

4. Everything we need to keep going

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[0 : 0 0] Now, if we could have our Bibles open, please, at 2 Peter 3, and we'll have a moment of prayer. God our Father, we ask that the gracious Holy Spirit, who spoke through the prophets and the apostles, will now open our eyes to behold wonderful things out of your law.

We pray above all that through the written word that he will lead us to the living word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

A leading theologian said, speaking of the coming of Christ, an event that has not happened in 2,000 years is a non-event.

It's not going to happen. Proving exactly what Peter says in these words. In the last days, scoffers will come, and they will say, where is the promise of his coming?

And that's what we're going to be looking at this evening as Peter comes to the subject that's been close to his heart, right from the beginning of the letter, the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[1 : 1 8] Now, the connection with chapter 2, I think, is very clear. Some people, as I said last week, see chapter 2 as a digression. I don't believe it is. It's a necessary part of the argument, as he warns against false teachers, particularly those false teachers who deny the coming, the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the, back in chapter 2, in verse 21, he's talked about the holy commandment. And now, in chapter 3, verse 2, he talks about the commandment of the Lord and Savior through the apostles.

Once again, bringing together the prophets and the apostles and saying, if you want to know Jesus Christ, if you want to hear his word, if you want to understand what he's saying, then you must know the scriptures, because that is the way in which God speaks.

What changes in these verses is the whole atmosphere of the letter. Peter, he uses a word which the ESV translates slightly quaintly as beloved, NIV, my dear friends, and various other versions have various colloquialisms about it.

But anyway, it's clear that Peter is showing his affection here. He is terrified of the false teachers, but he loves his brothers and sisters, and he repeats that word, repeats it in verse 8, and then in the final section, in verse 14.

[2 : 4 7] And Peter is conscious, as I've said, his ministry is nearly over. His time on earth has almost come to an end, but his brothers and sisters who remain need to be strengthened.

And not just those brothers and sisters, but people like ourselves, who will live during the time between the comings, the time until the Lord returns. So my title this evening is Everything We Need to Keep Going.

The coming has manifestly not happened. How do we keep going? And there's two particular things I want to say this evening. I want, first of all, to speak of the word which has power.

That's essentially verses 3 to 7. The word which has power, and then verses 8 to 10, the promise which will be kept. Both of these things, as you know, relate to the word of God, which has been Peter's concern throughout the letter.

So first of all, the word which has power. It's the effectiveness of the word of God. Now, Peter's first readers, and possibly even more us 2,000 years later, are thinking, do the false teachers have a point?

[3 : 59] And there must be times when even the strongest Christian faith begins to waver and wonder, when will he come? Will he come at all?

Now, notice when Peter says this is going to happen, verse 3, in the last days. Now, you're always getting people around who say they have a message for the last days.

Now, this is the message for the last days, because the last days are the period between the comings. Not just the end of that period, which no one knows at all when it will happen, but the whole of the period between the comings.

False teachers will arise. Scoffers will come with scoffing. Not a terribly elegant phrase, but it does bring out the Greek rather well, because Peter is emphasizing that one characteristic of the last days will be mocking unbelief in God's word.

And we know we are living in the last days because that is certainly characteristic of our days. But notice, it's not just mocking unbelief.

[5 : 08] Look at the end of verse 3, following their own sinful desires. Now, you see the connection there. If he's not coming, then we're just as well to live any way we like, aren't we?

If there is to be no judgment, if there is to be no day of review and day of reward, why bother? That's the question that Peter is addressing here.

These teachers sound so plausible, though. Nothing changes. It all goes on the same way. We're all familiar with that, particularly in times of barrenness and dryness in our own lives.

Nothing ever changes. And that is the aspect of human nature that those teachers are fastening on. Since the fathers fell asleep. The fathers almost certainly are not their own literal fathers, but this refers to the people we would probably call the patriarchs, the Old Testament believers.

Since they fell asleep, nothing has happened. That's essentially what the false teachers are saying. So do the false teachers have a point? It's not so much that they have a point, it's they are actually cashing in on our ignorance of when the coming will take place, to say it won't happen.

[6 : 21] And how does Peter answer this? And Peter answers it by telling us that God has already intervened. You see, the false teachers get their facts wrong.

Ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation. They do not believe, in other words, in the power of the word of God.

And you know throughout this letter, Peter is doing what he asks us to do. He is taking examples from the prophets. He is saying, look at the prophetic scriptures. And that will tell us how to live in the last days.

That will give us light shining in the darkness. Now, notice what Peter is saying. Peter isn't just saying, if you read the Old Testament, you'll get an accurate account of what God did and what happened.

Although he obviously is saying that. He's saying much more than that. He's saying that it is the word of God which itself brought about these things which are happening. In other words, the word of God doesn't just report what happened, it actually brought these about.

[7 : 29] And now these words are slightly difficult. In verse 5, they deliberately overlook this fact. The heavens existed long ago, the earth was formed out of water and through water.

Obviously, there is a reference to Genesis 1 when God says, let the waters be separated from the land and then let the water be gathered together in one place and let the dry ground appear.

But whatever the words exactly mean, it's pretty clear that Peter is saying God's work spoke creation into being. In other words, God intervened decisively.

There was a moment when God said, let there be light. There was a moment when the divine word spoke into the darkness and the earth and the waters appeared ungradually covered with teeming life.

Now, in other words, these false teachers don't even bother to get their facts right. A word of blessing that created a good and wonderful heaven and earth.

[8 : 29] That's what Peter is saying. That's how we know that God is the God whose word is powerful. But notice that same word was also the agent of judgment in the flood.

The act of creation that separated land from water and thereby created the conditions in which humanity could live and live well, that same word brought about, if you like, the dissolving of those boundaries and the judgment of water.

Now, at the beginning of our prayer, I refer to that passage in Matthew and also in Mark and Luke where Jesus speaks about his coming. And he says there, As it was in the day of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.

And he lists there, they ate, they drank, they bought, they sold, they married, they were given in marriage. In other words, all the normal and special things that people do. They were doing them. It wasn't suddenly that one day there was a great announcement, the Lord is coming tomorrow.

It's suddenly, unexpectedly, the Lord will return just as the flood came and the careless were swept away. So you see here, Peter's first line of argument, you false teachers have got your facts wrong.

[9 : 47] As Jesus once said to the Pharisees, you err greatly because you neither know the scriptures nor the power of God. So, will he come again?

Well, he created the universe, he destroyed the world in the flood, and of course, above all, he came in the Jesus Christ at the first coming.

And this is the God we believe in, the God who never allows his purposes to be thwarted. God who never is deflected on what he wants to do, even although it may appear so.

And I think this is, of course, on the big picture, the huge scale of human history from eternity to eternity. This God who intervened in creation, this God who intervened in the flood, this God who intervened in the exodus to rescue his people, this God who brought his people back from exile, and above all, this God who came in Jesus Christ for us and for our salvation.

One day, he will intervene again and intervene decisively as he did in these things. But, it can also be applied, I think, to our own lives in a partial way.

[11 : 00] You know how Jesus said, people ought always to pray and not to give up. Is there anyone here who has never felt like giving up praying?

The days pass, the months pass, the years pass, and the answer doesn't come. And Jesus says, keep on praying. Because, I'm sure we've all had experience of how, after a long silence, wondering if anyone is listening at all, God, spectacularly, sometimes, sometimes quietly, answers those prayers and surprises our pessimism with his complete relevance to all our requests.

Because that's what God is like. God works out his purposes. So, the fact that evil seems to flourish, the fact that God does not seem to be caring, and we'll come to this in a minute or two again, is that God is going to judge.

God is going to, there is a day, as Paul says in Acts 17, when he will judge the world in righteousness. And that's the subject we now turn to.

So, first of all then, the word which has power, shown throughout the whole of history, shown through, and indeed shown, often in our lives as well, for which we praise and thank God.

[12 : 20] But secondly, the promise which will be kept. And notice how often Peter uses words like, don't overlook, remember, recall, because very often Peter, what Peter is essentially saying is, one of the great values of reading scripture is that so often the answers to our problems are to be found in its pages.

Now, I'm not talking about simply opening the Bible and using it as a kind of magic book, putting your finger in and finding a text, or keeping on doing that until you find the text that suits you.

We've all had experiences, I'm sure, of reading scripture and suddenly, something that was puzzling us has become clear. The way ahead has been shown to us.

Many of these problems will find an answer if we continue to recall and to read and to listen to the words of the apostles and the prophets. And first of all then, he comes now to this God and the course of time, which is, of course, the quotation from Psalm 90, verse 8, 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.

God looks on time differently from what we do. Now, we know even in our human world that time is a relative thing, is it not? An hour can drag while you're waiting for something, a phone call, my visit, something like that, or somewhere you'd rather not be.

[13 : 58] Other times, hours, days, months flash past because time is only part of reality, the dimension in which we live. But God is the creator.

He is eternal. And this directly deals with the false teacher's arguments. God is the creator and he can uncreate. That's the point also of Psalm 46, where the psalmist says, though the earth be removed and the mountains fall into the sea, I will still trust in the Lord because he is a saving God.

He is a covenant God. The Lord, we are told, is not slow to fulfill his promise. Verse 9. Why has he waited all this time? Why, in fact, didn't, when Jesus rose from the dead, why didn't he just take his people to heaven then with him?

And the answer is here, the Lord is patient, not wishing that any should perish, that all should reach repentance.

There is one respect only in which God is slow and that is his anger. Now, notice how different that is from human anger. Human anger, we talk about having a short fuse.

[15 : 13] We talk about hot anger and so on. Because it has to be said, an awful lot of our anger is often injured vanity rather than righteous anger. But God's anger is slow and it is slow because he wants people to turn to him.

We will say a bit more about that next week when we look at verse 12, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God. We don't know when he will return and because we don't know, we need to, two things here.

First of all, we need to be ready at any moment. But secondly, we need to make best use of the time until he returns. And the particular use of the time here is sharing that gospel, gathering in the lost, telling people that this God who created, who judged, the God of the covenant, wants them as part of his family.

And that seems to me the point of the quotation from Psalm 90. Psalm 90 is a wonderful psalm. That's why I wanted us to sing that particular paraphrase which deals with the whole of the psalm.

Teach us to number our days. Teach us that we are under your anger and so on. And the, therefore, we don't know when he will return. So we must be ready.

[16 : 31] But we also must use the time. And Peter then goes on to this remarkable verse, verse 10, the promised day of the Lord. Let's read it again. The day of the Lord will come like a thief and 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 remarkable, powerful, rather terrifying passage. Very difficult for us to imagine for obvious reasons. It is totally beyond our experience.

Therefore, poetic, figurative language is used. Now, don't misunderstand me when I say poetic and figurative language. When people talk about poetic and figurative language, it's not to say the things are not going to happen.

It's to say the language of poetry is needed because the language of ordinary everyday prose is inadequate to express these realities beyond our understanding.

I want to say two particular things about this verse. The first thing is this. Peter is drawing very heavily from the Old Testament passages about the day of the Lord.

[17 : 42] The prophets looked forward to the day of the Lord, a day which would be both darkness and light, a day of judgment and a day of salvation. And they talked about that in cosmic terms.

They talked about that in terms of the whole universe being involved. And therefore, Peter is drawing from the prophets. Peter is once again saying, if you'd read your Old Testament, you would expect this.

This is what the prophets were looking to, the promised day of the Lord. In particular, the prophet Zephaniah, short little prophecy at the end of the Old Testament, especially centers around this idea of the day of the Lord.

There's a lot of judgment, but there's also, that book ends with one of the most glorious passages of blessing in the whole of the Bible. But secondly, he's also drawing from the words of the Lord Jesus.

Christ himself. The so-called Olivet Discourse. The last public speech of the Lord, the last, before he went to, before he went to his death.

[18 : 46] In Matthew 24, in Mark 13, and in Luke 21. And much of the vocabulary that Peter uses is taken from that discourse.

The words of Jesus talking about his coming and the end of the age. Jesus says, the Son of the coming of the Son of Man will be like a thief in the night. Exactly what Peter says here, the day of the Lord will come like a thief.

And then Jesus talks about the stars falling from heaven, the powers of heaven being displaced, and so on. This is a powerful, cosmic event which will startle.

See, he is coming with clouds, says John, and every eye will see him. It's mind-blowing. It's beyond our experience. That does not mean it's not going to happen.

Because it's drawing, as I say, both from the words of the prophets and the words of the Lord Jesus Christ himself. Heavens will pass away with a roar, with thunder, almost certainly recalling the giving of the law at Mount Sinai and the shaking of creation there, which Hebrews also refers to.

[19 : 57] Fire is the presence of the Lord. Throughout Scripture, when the fire burned at the gates of Eden, the book of Daniel, where from the throne of God, the judge, flows a river of fire.

Fire is the presence of God, which both destroys and purifies. It, once again, both judges and saves. But he is the creator.

We know he is the creator. And in verse 13, we shall look at next week, we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth. And because he created one, so that is our security.

He is the living God. And he will make sure that this new heavens and new earth arrive. Because that's the first thing. Peter is not, Peter is not using his imagination, as some of the commentators say.

Not that Peter didn't have imagination. What I'm saying is that Peter is using the words of the Old Testament and using the words of the Lord himself and saying, this is what it's going to be like.

[20 : 57] It's beyond anything we can imagine. And yet, it's already been foretold. That leads me to my second point. When that day comes, there will be both continuity and discontinuity.

Now, if you study the passages about the coming of Christ and the new heaven and the new earth, particularly if you compare this passage with Revelation 21 and 22, you'll find this passage suggests a drastic and dramatic event.

Whereas Revelation 21 talks about something that sounds more gradual. I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from heaven, out of heaven from God.

Now, that's not a contradiction. And it's not a contradiction, once again, when we read the Old Testament. There are passages in the Old Testament, notably Genesis 1, that speaks of creation in that gentle, ordered, structured way.

But there are also passages that speak of creation where God, overthrowing the powers of evil, establishes the universe. Like, for example, Psalm 74, where the creation of the world is described as God smiting the heads of the dragons on the waters, and so on.

[22 : 09] So, you see, the event will both be continuous and there will be discontinuity as well. And we'll say a bit more about that next week.

Some things will last into eternity. And, as Willie said this morning, the eternity is certainly not a disembodied existence in a shadowland.

The new heavens and the new earth are more, not less, real than this earth and the heavens around us. The grass is greener. It is a deeper country.

If that sounds like Narnia, then it's none the worse for that. So, you see, just as Jesus, when he came the first time, both fulfilled and confounded expectations.

So, when he comes again, the event will be beyond our understanding. You know the difficulty people had in reconciling together the coming king and the suffering servant.

[23 : 13] Reconciling those passages that talked about death and agony and those passages that talked about glory. And only when it happened did people see what it meant and only then by the guidance of the Holy Spirit himself.

But think once again even on the human level what really matters in our lives. Is it the houses we live in? The clothes we wear? Is it not above all the relationships?

If you've lived in, as I have, in many different houses and many different places, you begin to sit lightly to bricks and mortar. But the relationships matter.

And it's the relationship with Christ himself that is so important. As Don Carson says, without Christ, heaven is an empty triumph.

With him, the venue is irrelevant. That's me putting it a bit extremely, but there's a great deal of truth in it. So, there is continuity. It will be physical, more physical, rather than less.

[24 : 16] But it will be so much, so much more, unimaginably wonderful. So, how can we keep going? We don't keep going by sheer determination, by stiff upper lip.

In Britain, we are far too fond of that. Afraid to show emotions and trying to keep going without actually, without actually ever revealing what's...

No, it's because God has planned it. God has said it will happen. The God who, whose words spoke creation. The God who sent his son. The God of the exodus.

The God of the flood. It is that God who will bring about the new heaven and the new earth. Now, there's a lot more in these verses, this particular work. I don't know when it will be exposed, but I want to say something about that next week in the section that follows.

I do want to finish by saying this. This is not too heavenly minded to be of any earthly use. And by the way, if any of you have ever met anyone like that, I would like to hear about them.

[25 : 19] I have never in my life met anyone like that. The problem of the church in the 21st century, certainly my problem, is almost exactly the opposite. too earthly minded to be of any heavenly use.

No, it's exactly the opposite. The more firmly we believe that Jesus Christ will one day return, wind up the affairs of this world and usher in a better one, the more urgent it is that we engage in all lawful and worthy activities until he comes.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus. Let's pray. Amen. At the end of our Bibles, John writes, the spirit and the bride say come.

Let him who is thirsty say come. And let the one who desires take the water of life without price. He who testifies to these things says surely I am coming soon.

Amen. Amen. Amen.