

2. The Scoffers and the Last Days

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Date: 10 May 2009

Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 0 0] Well, do turn with me, if you would, to 2 Peter chapter 3, page 1019 in the Church Bibles, if you have one of those.

And in this little series, which we're calling Living Through the World's Last Days, tonight's message is all about the scoffers and the last days.

As we said last time, we're living in difficult days, days of instability and days of uncertainty for the whole world, and also for the Church.

It's true that we do face increasing hostility in society today, isn't it? We face, as the Church of Jesus Christ in the West in general, and I would say in this country in particular, we face really decreasing influence as a body on our society, on our nation, on our politics, on the laws of this country.

It's becoming increasingly hard for Christians. Just the other week, I was reading in the Daily Telegraph an article by Janet Daly, and included in that, she says this, Evangelical Christians, and remember Janet Daly is a Jewish commentator, Evangelical Christians are now treated as a pariah in a country that is still officially Christian.

[1 : 3 4] Isn't that interesting? I think it's probably true. If you were reading the newspapers this week and saw what the members of the Scottish Parliament were fling, they had to do, weighing in to the debate about the current issues in the Church of Scotland, you'll see that Evangelical Christians, anybody daring to stand for what the Bible teaches clearly, is increasingly regarded as a pariah.

But that should not surprise us, because Peter's letter warns us of this, and encourages us, that nevertheless, God, he says, as we read in the beginning of chapter 1, has given us everything we need, no matter what the circumstances, everything that pertains to life and godliness.

He hasn't left us at sea, or without anything. And he's given us focus. Whatever these last days are going to bring to us, whatever will face us, one thing we are to be certain about, about these last days.

And that is for us, they are to be days in which we grow in the grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. That's how he begins the letter, isn't it?

And it's how he ends it in the very last verse, verse 18 of chapter 3. We have great and precious promises, Peter says, and through them, we will reach our true calling and destiny.

[3 : 0 3] And that is an enormously marvelous thing that he says is our destiny. Sharing in the divine nature, sharing in the true glory of God himself, through the righteousness of our God and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

And we have these great and precious promises, which will take us to our true destination in Christ. We have them, he says, forever. And they are fixed, and they are indelible.

In the words of the prophets, and in the commands of our Lord and Saviour, chapter 3, verse 2, through your apostles. What a wonderfully positive message he gives us for difficult days and dark days.

That we have all that we need to reach our destiny through growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. Wonderfully positive.

But of course, the positive on its own isn't enough, is it? Never is in the Bible. There are necessary negatives, there are clear warnings, all the way through Scripture, that we also need to keep us from going off-center and going into error.

[4 : 12] Now, people who think that the Bible is just a crutch for feeble believers, are just self-deceived. The Bible never hides us from reality.

Rather, it exposes us all the time. The Bible kicks away constantly all such crutches of pretense. And that's exactly what Peter is doing here.

Peter must warn us that there really are negative things, dangers, that we have to be very realistic about. And what he says to us is that in chapter 3, verse 3, if you look there, that's where we're focusing tonight, verses 3 to 7, he says that it will mean that we are going to live in an age of skepticism.

It's of vital importance, he says. Know this first of all. Grasp this necessary negative if you're going to be positively growing in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Grasp this necessary negative.

It will not be easy, says Peter, because scoffers, he says, will come in the last days with scoffing. There won't be passive scoffers, there won't be scoffers who just keep quiet and don't scoff.

[5 : 25] There'll be loud, scoffing, audible scoffers, skeptics. So, that means that the trustworthy voice of the true teachers who teach us the great and precious promises of God that can lead us to the glory of God in Christ, their voices will not be the only voices that are heard by God's people in these last days.

Scoffers will come, he says. And notice this. They will not just be on the outside of the church in the world. They'll be inside the church too.

It's shocking, isn't it, to say that. It's especially shocking if you're the sort of person who hankers after a pure church, but that is what Christ's Apostle Peter tells us.

Look back to the very last verse of chapter 1 and the first verse of chapter 2. See what he says. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, this is in the old days, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

So far, so good. Great and precious promises. But, verse 1 of chapter 2, false prophets also arose from among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them.

[6 : 50] inside the church, you see. Well, as we said last week, that's only too true, isn't it? If Peter is to be believed, that's how it's going to be right through the end of the ages, even in the church, right up until when the Lord Jesus himself comes.

That's how it's going to be. False teachers inside the church, even denying the Master. So, we can't pretend that away. We've got to be realistic and believe what Christ's Apostle tells us.

But the real question then is this. When there are these two voices to be heard in the church of Jesus Christ, one teaching the truth of God, the other scoffing and teaching falsehood, which voices are we as the church of Jesus Christ going to listen to?

Which voices are going to prevail? When many voices are shouting their own different opinions, who are we going to listen to to find the truth and not error? Who are we going to be listening to when we want to be led into reality and into sanity, not into deception and folly?

That's always the question that the New Testament is putting to us and that is a vital question today, isn't it? Well, Peter wants us to be in no doubt, absolutely none, as to which voices we are to listen to.

[8 : 13] And so he gives us here in these verses a clear course in what we might call voice recognition. He gives us three clear marks of the scoffer and his ways so that we can expose the scoffer and so that we may resist them and resist their pernicious influence on the church and not be, as he says at the end of the letter, destabilized so that we also fall away into the error of lawless people.

So he says we need to understand their motives, and their message and above all their supreme mistake. So first then, scoffers, says Peter, have a clear motivation.

You see that very clearly in chapter 3, verse 3. Their teaching, their belief, their lifestyle is driven by what? Verse 3. What is it that drives what they teach and say?

Their following, he says, their own sinful desires. Now contrast that with the true teachers of Christ that we just read about in chapter 1, verse 21.

No prophet, no true teacher in the past ever produced his message from his own will. No men spoke from God as they were driven by the Holy Spirit.

[9 : 30] And just so, the true teacher of Christ in the church today is driven not by his own desires, not by a quest for popularity, not by success or by growth or self-satisfaction or even just for a quiet life.

And not by his own interpretation of what the faith is all about. But rather, by the clear revelation of God in Scripture.

By the faith once for all delivered to the saints. As chapter 3, verse 2 says, through the words of the Old Testament prophets and look again through the command of our Lord and Savior through your apostles.

It's as stark and simple as that, you see. The true teacher speaks the words of the Old Testament and the New Testament and teaches it as the authoritative word of God himself.

Even if no one wants to hear those words, that's what he teaches. That's what Paul also tells to Timothy, isn't it? Listen to his words from 2 Timothy chapter 4.

[10 : 39] I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead and by his appearing and his kingdom preach the word. Be ready in season and out of season.

That is, when people want to hear it and when they don't. Reprove, rebuke and exhort with complete patience and teaching. Why? For the time is coming when people will not endure sign teaching but having itching ears they'll accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions.

They'll turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, says Paul, always be sober-minded. Endure suffering. Do the work of an evangelist.

Fulfill your ministry. Endure suffering, says Paul. Well, you see, you don't suffer, do you? There's no suffering in telling people exactly what they want to hear but there's a lot of suffering in telling people what they don't want to hear.

And not so, you see, the teacher who purports to be a preacher or a leader in the Christian church but purports to be genuine but is in fact in reality is a scoffer.

[11 : 53] He or she, says Peter, is quite the opposite. Not speaking the unchanging word of God, rather, he follows his own sinful desires. And so his message, his gospel, his understanding of the Christian faith is totally shaped by his own desires.

What he feels, what he wants, the things he's chasing in life. Now, I guess we've got to be honest here, haven't we? Because all of us, I guess, secretly, all of us want to be told the things that we find convenient, the things that we find easy for us, the things that we find self-justifying to our own behavior.

And so, you see, when people today in our society all around us want sexual freedom or so-called sexual freedom, well, the scoffer is the one who shapes his teaching to accommodate that.

So, he'll play the Bible down, he'll snip out the commands of Jesus that are awkward and that get in the way, hard words that Jesus said, for example, about adultery or about divorce or about sexual immorality.

Those words will be silenced or at very least played down greatly. And bingo, all of a sudden, our own sinful desires can step in and be baptized into the church as holy and right and good.

[13 : 15] We have a gospel of affirmation with all sorts of talk about unconditional love but absolutely nothing about what Jesus actually was always going on about repentance.

Have you noticed that? Jesus is always on about unconditional love. I've read that lots of times in the newspapers this week. I've looked in my Bible and I've looked at what Jesus says and Jesus always seems to be on about repentance.

Hasn't made it into the Glasgow Herald or Scotland on Sunday. Isn't that strange? And you see that's the gospel minus, isn't it?

Things that we don't like are conveniently subtracted. We push them out. We're left with something quite anodyne that we can perhaps tolerate. Or it can actually work in the very opposite direction.

People want and desire health and wealth and prosperity and wonderful spiritual experiences and all kinds of thrills and excitement.

[14 : 14] So when Jesus said repeatedly to follow me means taking up your cross and walking after me in the way of pain and suffering. And when Peter his apostle says it's a life of suffering now and glory to be revealed when Jesus comes and not before.

And when Paul speaks about dying daily and sharing in Jesus' death. Well the scoffer you see he scoffs at all of that. No, no, no. We name it and claim it.

It's the crown now in that gospel. You can have all the things you want right now. If only you'll have faith. And so things that Jesus never ever promised to his people are held out before people in the Christian church and told these can be ours.

Or things that Jesus did promise but very clearly only promise when he comes to transform this universe. They're held out as things we can have now. That's not the gospel minus, that's the gospel plus.

Things that we would love to have now according to our own desires are added in. The gospel is shaped by our own sinful desires. That's the scoffer's gospel says Peter.

[15 : 35] Sometimes I'm sure it can be from the very best of intentions. We quite understandably don't want to offend people so we cut out the nasty bits from the gospel. We don't want to offend people of other faiths and we live in an increasingly multicultural society so we're tempted to play down the uniqueness of Jesus Christ.

As soon as we do that we've destroyed his gospel haven't we? Or we don't want to hurt people whose lives have been in a terrible mess, perhaps in a sexual mess.

Well of course we don't want to hurt people. Neither did Jesus. Remember how gently he treated the woman at the well or the woman caught in adultery.

It was the very antithesis, wasn't it? Of the sometimes sanctimonious religious moralism that is sometimes found alas in the Christian church. Certainly found greatly in the newspapers.

It wasn't that kind of self satisfied superiority at all. But Jesus' grace to those people was suffused with truth, wasn't it? He knew it would be a far greater sin not to gently confront the sin of people when he met them.

[16 : 56] Neither do I condemn you, he said, but go and sin no more. Leave your life of sin. And the wonder is that in the command of the Lord Jesus Christ is the power to go and do precisely that.

In his call comes the power to take up the cross and to follow him and to leave the world behind. God's love to God's desire to all whom he calls whoever we are.

But the scoffer doesn't think about Christ's desires, he thinks about his own sinful desires. You might say he does, but that's the truth. Like the politician really at the end of the day always thinking about the ballot box, always thinking about self preservation or he's like the merchant always thinking about profit and loss.

So he gives the people what they want. And that, says Peter, is the scoffer's clear motivation. That's what lies behind it, whether he admits it or not, whether he even is conscious of it or not.

That's the scoffer's motivation. What about the scoffer's cynical message? Well, it's there in verse 4. Do you see? Where is the promise of his coming?

[18 : 09] The cynical message, but it's a very consistent one, isn't it? Where's your God? Where's the evidence of the God that you claim exists? Just an illusion. If he was real, it'd be far more obvious, wouldn't it? And if what God said was true, was true, well, of course we'd believe it, but it isn't.

Well, it's a very old one, isn't it? It goes right back to the serpent in Genesis chapter 3. All through the history, it's been the same cynical message of the scoffer. The psalmist speaks about it in Psalm 79.

The nations say, where is their God? We can't see him. Or Psalm 42. My adversary says to me continually, where is your God? Scoffing.

Just so for the prophets, Joel in chapter 2 complains, why do they say among the peoples, where is their God? They're scoffing at us. Even among the Lord's people, the church, sometimes you get the same cynical message in the Bible.

Remember poor Jeremiah, who was called by God to that terrible duty of presenting the sin of God's people to them and calling them to repent, telling them about God's judgment.

[19 : 15] Well, when he preached that truth to them, he was met with exactly that attitude. Ha! Judgment, Jeremiah. What a load of rubbish. Bring it on, they said. And eventually, poor old Jeremiah, because he was faithful to his message, got thrown down a cistern and sat in a pile of mud right up to his oxters.

See, nothing really has changed through history, whether you're in the 10th century BC or the 1st century AD or the 21st century. The scoffers are there just the same.

Where's your God? Don't believe that? What a lot of tosh. Hell will never come. Judgment will never come. Jesus will never come again. That's a scoffer, isn't it?

If God was real, why is there so much suffering in the world then, you Christians? Explain that to us. Where's the God of justice? How can there possibly be a God who lets these terrible things happen? Huh?

Or if your gospel's true and there's resurrection, eternal life, then how come people still die? Explain that one. Why is there so much evil in the world if you see that Jesus has defeated evil on the cross?

[20 : 27] Jesus hasn't changed anything. The world's just the same as it always was. You Christians are just deluded. As for judgment, what a load of rubbish. So Richard Dawkins and his friends have put on the London buses, big posters.

You've probably read about them. There's probably no God, so stop worrying and enjoy your life. Cost them a lot of money. Quite glad about that. Rather they spent the money on that than many other things.

There's probably no God, so stop worrying and enjoy your life. That's a lot of faith in that word probably, isn't it? They're very confident of course, the scoffers, and their message is very cynical.

It was then, and it still is today. But before you buy into that cynical message, Peter says a third thing.

Look at their colossal mistake. verses 5 to 7. He says they're deliberately suppressing the facts.

[21 : 36] In particular, there's one fact, says Peter. What fact? Well, they scorn the word of God, the promise of his coming, but they forget, says Peter, they forget culpably and with great conceit, that God's word is not only trustworthy, not only the witness of honest prophets and apostles, eyewitnesses, but God's word is the very power that created the universe in the first place and demonstrated God's judgment in the past in history.

And God's word, he says, verse 7, is the only thing that is keeping this present world in existence now and it's only doing so until the certain judgment that is to come.

Look at these verses again. 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 and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished.

But by the same word, the heavens and the earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly. You ignore that fact, you ignore the clear evidence of scripture and of history, says Peter, at your peril.

Scoffers scoff at the Bible, of course they do. But listen, the key question is this, do you take the real Jesus Christ of history at all seriously? Because if you do, you need to know how seriously he took these warnings in the word of God.

[23 : 14] Jesus and his apostles were absolutely clear about each of the three things that Peter mentions here. They were clear first, as Peter says, that the world that we have and live in wasn't just something that came up by chance naturalistically, but it was created by the word of God.

It takes extraordinary self-deception, it seems to me, to deliberately overlook this fact, and yet there are intelligent people all through the world who seem to do just that. So somebody of the extraordinary intelligence and experience of David Attenborough, for example.

These wonderful nature programs that he's made, his whole life devoted to natural science and so on. And yet just the other week I was reading an article by him in the newspaper where he was scorning Christianity and speaking of his old school headmaster and how he used to get up from time to time in chapel and he was obviously a Christian man and would speak about his faith and speak about the trustworthiness of scripture.

And David Attenborough said, I couldn't understand how a man of such learning could believe such nonsense. You see, I can't believe how a man like David Attenborough of such learning can be so extraordinary ignorant.

Somebody who can make programs about life on earth and about the wonders of nature and the migration patterns of birds and how salmon go all the way across the Atlantic and come all the way back up to the same river and little burn in Scotland.

[24 : 46] How he can understand all of these things about the complexity of life on earth and how he can fail to see the hand of God. The heavens declare the glory of God, the psalmist said.

Day after day, night after night, they pour forth knowledge, but it all just goes over the head of somebody as intelligent and as clever as David Attenborough. And then, I read just a few days later in the newspaper, the same David Attenborough telling us he believes in the abominable snowman.

Which thing requires a greater leap of faith? To look around at the world of nature and the world of humanity and the world of arts and sciences and all the wonders that we see and to see that there is, of course, evidence of an intelligent design of this universe.

Which is the greater leap of faith? To believe that or to believe somehow it was all just a mistake? It just happened by chance. And by the way, I believe in the abominable snowman. I don't know if he believes in the Loch Ness monster.

I'll have to perhaps write to him and find out. But Jesus Christ and his apostles were very clear. This world didn't just happen. It was called into being by the word of God.

[26 : 17] But secondly, Jesus and his apostles were equally clear about God's powerful judgments in history. Look at verse 6. It's the flood that he's talking about here, but if you go back to chapter 2 you'll see he also mentions others, including the judgment of Sodom.

God, he says, created the heaven and the earth, verse 5, and God's word likewise destroyed the world that then existed, verse 6. By the way, that word in verse 6, for the world that then existed, it's a different word from the earth in verse 5.

It's the world of men that he's talking about as being destroyed in the time of Noah, not necessarily the whole planet earth. It wasn't the whole of planet earth, was it, that was destroyed then? The earth is still here.

So regardless of how extensive you think the flood may have been, it was the world of men that perished then. That's what Peter's saying. Perhaps we should be careful to notice that in case we want to be too dogmatic about things like how far the Genesis flood extended.

But the point is that God has judged by his word in human history and we have evidence of that. And thirdly, in verse 7, he says Jesus and his apostles are just as clear that by the same word the whole heavens and earth that now exist will also be judged one day.

[27 : 38] In fact, the only thing holding up that judgment is the word of God, which is keeping the world in existence until that day. Just as God has judged in history in the flood and the judgment of Sodom and in many other judgments and indeed in the judgment of Jerusalem and Judea in AD 70, which Jesus himself predicted and which all the historians recorded, just as God has judged in history, so he will judge ultimately to end history.

That's what Peter is saying. And on that day, verse 7 says it will be the final destruction of the ungodly, of those who scoff and reject the one true God and his word.

And that, says Christ's apostle, is the truth of God in Jesus which scoffers are deliberately overlooking. They suppress it and they hide from it, deliberately, when they say things like, there's probably no God, so go and do as you please.

Friends, in the light of what Jesus and his apostles say with absolute certainty, dare you, dare you put all your trust in that word of Richard Dawkins and his friends? Probably. Dare you risk your whole eternity on something as flimsy, something as cavalier, and what the Bible calls utter self-deception.

Dare you do that? That, says Peter, would be a colossal mistake. A colossal mistake. Don't listen to the siren voices of the scoffers, says Peter.

[29 : 20] Don't do it. They twist the scriptures to suit their own sinful desires and the desires of others like them. That's the clear motive behind what is a deeply cynical message.

very plain speaking, isn't it, from Christ's apostle Peter. I'm sure the newspapers today wouldn't like him at all. They'd call him a bigot. They'd call him an extremist.

They'd probably try to get the home secretary for not allowing him into the country. But, you know, in the face of real danger, that's what's needed, isn't it, plain speaking? Yes, we shy away from it.

We want to be polite, I suppose. We don't want to be offensive. But, you know, there comes a time when that becomes culpable. There comes a time when to fail to give a warning, to neglect that, is a wicked thing to do, even if some people are going to get offended by it.

Those of you who've been to Australia will know that, I guess, down under, they're a little bit more blunt, perhaps, than we are in Britain. Our one-way streets just have those signs with the circle and the bar across the middle.

[30 : 26] No words that we're all supposed to know. But if you go past a motorway slip road in Australia, what you'll see is this. A huge sign halfway down the slip road that says this, Wrong way, go back.

Well, maybe if we had that, then that poor chap in his 80s who was on his little motorised wheelchair wouldn't have got so far down the M6, would he? Nearly killed himself. And sometimes God has to shout to us, wrong way, go back.

He has to shake us up to recognise the truth about the cynicism and the motivation that really does underlie the claims and the teaching of those who are in fact twisting the scripture, says Peter, to their own and to other essential desires.

It doesn't matter how dripping with honey that message is. It doesn't matter how full of the language of love and of affirmation, of inclusiveness, and breadth, and so on.

It doesn't matter how positive it all seems to be. Or even for some, I dare say, how sincere and how well-meaning it may genuinely be. And it may well be.

[31 : 38] But Peter says they make a colossal mistake. Colossal mistake. Because they overlook the fact, the essential and necessary fact that this whole creation is being held up by the word of God, says Peter, for a judgement that is to come.

And for the destruction of the ungodly. And friends, which is the more offensive thing? If you're standing by a road and by a corner and just around the corner, you know that the road has been washed away and a bridge has gone and cars going around that road and not stopping will hurtle into a ravine to certain death.

Which is the more offensive thing to do? To stand by the road and wave and smile and say, bon voyage! Or to shout, stop!

Wrong way! Go back! The second one sounds much more offensive, doesn't it? Which is more offensive and culpable for us in the church of Jesus Christ?

To join the scoffers in their message of deliberate suppression of the truth and to acquiesce in a cynical message twisted to suit the appetites and the desires of the world around us and merely affirm what people want to hear about a God who never judges and will certainly never judge anybody for their behavior and to lead people into disaster.

[33 : 02] That or to speak the truth of Scripture plainly in a way that most certainly will offend many. But it's the only way that can save many.

From certain disaster and from eternal loss. That's our choice. That's the choice Peter's putting before us. It's not a choice between being polite or being offensive.

Don't misunderstand. We are called to sincerity, to honesty. But we're called to speak that with dignity and with respect and with love. Of course we are. There's no place in the Christian church for boorish and brutish or bullying rants.

None at all. It's not a choice between politeness and offensiveness in our manner. But it is a choice ultimately between scoffing skepticism and scriptural sincerity.

It's either or. It's one or the other. And that doesn't mean either unintelligent or simplistic Bible bashing. If you look down to verse 16, Peter himself says it plainly, some scriptures, he says, are hard to understand.

[34 : 17] He's speaking about Paul's letters there. Noticeably calling it scripture. But they're hard to understand. And they are. But we have to work to understand them. But not to twist them as he says some do.

Do you know, often of course, it's not that the scriptures are that hard to understand, is it? It's just that they're very hard to take. We don't like what they're telling us. It's not the bits of the Bible that I find hard to understand, the real problem in my life.

I can assure you of that. It's the bits I can understand that are as plain as a pike to huff and I find very hard to accept and even harder to do. That's the bits of the Bible that are a problem to me. I expect it's the same for you too.

It's certainly true of those teaching falsely that Peter calls the scoffers. Whether they admit it or not, whether they really believe it or not, that is their clear motive.

That's what shapes their cynical message. But, says Peter, they make a colossal mistake. Look at verse 16 again. They're ignorant and unstable, he says.

[35 : 27] They twist the scriptures as they do, he says, to their own destruction. Don't you be taken in. Don't fall for the scoffing skepticism all around us today, outside and alas, inside the churches.

That's God's word to us today from Peter here in the 21st century in Scotland as we live in a world of increasingly vocal scoffing from skeptics all around us and skeptics even in among us.

Don't go that way, says Peter. And if you've begun to go that way, read the sign. Wrong way. Go back. Back.

To scriptural sincerity. That's the only way to safety. What a word of gracious, loving warning. And what a word of wonderful encouragement from Peter, the apostle of Jesus Christ, isn't it?

You, therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability, but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

[36 : 43] To him be the glory, both now and to the day of eternity. Amen. And amen. Let's sing together as we end our service.

hymn number 883, a call to fight the good fight with all your might. Christ is your strength and Christ your right. Lay hold on life and it shall be your joy and crown eternally.

Run the straight race through God's good grace. Lift up your eyes and flyby toda Aubrey. Amen. Thank you. Thank you.

Thanks. Bye. Bye. Bye. Bye.

Bye. Bye. Bye. Bye. Bye. Bye. Bye.