barnes, *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament* (Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2006), n.p.

It's important to notice that Peter says a thousand years is *like* a day not a thousand years *is* a day. Peter is using an analogy here, not giving us a literal equation. It wouldn't be helpful or correct to extrapolate this timetable backwards in redemptive history and neither is it correct to interpret the timing of future events using this mathematical formula. Peter is simply saying what seems like a long time to the scoffers and even many of us as we consider the promise of Jesus' return is really not a long time from God's perspective. God is working all things, including the return of Christ, in accordance with the counsel of His will (Ephesians 1:11). You can rest assured He won't be a day late or a dollar short.

We need to be growing in an eternal perspective. If we don't have an understanding of God's perspective of time we won't suffer well as believers. At times our trials can feel crushingly heavy and endlessly long. But God tells us that our trials are *light* and *momentary* (2 Corinthians 4:17). The writer of Hebrews encourages us to have an eternal perspective!

*But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. For, "Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; Hebrews 10:32–37*

## **2. EVERY MOMENT BEFORE CHRIST RETURNS SHOULD BE UNDERSTOOD AS GOD'S PATIENT FORBEARANCE TOWARD UNDESERVING SINNERS. (v. 9)**

*The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.*

In verse 9, Peter moves from the *timeless* nature of God to the *tender* character of God. God is unlike us in that He is eternal and therefore exists outside of our human time constraints, but His perceived delay in the return of Christ is also due to the fact that He is incredibly patient toward us.

Peter says, "The Lord is not slow to fulfill His promise as some count slowness." It's apparent that the false teachers and scoffers used the perceived slowness of God to fulfill His promise as justification for their denial of the second coming of Christ. They presumed, "Surely if God were going to fulfill His promise and judge the world He would have done it by now." The word "slow" here has the idea of loitering, lingering, being slack, hesitant, or tardy. It basically means to be negligently behind. Peter reminded us in verse 8 that the only reason God seems to be slow is because we have a finite

view of time. Everything God does is right on schedule. He's not loitering, He's not idle, He's not lollygagging, He's not slow, He's not late, He's not powerless to act, and He's not indifferent, distracted or apathetic. He may not be in a hurry, in terms of our understanding of time, but rest assured that He is never late. While God isn't slow to fulfill His promise, notice what Scripture says He is slow at...

In Psalm 86:15 David says, "But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." Likewise Isaiah says, "Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you" Isaiah 30:18a

God's delay in the return of Christ is not due to indifference, inability, forgetfulness, or the abandonment of His plan, but rather His compassion for sinners. Do you remember the heart of Jesus as he surveyed the mass of lost Jews in Matthew 9:36? Matthew writes, "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." We see that same heart at the end of Matthew's gospel as Jesus is broken over the rebellion of Jerusalem. He said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing" Matthew 23:37!

Peter is telling us that God is not delaying because He has changed His plans, rather He is delaying to give you time to repent. He is patient. The word "patient" is the Greek word (μακροθυμέω | makrothumeo). It's a compound of the word "makro" which means large, long, or far off, and "thumos" which means anger, passion, wrath, or temper. Together the word has the idea of being long-tempered as compared to short-tempered. It describes God's ability to remain restrained even when He is relentlessly provoked. Peter is reminding us that God, in His mercy and grace, has an immense capacity for storing up anger and wrath before it spills over in judgment. In Romans 2:5 Paul said, "Because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed." God's judgment of sin is certain and inflexible, but every moment before God executes His judgment is a demonstration of His patience and mercy. Peter tells us later in verse 15 to, "Count the patience of our Lord as salvation."

A well-known devotional booklet once included a story about an atheist farmer who mocked those believed God and trusted His Word. To prove that following God was futile, the farmer wrote a letter to the local newspaper in which he scoffed, "I plowed on Sunday, planted on Sunday, cultivated on Sunday, and hauled in my crops on Sunday; and not once attended a Sunday service. "Even so," he boasted, "I harvested more bushels per acre than anyone else, even those who are God-fearing and never miss a [Sunday] service. Upon reading the farmer's letter, the editor, who was a Christian, decided not only to print it, but added the remark: "Dear sir, God doesn't always settle his accounts in October."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A search of this story reveals that it has many variations.

We see God's patience all over the Bible. God didn't judge, at least in a final sense, Adam and Eve when they deliberately disobeyed Him in the garden. God displayed this same longsuffering and patience in the 120 years before the flood (1 Peter 3:20). God witnessed the violence and wickedness of man (Genesis 6:5) but instead of immediate judgment, He sent Noah, a herald of righteousness (2 Peter 2:5) to preach and warn. God was patient with Israel. And God is patient with you.

God patiently endures innumerable murders, lies, thefts, adulteries, fornications, slander, deceit, idolatry, swearing, anger, bitterness, boasting, grumbling and complaining, greed, hypocrisy, homosexuality and every other sexual perversion, unforgiveness, disbelief, endless violations against His law and blasphemies against His name. Why? Why does God endure such provoking? What is His desire? Peter tells us. He says, "God wishes that none should perish, but that all should reach repentance." He delays, and delays, and delays, giving all men sufficient time to respond to the gospel in faith and repentance. He is holy and has every right to judge every sinner immediately, but He is also kind and benevolent. Paul says, "Do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance" Romans 2:4?

Needless to say, much ink has been spilled over the correct exegesis of this verse. Both Armenians and Universalists have misunderstood this text. Armenians believe since God desires all men come to repentance that it must then mean that men have within themselves the ability to synergistically (of their own will) come to Christ. Universalists, on the other hand, believe since God desires all men come to repentance that He will make sure the job gets done irrespectively of what a person believes to be true about God – or if they even believe at all. We need to make a critical distinction here to correctly understand and interpret this verse. It's important that we understand that the verb "not wishing" does not express a *decree*, but rather a *desire* of God – His heart.

We see this desire of God repeated multiple times throughout Scripture. In Ezekiel 18:23, 33:11 God says, "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord GOD, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live." Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?" Paul repeats this in 1 Timothy 2:4 when he says, "[God] desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."

Here is the theological tension that we must hold; while God desires that all men everywhere should repent and come to a saving knowledge of Christ (Acts 17:30), He has only decreed that the elect will come to Christ. Sometimes God desires what he does not decree. Though God has predestined the elect before the foundation of the world, this doesn't negate the fact that the gospel is a free offer

to all who would come. But the predestination of the elect also doesn't negate the fact that those who reject the gospel go to hell because they have made a choice and are responsible for their rejection and unrepentant heart. While we must consign these truths to rest in tension in our hearts, there is no tension in the heart of God. God's foreordained plan is in complete harmony in His mind.<sup>3</sup>

Not only does God sometimes desire what He does not decree, but He also sometimes decrees what He doesn't desire. We see this clearly in the death of Christ. In Acts 2:23 Peter said, "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men." The crucifixion of Jesus Christ was accomplished by the sinful deeds of evil men. God Himself doesn't desire sin - neither is He the author of it - but by His divine prerogative, He does permit it. But even when wicked men commit their evil deeds, as decreed by God, they are fully responsible for their actions.

If you can remember back to our study of Malachi, the charge was made in Malachi 2:17 and again in 3:15 that since God was not hastily dealing with the wicked that he must delight in them because they put God to the test and escape. This was a false presumption - no one will escape who does not repent and trust Christ. God will deal with the unrighteous. He is patient, but rest assured Jesus is coming back to reign and rule in righteousness. How are we, as believers to respond to the increasing wickedness that we see in the world? In Psalm 37:1-3 David tells us, "Fret not yourself because of evildoers; be not envious of wrongdoers! For they will soon fade like the grass and wither like the green herb. Trust in the LORD, and do good; dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness." Likewise James tells us, "Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand" James 5:7-8.

IN LIGHT OF THE TEXT:

**A. God is faithful; everything He promises, He will certainly fulfill. Numbers 23:19**

**B. We should never presume on God's patience. Romans 2:4**

There is a day coming when God's patience, by His own determination, will end. Having given the world as much time as He has sovereignly determined, God will pour out His wrath on impenitent sinners. While His patience currently holds back His judgment, the time of grace that we now enjoy will not last forever.

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<sup>3</sup> I would commend John Piper's well-written article *Are There Two Wills in God* for your further study. The article can be found at - <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/are-there-two-wills-in-god>

In 1982, "ABC Evening News" reported on an unusual work of modern art - a chair affixed to a shotgun. It was to be viewed by sitting in the chair and looking directly into the gun barrel. The gun was loaded and set on a timer to fire at an undetermined moment within the next hundred years. The amazing thing was that people waited in lines to sit and stare into the shell's path! They all knew the gun could go off at point-blank range at any moment, but they were gambling that the fatal blast wouldn't happen during their minute in the chair. Yes, it was foolhardy, yet many people who wouldn't dream of sitting in that chair live a lifetime gambling that they can get away with sin. Foolishly they ignore the risk until the inevitable self-destruction.<sup>4</sup>

**C. Since God desires that all men come to repentance, we should be calling those we love to repentance and faith. Acts 17:30**

Spurgeon once said, "While I have prayed, 'Come quickly,' I have often felt inclined to contradict myself and cry, 'Yet tarry for a while, good Lord. Let mercy's day be lengthened. Let the [lost] yet receive the Savior.' We may desire the coming of the Lord, but we ought also to be in sympathy with the tarrying of the Most High, to which His loving heart inclines Him."

The Text in a Sentence:

*The wicked cannot infer that they will escape because their punishment is delayed; nor should the righteous fear that the Divine promises will fail because ages pass away before they are accomplished.*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I have been unsuccessful in recovering the original story as supposedly reported by ABC News.

<sup>5</sup> Albert Barnes, *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament*.