

2 Peter 3: Forward Thinking: Getting Ready for the Big Day

Famous English footballer, Paul Gascoigne once said: "I never predict anything and I never will." Hopkins was a TV meteorologist who became a local joke when a newspaper kept a record of his predictions and showed he'd been wrong almost three hundred times in a single year. He was fired. He moved to another part of the country and applied for a similar job. One blank on the job application called for the reason for leaving his previous position. Hopkins wrote, "The climate didn't agree with me." Predicting the future can be a precarious business.

Albert Schweitzer was a great humanitarian, but also a very influential theologian. He taught that Jesus predicted he would come back during the lifetime of his apostles and that history proves Jesus was mistaken. Bertrand Russell wrote a book entitled *Why I Am Not A Christian*. He wrote: "[Jesus] certainly thought that his second coming would occur in clouds of glory before the death of all the people who were living at the time. There are a great many texts that prove... He believed that his coming would happen during the lifetime of many then living. That was the belief of his earlier followers, and it was the basis of a good deal of his moral teaching." Russell argued that it was foolish to follow Jesus given that he was mistaken on so basic a prediction as his coming-again.

It was in AD 30, just before his death, that Jesus prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem. This is recorded in Matthew's Gospel which was written before AD 70 when this happened. When Jesus predicted this his disciples asked: "*Tell us, when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?*" Jesus then told them various things that would happen in history – wars, famines, earthquakes, the killing of Christians, false prophets, the preaching of the gospel all over the world, "the abomination that causes desolation" linked to a time of unprecedented suffering, and false Messiahs. Jesus goes on to say: "*At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his messengers (angels) with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other*" (vv30-31). But then Jesus said something which explains why false teachers in Peter's day and why false teachers in our day scoff at the idea of Jesus coming again. Jesus ends off saying, "*I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away*" (vv34-35).

See the problem? Many conclude that Jesus himself expected that he would come back on the clouds of the sky before his own generation passed away. Throughout history the average age for a woman to give birth has been 16. So, a generation has traditionally been around 16 years duration, which we might stretch to say 20-25 years. By the time Peter writes 2 Peter 30 years have elapsed. So some in the churches were telling others that Jesus was mistaken. They accused Peter and the other apostles of cleverly inventing stories when they taught that Jesus rose from the dead and would come back again. If there were those who even after 30 years mocked the idea of Jesus coming back then what about those who dismiss the resurrection and second coming as myths in our own day, now nearly 2000 years after Jesus died on the cross?

When Jesus said, "*this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened*" he prefaced it by saying, "I tell you the truth" and followed it by saying, "*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.*" Jesus is saying this is something so sure you can bet your life on it. If Albert Schweitzer and Bertrand Russell are right in saying Jesus got it wrong then we are

left asking what else did he get wrong? As Russell said, we are foolish to follow Jesus if he is capable of such basic error. Ah, but did Jesus get it wrong or could it be that Schweitzer and Russell have it wrong? We don't have time to analyse Matthew 24. But there are alternative ways of understanding what Jesus said. Perhaps by "this generation" Jesus was not referring to his own generation, his contemporaries, but to the generation of people who would be alive when such things as the signs in the sun, moon and stars occur. Or maybe when Jesus speaks about "*the sign of the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory*" he is not here referring to his ultimate coming back – which he does speak about in his parables - but to his resurrection and ascension. Daniel 7 describes the Son of Man coming on the clouds not to earth but into the presence of the Ancient of Days, that is, God, to receive all authority. Remember Matthew 28 has Jesus claiming all authority in heaven and earth and then sending out his messengers to gather his disciples, the elect, from all nations. If that is what Jesus has in mind then, of course, all the events of Matthew 24 were indeed fulfilled before Jesus' own generation died off.

Those who mock the whole idea of the risen Jesus coming back to earth do so on the basis of a fundamental flawed assumption: "*Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation*" (v4b), or as it might be put by today's materialists: "Everything goes on as it has since the Big Bang."

At the end of August John Lennox, Professor of Mathematics at Oxford University and Professor of the Philosophy of Science at Green Templeton College, will be speaking with John Piper at the Katoomba Convention Pastors' Conference. In this book *God's Undertaker. Has Science Buried God?* Lennox observes that it was only possible for science to develop by allowing the universe to speak directly and not to make the same mistake as Aristotle by deciding in advance what the universe must be like on the basis of prior ideas. Francis Bacon is often called the father of modern science. He taught that God has provided us with two books – the book of Nature and the Bible. In his view, a properly educated mind was committed to studying both. Bacon, Galileo, Kepler and others presupposed that the universe was created by God and this motivated them to look at what the universe is really like and how it actually works. When scientists first looked for natural explanations they weren't excluding God. Today many scientists who are also Christians believe that scientific explanations of the universe need to be combined with what the Bible teaches in order to understand the universe and human history. But there are also many atheistic scientists who make a lot of noise and say that the only way to understand the universe and history is with scientific explanations. For them: "*everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.*"

The false teachers in Peter's day "*deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed*" (vv5-6). Peter here summarises Genesis 1 and adds, referring back to Genesis 6, that the original heavens and earth, the world, was destroyed by the Great Flood. When the waters subsided a new heavens and a new earth came into being. In the late 1990s Columbia University geologists Ryan and Pitman proposed that a great flood had occurred in the Middle East 7000 years ago. From time to time other scientists have argued a global flood occurred. But modern science can neither conclusively confirm or refute that there was a global flood. Similar myths about a great flood have been found from different cultures and locations all over the globe, indirectly indicating that the Bible is recording actual history when it declares that a great global flood occurred. You and I as Christians must decide: Is the Bible a primary source for understanding

what has happened in history or is it a collection of myths? As Peter indicates at the beginning of this chapter we are stimulated to have a wholesome, healthy mind by recalling what we have been taught by the holy prophets in the Old Testament and the apostles of the New. We insist that the Creation, the Great Flood, the Resurrection and Ascension of our Lord are all historical events, just as the coming-again of Jesus will be the great conclusive historical event. Indeed, Peter continues, that just as the heavens and earth were created by God's Word, with that same world also being destroyed by the Great Flood: *"By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men"* (v7).

When Peter looks ahead to the coming-again of our risen Lord he describes that day in a frightening way – as a day of judgment, a day of destruction. In verse 10 he says: *"But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare."* The heavens and earth will be "destroyed" by fire in a similar way to that by which the original heavens and earth were destroyed by the Great Flood. Just as the destruction of the original heavens and earth was not annihilation nor is Peter describing the obliteration of the universe. Rather he is describing the refining or purifying of the heavens and earth. Here he has in mind Malachi 4:1-2: *"Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire."*

In verse 13 he says: *"But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness."* This new heaven and the new earth will not completely replace our present heavens and earth. To a significant degree it will be a continuation of our present heavens and earth, though after extreme refinement it will be radically new.

Peter makes it clear that the new heaven and the new earth is "the home of righteousness." Remember what Malachi said: *"Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire."* In the same way Peter says that when the present heavens and earth burn like a furnace on the day of judgment it will involve the "destruction of ungodly people" (v7). The new heaven and the new earth is only home for the righteous, not the ungodly. The ungodly will be burned up by the refining fire precisely because the smelter burns away all the dross so as to leave only pure refined gold. In verse 10 it says, according to the NIV, "everything in [the earth] will be laid bare." The translation "will be laid bare" is just a guess by the NIV translators. It is actually a metallurgical term describing the result of a smelting or refining process. It means "to be proved genuine", that is, to be shown as real gold.

In 1 Peter 1 we are urged to "make every effort" to be the godly people God calls us to be and all this by way of making our calling and election sure. Near the end of his epistle Peter re-emphasises this: *"Since then everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming"* (vv11-12a).

In early 19th century Hungary one in six young women died in hospital after giving birth. Dr. Ignaz Phillip Semmelweis was the first in history to recognise that women were dying in such high numbers because doctors were not washing their hands after examining corpses. He told fellow doctors: "Puerperal fever is caused by decomposed material, conveyed to a wound. . .I have shown how it can be prevented. I have proved all that I have said. But while we talk ,talk, talk, gentlemen, women are dying. I am not asking anything world shaking. I am asking you only to wash...For God's sake, wash your hands." But virtually no one believed him. Doctors and midwives had been

delivering babies for thousands of years without washing, so why change now? Semmelweis died insane at the age of 47, his wash basins discarded, his colleagues laughing in his face, and the death rattle of a thousand women ringing in his ears.

In verse 14 Peter urges: *“So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to [a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness], make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.”* He is asking you something world shaking. He is asking you to wash. For God’s sake, for your own sake: Wash! The new heaven and the new earth are only home for those who are serious about living clean, righteous lives. If you are not serious about being spotless, blameless and being in a right relationship with God then there is no home for you in the new heaven and the new earth. When the refining fires burn away on the day of judgment your heart will be fully exposed for what it truly is. If you are not genuine about being a godly, righteous person then that will become apparent and you, along with all other arrogant and wicked persons, will become stubble.

So far there has been a 2000 year delay since the promises concerning Jesus’ return and the day of judgment were made. How are we to view this delay? Firstly, understand that God’s perspective on time is not like ours. As Peter states: *“But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day”* (v8). From one perspective not 2000 years but approximately 365 times 1978 times 1000 years have elapsed, i.e. 721,970,000 years. From one perspective it is as though the Lord has experienced 722 million years of immense grief on account of human ungodliness. From another perspective less than 2 days have elapsed.

After seizing power in 1971, Ugandan tyrant Idi Amin promised a swift return to democracy. He then murdered all of his political opponents, including Uganda's Anglican archbishop, its chief justice and most of its senior army officers. When a rebel army of Tanzanians and Ugandan exiles invaded the country in 1979, they found bodies stacked in the basement of a government building: the headquarters of Amin's euphemistically-named “Bureau of State Research.”

The day of judgment will be a day of destruction and many people will be destroyed. But don’t make the mistake of thinking that God is an evil tyrant. Peter says in verse 15, treating the apostle Paul’s writings as Scripture, even if difficult to understand at times: *“Bear in mind that our Lord’s patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote with the wisdom that God gave him”* (v15). The longer the time between the promise of our Lord’s return and its realisation means not lesser confidence in the promise, but the greater our appreciation of God’s patience. As Peter, fully agreeing with Paul, says: *“The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance”* (v9).

The longer we have to wait the more we should appreciate how much God wants to avoid destroying people. Idi Amin was an evil despot who sadistically destroyed innocent people. God is not a sadist. He is not a tyrant. He is profoundly patient, marvellously merciful. He wants you to come to terms with all the evil that you have thought, said and done and to repent. He wants you to devote your life to him, looking forward to receiving *“a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ”* (1:11). The heat is on! You must set your heart, as Peter exhorts in closing: *“Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen”* (vv17-18).