

## **“When Will You Come Again? How Will the World End?”**

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Most of us want to know how stories end. When you read a novel, are you tempted to turn to the last page before you're finished? Are you the kind of person who looks up spoilers of a new movie—perhaps the latest *Star Wars* movie, “The Last Jedi,” which comes out next month—or a TV show? Are you the kind of person who can't wait to know how the story ends?

Many people are fascinated with how *the* story will end. They want to know how the world, or the universe, will end. Atheists believe the universe will likely come to an end billions of years from now, as the universe continues to expand and entropy continues. In that case, everything will get cold, leading to death on earth. If the universe began with a Big Bang, it may very well end with a Big Freeze.

Many theists believe that the universe will end when God decides to bring human history as we know it to a close. Christians believe that human history will end when Jesus returns to earth. There is no shortage of speculation about when Jesus will return and what will happen when he returns. I suppose it's quite natural for people to want to know when and how Jesus will return, because it's closely related to how our lives will end. Christians hope that Jesus will return soon because it will mean the end of suffering and pain. We hope Jesus will return soon so that we won't die. We hope Jesus will return soon so that we can live with him forever.

Over the last several weeks I've been answering questions that were submitted to us. We had asked people, “If you could ask God one question, what would it be?” Two people asked different questions about the end of the world. One person asked Jesus, “When will you come again?” Another asked, “How will the world end?”

I'll try to answer these questions today. I'll spend more time on the second question, because the answer to the first question is, “We don't know.” We don't know when Jesus will return. People in every generation since Jesus ascended into heaven thought he would return in their lifetime. Those who have predicted when he would come have been proven wrong, time and again. The fact is that we're not supposed to know. Jesus himself said, “But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only”

(Matt. 24:36).<sup>1</sup> Shortly before ascending into heaven, Jesus told his disciples, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority” (Acts 1:7). We simply don’t know and it’s foolish to think we could figure it out.

The only thing that seems to be clear is that before Jesus comes, there will be some kind of heightened evil. The apostle Paul, in his second letter to the Thessalonians, says that there will be a certain “man of lawlessness,” who proclaims that he is God (2 Thess. 2:1–12). But we’re not given much information about what exactly will happen when that occurs. This seems to be the same event as described in Revelation 20, when Satan is released to deceive the nations (Rev. 20:8ff.). But we’re given such little information about these events that it would be impossible to predict when they will occur. And I think that’s by design. We’re not supposed to speculate on when Jesus will return. Any information in the Bible related to Jesus’ second coming is meant to comfort us and motivate us to live holy lives.

Before I continue, I should add this: I’ve already preached or taught different messages about Jesus’ second coming. About two and a half years ago I preached a message on Jesus’ return when I preached a series of sermons on Jesus.<sup>2</sup> At the beginning of 2016, I preached a sermon called “The Returning King,” which was part of a sermon series on the big story of the Bible. In that sermon, I discussed the passages in 1 and 2 Thessalonians related to Jesus’ return.<sup>3</sup> I also taught through the book of Revelation in our Sunday morning Bible study.<sup>4</sup> All of those materials are on our website. Since I don’t want to repeat what I’ve taught earlier, I’m going to look at a different passage today.

So, let us be more concerned with the second question: “How will the world end?” To answer that question, we’ll look at 2 Peter 3. I would invite you to turn in your Bibles to that passage to see what happens when the world as we know it ends.

We’ll begin by reading the first four verses:

<sup>1</sup> This is now the second letter that I am writing to you, beloved. In both of them I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, <sup>2</sup> that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles, <sup>3</sup> knowing this first of all, that scoffers will

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

<sup>2</sup> That sermon, “Jesus Will Come Again,” was preached on May 3, 2015 and can be found here: <https://wbcommunity.org/jesus>.

<sup>3</sup> “The Returning King” was preached on January 31, 2016 and can be found here: <https://wbcommunity.org/story-of-the-bible>.

<sup>4</sup> Those lessons are available here: <https://wbcommunity.org/revelation>.

come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. <sup>4</sup> They will say, “Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.”

The apostle Peter is the author of this letter, and he begins this chapter by referring to a previous letter he wrote. A number of skeptics don't think Peter wrote this letter, but I find their arguments very weak. Many people who oppose the authority of the Bible do so by trying to create doubts in our minds. But since this letter is written in Peter's name, I believe it is the work of the apostle. He may be referring back to 1 Peter. It's possible he's referring to a letter that didn't become part of Scripture. What's important is what he's trying to do in that previous letter and this one. He's trying to remind them what the prophets and the apostles taught.

The “holy prophets” are likely Old Testament prophets (cf. 2 Pet. 1:16–21; Luke 1:70; Acts 3:21). The prophets of the Old Testament taught people in their day to turn back to the Lord God. But they also looked into the future and told of the “day of the Lord,” a day of salvation and judgment, when God would redeem his people, defeat their enemies, and restore the world.<sup>5</sup>

Peter also mentions “the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles.” This shows us that Jesus teaches us through his apostles, such as Peter and Paul. “The commandment” that Peter has in mind is probably all of Jesus' teachings, which can be summed up in the commandment to love God and love one's neighbor (Matt. 22:37–40). But it also includes Jesus' command to his followers to “stay awake,” or to be ready for his return. In Matthew 24:42, Jesus says, “Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.” Then, he adds, “Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect” (Matt. 24:44). Again, we don't know when Jesus will return.

Peter wants his readers to remember what the prophets and Jesus himself taught because he knows that “scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires.” In the previous chapter, Peter warned about false teachers that would come into churches and lead people astray to follow sinful desires. These may not be the same people as the scoffers, but Peter realized that Christianity has opponents of all kinds. Peter said these scoffers will come in the “last days.” This shouldn't be interpreted to mean the “end times,” the very last

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<sup>5</sup> See Isaiah 13:6, 9; Jer. 46:10; Ezek. 13:5; 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11, 31; 3:14; Amos 5:18, 20; Obad. 15; Zeph. 1:7, 14; Mal. 4:5. Some of these uses of “the day of the Lord” refer to times of salvation and judgment that would occur in the near future, while others look to *the* ultimate day of the Lord, which is what Peter has in mind in this chapter.

days before Jesus appears. The New Testament often refers to the period between the first and second comings as the “last days” (Acts 2:17; Heb. 1:2; 2 Tim. 3:1; James 5:3).

Peter probably heard these scoffers say something like, “Didn’t Jesus say he was coming again? Well, I don’t see him. Hasn’t it been decades since he left?” These skeptics mocked the Christian faith. They probably failed to see how the coming of Christ changed human history in any discernible way. Christianity teaches that when Jesus, the Son of God, came to earth, he inaugurated the kingdom of God. It teaches that when Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty for the sins of his people, he dealt a decisive blow to Satan and the powers of evil. Christianity teaches that when Jesus rose from the grave two days after he died, he was the first installment of a new creation that will come in its fullness when Jesus returns. Yet for these scoffers, nothing had changed. For them, “things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.” Ever since their ancestors had died, people had lived and died. Life goes on. And so does death. Wasn’t Jesus supposed to put an end to death?

But Peter goes on to say that these scoffers have overlooked something important. Let’s read verses 5–7:

<sup>5</sup> For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, <sup>6</sup> and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. <sup>7</sup> But 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.

Peter says these scoffers have overlooked important things in history. One is the creation of the world, and the other is the judgment that God put on the world during the days of Noah. Here, Peter is making literary allusions to these events in the book of Genesis. In Genesis, we’re told that God fashioned or created the world out of a watery chaos. I don’t think Peter is making the claim that everything on this planet is made out of water, or any other detailed scientific claim. He’s saying that, according to Genesis, the world as we know it emerged when God made a distinction between sky and water and between dry land and water (Gen. 1:6–10). This was done by God’s word. In other words, Peter is saying that history is not infinite. History as we know it had a beginning through a miraculous event, which occurred at the command of God. If history begins with God’s command, it can certainly end at God’s command.

Peter then refers to the flood during the time of Noah, when God judged the earth because people were so evil. According to Genesis 6:5, “The LORD saw that the wickedness of

man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” So, at God’s command, he brought judgment to the world through water, through the flood, which killed everyone on the earth except Noah and his family. So, human history has not gone on forever without decisive acts of judgment. The flood is a foreshadowing of what will happen on the final day of judgment, when God punishes those who have rejected him and his Son.

So, in the past, God acted decisively by water and his word. But in the end, he will act decisively by his word and fire. The “heavens and earth that now exist”—the universe and everything in it—“are stored up for fire,” which will come on the day of judgment. When God judged the world with water, it didn’t remove sin. Noah and his family were sinful. They didn’t love God with all their hearts. They weren’t perfectly obedient. But a final, ultimate judgment through fire will purge the world of the ungodly. Peter’s main point is that there will be a final judgment, and it will come when God wants it to come. But when it comes, it will be too late to repent, to turn from sin and to turn to God.

Let’s now read verses 8–9:

<sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> 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.

The scoffers overlooked the fact that God had acted in human history. His point is that if God acted decisively in the past, he can do so again in the future. Now, Peter wants his readers not to overlook something else. God hasn’t failed to fulfill his promise. Jesus will return. But it won’t be on our timeframe. In God’s timing, “one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.” Peter is referring back to Psalm 90, which begins with these verses:

- <sup>1</sup> Lord, you have been our dwelling place  
in all generations.
- <sup>2</sup> Before the mountains were brought forth,  
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,  
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.
- <sup>3</sup> You return man to dust  
and say, “Return, O children of man!”
- <sup>4</sup> For a thousand years in your sight  
are but as yesterday when it is past,  
or as a watch in the night.

5 You sweep them away as with a flood; they are like a dream,  
like grass that is renewed in the morning:  
6 in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;  
in the evening it fades and withers.

In that Psalm 90, we're told that while God is eternal, we are not. Though God has no beginning and no end, our lives had a beginning and our lives in this world do have an end. For God, a thousand years are nothing. But our lives are like grass that is here today and gone tomorrow. The scoffers thought God had broken his promise to set all things right because he was taking too long. Peter wanted his readers to know that God never takes too long, even though it may seem that way to us.

The reason that Jesus hasn't yet returned to judge the living and the dead is because God "is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." What do we make of this verse?

Some people think that God doesn't want anyone to be condemned; instead, he wants people to turn from their sinful ways of living and turn to him in faith. Of those people, some people believe that while God wants everyone to be saved, he can't go ahead and save everyone because that would somehow violate free will. To those people, I would point out that "no one seeks for God" (Rom. 3:11). If we were left to our own choices, we would never choose God. We are spiritually dead before coming to Jesus (Eph. 2:1-3). Until we are born again, we can't even see that there is a kingdom of God, much less enter it (John 3:3, 5). Dead men don't make themselves alive. They can't even choose to do that. So, unless someone has been transformed by God, they would never choose Jesus. But there are some who will come to Jesus. Jesus said, "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out" (John 6:37). He also says, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:44). So, who can come to Jesus? Only those whom the Father draws to Jesus. What happens to them? Jesus will never cast them out; they will be raised to eternal life on the last day, when the dead are resurrected and judged. On that day, Jesus' people will live with him forever in a new creation. But those who have rejected him will stand condemned.

So, I don't think that God wants to save everyone but his hands are tied because he must wait on our free will. I believe we do have a will, but it isn't free to choose anything. We are only free to choose what we desire, and apart from God's intervention, we don't want him.

Another possibility is that God wants everyone to be saved but, for reasons that are hard to understand, he doesn't plan to save everyone. Some theologians talk of God's will in terms of his desire and in terms of his decrees, what he has decided will happen. According to this line of thinking, God would like everyone to be saved, but his plan doesn't include the salvation of everyone. In this case, it's not because he so values human freedom. In this case, it's because somehow his plan brings him more glory. Remember that Jesus didn't truly want his friend Lazarus to die, but he allowed Lazarus to die because it was part of his plan to bring God glory (John 11). In some way, the fact that not all are saved by God is similar. It brings him glory to save only some. If everyone were saved, salvation would be cheap and meaningless.

But perhaps there's an easier way to understand this passage. Remember that Peter is writing this letter to Christians. He's writing to those who have faith, as the first verse in the letter states (2 Pet. 1:1). And in verse 9 of this chapter, he says, "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." Why has Jesus not returned yet to put an end to human history as we know it? Because he is patient towards *you*, Christian! He is giving more time for people to be saved. It might be that when Peter says "any" or "all" he means, "any" of those the Father has given to the Son, or "any" of the ones God has chosen to be saved. And if someone today is legitimately asking, "Why hasn't God ended it all by now," the answer is that he wants more people to be saved. If Jesus came back in 1975, I would never have existed. And if Jesus had come back in, say, 1991, I wasn't truly a Christian then. So, it's good for me that he hasn't come back yet. Otherwise, I would be on the wrong side of his judgment.

God is waiting for all who will put faith in Jesus to put faith in Jesus. God the Father gives some to the Son, and those people will never be cast out. Rather, they will be raised up to eternal life. But we also know that faith and repentance are necessary for salvation. We need to trust Jesus while we still have time. That means that we trust that he is the eternal Son of God who became man to live the perfect life that we don't live, satisfying and fulfilling God's designs for humanity, and to die a sacrificial, atoning death on the cross, to satisfy God's righteous wrath against sin. He did that so that everyone who trusts him can be credited with his righteousness and can have their sins paid for. That is the great exchange. When we are united to Jesus, he takes our sin and we take his perfection. If you're hearing this message now, I urge you to turn to

Jesus while there is still time. Jesus may not come soon. But we will die. And whether he comes before or after we die, there will be a time when it is too late to turn to him in faith.

We don't know when Jesus returns. He will come at an unexpected time. But when he comes, things will be changed. Let's read verse 10:

<sup>10</sup> 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.

The day of the Lord is the day when Jesus will come to judge the living and the dead and to restore, or recreate, the universe. And it will come "like a thief." That's what both Jesus (Matt. 24:43–44) and Paul (1 Thess. 5:2) said. A thief doesn't tell you in advance when he's coming. He comes when you're not expecting him.

And when the Lord comes, 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." This seems to mean that the heavenly bodies, such as the sun, moon, and stars, will be removed from the sky, laying the earth bare before the eyes of God, who sees everything that has ever been done (or even thought or desired) on it. I don't know how literal or figurative this language is. But the idea is that everything is being stripped away. Everything that stands between God and us will be removed. We will stand before God in judgment, with nothing to hide us or protect us. We'll be like Adam and Eve, naked before God in our sin (Gen. 3:10–11). The only thing that can cover up our sinful deeds, thoughts, and desires is the righteousness of Christ, and we can only wear that if we trust him.

So, we will be judged. What happens next? Let's read verses 11–13:

<sup>11</sup> Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, <sup>12</sup> 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! <sup>13</sup> But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

What happens is that God will recreate the universe. There will be a new heavens and earth. Some people think the old creation will be totally annihilated and then a new creation will be made. I don't think that's the picture we're getting here. Instead, it seems like the old creation will be refined by fire. It will burn up everything that is sinful, everything that doesn't align with God's will and design. Everything that doesn't glorify God, that doesn't display his brilliance,

will be burned up. All sin and evil will be destroyed. Even Christians will have their character permanently altered so that they will no longer be able to sin. And then Christians will live in a new creation, “in which righteousness dwells.” In the book of Revelation, we’re told that in this new creation, “death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Rev. 21:4). Other passages in the Bible depict this new creation as a tremendous feast (Isa. 25:6–8). The idea is that the new creation will be a Paradise. It will be perfect. God’s people will live with God there forever.

Peter tells us this in order to motivate us to live “lives of holiness and godliness.” All the passages that speak of Jesus’ second coming seem to do one of three things. One, they comfort us, teaching us that this life, marked by sin and death, will not last forever. God will make everything right someday. Two, they warn us against being complacent and lazy in our faith. If we continue to sin, we may not really trust Jesus. Some mentions of Jesus’ second coming remind us of judgment. All our works will be exposed before God. So, live as if you really are part of God’s family. God uses these warnings as a means to keep believers on the right path. And, three, these passages motivate us to live holy lives now. We don’t want Jesus to return while our lives are a sinful mess.

It seems that Peter wants to comfort his readers against the mocking of these scoffers. But Peter also wants us to motivate us to live in light of eternity. What he’s saying is, “If righteousness dwells in the new creation, and you’re going to live there forever, you better start living righteously now.” He doesn’t say this because we earn salvation. He doesn’t say, “Be good and you’ll get into heaven.” He doesn’t say, “If you’re not righteous enough, you’ll be cast out.” He’s saying, essentially, “Be holy, for God is holy. You’re going to live in the direct presence of God. Start living that way right now.” That’s why Peter goes on to say, in verse 14: “Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace.”

Yes, we are saved by God’s grace. In other words, salvation is a gift. A right relationship with God is something that we can’t earn. We are saved by Jesus’ perfect life and atoning death. But salvation also includes being transformed by God. Salvation includes having the Holy Spirit live inside of us, changing us from the inside out. And if we truly belong to Jesus, we’ll obey him. We’ll do this out of love and gratitude, not fear. In the end, we’ll live with Jesus forever in a perfect world. Shouldn’t we want to start living life right now as if we’re already there?

Now that we've examined this passage, I want us to think about three ways that it might apply to our lives.

The first is that there will always be scoffers. From the beginning, there have been people who have mocked Christianity. They will always be there. If you're a Christian, this is something that you must get used to. Don't let it throw you.

If you're not a Christian, I would ask you to question why people mock Christianity. People who think the idea of creation or the idea of an apocalypse are silly assume history has always gone on the way it has and that it will continue the way that it has. This is an unwarranted assumption. There are limits to what science and history can tell us. And they can't predict with absolute certainty what will happen tomorrow. Many people say that Christians are now on the "wrong side of history," but how can they say that when they don't know what will happen in the future? How can they say that if they don't know how the world will end?

This brings me to the second way this passage may apply to us. If you're not a Christian, this may seem like crazy stuff. But consider this: don't we all fear being seen for who we are, for being found out? Don't we all fear that our deepest, darkest secrets will be exposed? Where does that come from? Maybe we fear that because we intuitively know that we will be judged by God. And don't we really want a final judgment, a final assessment of history, so that evil will be judged? If there is no final assessment of what is right and what is wrong, then our lives will be meaningless. It wouldn't matter if we were Hitler or Mother Theresa. It's all the same, because in the end, everyone dies and then the whole universe will decay and everything will be forgotten. But if there is a God who lives forever and who will evaluate everyone's lives, that means life is meaningful and we will never be forgotten. And, more than that, we have the promise that God will refine and recreate the universe to be perfect. Who wouldn't want to live there?

If you're not a Christian, the time to repent is now. You don't know how long you have to live. God is patient with us, but he will only be patient for so long.

Here's the third way this passage affects us. If you're a Christian, live your life in light of eternity. Earlier theologians used to use a Latin phrase, *coram Deo*, which means "before the face of God." The idea is that we should live right now as we will in eternity, as if God were right here with us.

Do you want Jesus to return when you're being lazy? Do you want Jesus to return when it's been months since you read the Bible on your own, not in church? Do you want Jesus to return when you're sitting around watching TV and not trying to obey him? Do you want him to come when you've been living only for yourself? Do you want him to come when you're watching pornography? I think we know the answer to those questions.

If we are going to live in a new creation where righteousness dwells for eternity, shouldn't we start to live righteous lives now? Shouldn't we focus our lives on things that matter eternally, things that won't be burned up? We should focus on learning more about God, loving him, and obey him. We should focus on loving other people, which means treating them according to God's design for human lives, not ours. We should do that now in order to prepare for the time when we will stand before our Lord.