

3. The Slowness of the Last Days

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Date: 17 May 2009

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[0 : 0 0] Turn, if you would, to Peter's second letter, 2 Peter, chapter 3, and we're looking tonight particularly at verses 8 and 9, which are all about the slowness of the last days.

Peter's whole letter is about living in the world's last days, and as we've seen, the letter is written to ordinary Christians, very much believers under pressure, up against it, not just from a hostile world, but also from what we might call a crisis of truth within the churches. Increasingly then, as today, there were, it seems, voices of some influence inside the churches, within the churches, as chapter 3, verse 17 puts it very plainly, carrying away into error many Christian people, causing them, as Peter says there, to lose their own stability in the faith. And when you lose your stability, of course, you're in danger of falling, catastrophically. And the fact was that it seemed many of the theological teachers, we might say the professors, the public figures of the church, the moderators, we might say, the bishops, people like that, they were already, according to Peter, in verse 3 of chapter 3, they were becoming scoffers, skeptics. They were undermining the truth of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, even within the churches. That's why they were so dangerous, because the words were spoken by those who had recognized authority, and understandably people take that seriously, when somebody was recognized authority in the church teaches something. But Peter says they were scoffers. Peter says in chapter 1 that he, God, has given his people all that we need for life and godliness, through what he calls the great and precious promises, the true apostolic gospel of Jesus Christ our Savior, the promises that come to us in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Remember chapter 3, verse 2, the prophetic word, the word spoken of four times by the holy prophets, and notice critically, the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles. That is the commandment of Jesus Christ himself that comes to us, how? Through the apostolic writings of what we now know as the New Testament.

Important to remember that all the time when you hear people saying, ah, our teachers is not Paul, not Peter, not any of these others, but Jesus. Well, Jesus' commands, comes to his church through his apostles.

But, ah, though God has given us these great and precious promises, all we need until the day Jesus comes, nevertheless, as has always been the case, Peter says, right from the beginning, there will be false teachers also among you. That's what chapter 2, verse 2 tells us.

It was so in the past, there were false prophets among the people. It will be so among you right till the very end. Jesus himself told us that. And so it is, of course, as we know, right until this very present day, and very clearly and publicly in our present day. So this is a very vital message for us. This is not some ancient document we can discard to the back of the shelf with dust on. This is a vital word for today and for our church.

[4 : 0 0] And last time, here in chapter 3, verses 4 to 7, we saw the characteristic telltale marks of the scoffers. Two things in particular. Verse 4, they deny God's word. Where is the promise of his coming? You can't take the Bible all that seriously anymore, not just at face value anyway, not its plain meaning. Of course, that's nonsense. Not if you're intelligent, not nowadays.

We've got to reinterpret it for our times. We've got to take it with all our modern knowledge and refinement and skills and make it something that means something today.

Remember, we mentioned David Attenborough and his comment. Remember David Attenborough, the great naturalist? And yet he spoke of his school headmaster, who he admired and knew was an intelligent man, but couldn't understand how he could get up in chapel, sometimes at school, and speak about his belief in the real Christian faith. How could an intelligent man speak such nonsense?

That's what David Attenborough said. David Attenborough, remember, who believes in the abominable snowman. Don't forget that. Well, alas, these attitudes are not confined to David Attenborough and Richard Dawkins and people like him outside the church attacking it. Alas, says Peter, and we know it to be true, alas, these scoffing attitudes have plenty of allies within the professing church. They deny God's word and they therefore undermine the authority of the scripture and the whole gospel itself. But also, verse 5 to 7, they deny equally vehemently God's wrath and therefore they undermine the whole notion of sin and the need for repentance and turning away from sin.

They deliberately overlook, they suppress, says Peter, the plain teaching of scripture, the plain evidence of history. That God's judgment upon sin is the explanation of the world that we live in and know and experience and understand. That God's judgment upon sin is what explains the world in a way that nothing else can possibly explain our world. That's why you see all the secularist and the humanist optimism that so dominates our politics, that so dominates our social policy in the Western world is doomed to failure.

[6 : 34] Because it's based on a suppression of the truth. Because the skeptics, the scoffers, says Peter, are deliberate self-deceivers. They're living in a world of fantasy. They deliberately suppress the reality of the sin of human beings and the judgment of God upon it.

The reality of the curse upon our world, which is the only thing that explains why our world is as it is. The liberal optimist cannot explain our present world of chaos.

A world of chaos which is so plain to us today in the economic crisis and so on that we're seeing. Underneath all of that, everybody recognizes now, lies a moral crisis. And underneath that, lies the fact of sin.

Now we need to see that. The mark of the scoffer is that he is in denial about reality. To use Paul's words in Romans 1, where he speaks very similarly, he says they suppress the truth.

And that is, according to Paul, the natural hallmark of human nature. We suppress the truth all the time. We live in denial. Let me just read to you and remind you what Paul the Apostle says in Romans 1.

[7 : 53] The wrath of God, he says, is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness, what? Suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.

For his invisible attributes, namely his eternal power and his divine nature, have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world and the things that have been made. So they are without excuse, says Paul.

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools.

He goes on to say they exchanged the truth of God for a lie. And they worshipped and served the creature, the created things, rather than the creator who is ever blessed forever.

You see, suppressing the truth. Actually, it's very interesting, isn't it, in that regard, that Paul goes immediately on to say, for this reason, God gave them up to dishonorable passions.

[9 : 05] For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature. And the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another. Men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty of their error.

See what Paul is saying? Part of that denial about reality, part of that self-deception and suppression of the truth, finds its outlet in a contorted view of our human nature and our sexuality.

The two are intimately relinked in Paul's thinking. But in all kinds of ways, human beings, our fallen nature is marked by the fact that we are suppressors of the truth.

We live in denial. We've been living in denial in the West for many, many years and decades. That's one of the reasons we're in such a state of economic collapse, isn't it? We're in denial. We deceive ourselves.

Not just the bankers who are doing it, they've deceived themselves to think money grows on trees. And it worked for a while. Well, the governments are at it too. They think that money can be magicked out of thin air.

[10 : 16] You just turn on the printing presses and out they come. It's wonderful. Quantitative easing. Don't you wish somebody would quantitatively ease your bank account? Wish somebody would quantitatively ease my bank account?

Politicians seem to be very good at quantitatively easing their expenses accounts, don't they? But you see, we all do it. We deliberately overlook, says Peter, we suppress the truth.

We suppress the truth about reality. Why do we do that? We do it as human beings because we fear the real truth. I think I've mentioned to you before something that Matthew Paris, the columnist, writes in his autobiography here, *Chance Witness*.

It's an interesting book. It's a rather sordid book in some places. But he's got a fine mind, Matthew Paris. And this is part of an article that he wrote. And he's describing how once he woke up in the middle of the night and got up and sat in the darkness, in the complete silence, and suddenly became so conscious of the intricacy of his own human body and human nature, and began to start thinking all kinds of thoughts that became so worrying and frightening that he immediately had to switch on the light and put on the radio and make noise so that he could drive these scary thoughts out of his mind.

Listen to how he describes it. Sit in the dark for a while, he says, and the deeper elements of our sentience begin to swell. I sat absolutely still in the blackness.

[11 : 54] I was listening to the white noise generated by my own electronics. Now I could hear my blood, too, coursing through the artery near each ear.

I could hear my heart, strong and regular, each smooth, powerful pulse followed by a gush past the ears. What a piece of work is man! I would have rejected the design outright.

I would have called for something solid and straightforward to fix. Too clever by half, I would have said. All of that black box technology, the super sophisticated electronics, those eggshell delicate parts, sacrifice sophistication, design me something durable, robust.

Yet the machine sitting on that bath's edge was both. Man is an almost miraculous combination of fragility with resilience. It doesn't bear thinking about.

You better not look down if you want to keep on flying, BB King. It seems to me that human viability is an impossibility sustained by inattention.

[12 : 59] We mustn't eavesdrop on those noises too often or for too long. That singing in the wire should stay mostly a secret. I switched on the light and it fled. Matthew Paris, agnostic, atheist even, I think.

But even he, sitting on the edge of his bath in the darkness and the quietness of night, having to begin to think about reality, can't handle it.

So suppress it again. Well, that is the self-deception, says Peter of the scoffer. But notice that what the Bible does and what the Christian gospel does is call us back to truth, back to facts, verse 8.

Do not overlook this one fact, beloved, says Peter. Come back to reality, says the Bible. Consider the truth. Leave aside that fantasy, that deception. And in verses 8 to 10 here of 2 Peter 3, he answers the questions of the scoffers.

In verses 8 and 9, he answers that question from verse 4. Where is this coming? And he explains its slowness. And then in verse 10, he answers the issue of verse 5 and makes it clear and plain that God's wrath and judgment against sin will ultimately be made absolutely clean to everybody.

[14 : 24] That's for next week when he speaks about the suddenness of the last day. But tonight I want to focus on its slowness. Where is the promise of his coming, says the scoffer?

Is God really, in fact, feeble? Is he powerless? Is he unable to deliver on his promise that he said he would come again?

Is God impotent? Or is he, as Friedrich Nietzsche said, is he, in fact, dead? Should we listen to Richard Dawkins' adverts on the London buses?

There's probably no God. So get on with enjoying your life. Don't worry. Well, Peter has two clear answers to the scoffer's questions.

The scoffer, he says, is utterly wrong about who God is in relation to our world of time. And secondly, the scoffer is utterly wrong, therefore, about what God is doing in our world of time.

[15 : 26] In verse 8, you see, he proclaims that God is the ruler of time. God's not a mere creature inside time, as we are. God is the creator of time, and therefore he's the Lord of time.

And indeed, he is the only true interpreter of time. God is the ruler of time. So verse 8, With the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.

If God created this universe, then he created not only space and matter, but God created time itself, didn't he? You can't have space without time. That was Einstein's great, brilliant insight.

The space-time continuum. And the relativity of time. But you see, we are creatures of time. We are time-bound.

We are space-bound. And therefore, we are just relative ourselves. So we can't possibly break out of our time-bound existence to properly understand that which is above and beyond and greater than time.

[16 : 35] Of course we can't. Of course we can't understand, as time-bound human beings, what eternity is all about. Only God can. Only He is from everlasting to everlasting, as we sang.

Only He who is outside time and above time can give us a true estimate of time. In terms of time's speed in relation to anything other than itself.

In terms of understanding time in relation to something that is fixed and absolute and not relative. Now this is very difficult for us by its very nature, for us to understand.

It's hard to even talk in these terms. We can't get our heads around it. But we do have some sense of it in our own experience, I think. Because we say things, don't we? We say, well, boy, time really dragged during that lecture.

Time really dragged during that exam. Maybe you're thinking at the moment, time really drags during this sermon. Well, I can tell you that time always flies when you're preaching a sermon.

[17 : 41] There's never enough of it. You see, we're trapped in time. We can't be objective about it. It's all different. Two hours with a pretty girl seems like that. But two hours in a math exam seems like something that will go on forever and ever.

Isn't that right, blokes? Absolutely. You see it too if you're in a train, if you're going in out of Glasgow Central Station. Sometimes you come in or you're just leaving in a train and there's another train on another track.

And it's moving along just at the same speed as you. And it's a very strange feeling, isn't it? You look out of the window and it feels as though you're moving because there's jolting and juddering. But you're looking at somebody in another carriage, in another train, just absolutely parallel with you and it doesn't seem like you're moving at all.

Well, but you see if you were in a helicopter or a plane up above looking down on those two trains, you would see very clearly, wouldn't you, that both of those trains are moving in relation to the track and in relation to the world round about it.

But it doesn't quite seem the same when you're in one of those trains because you're a relative. You're inside that movement of time. And that's how it is, says Peter, with God and time.

[18 : 54] He is the ruler of time. He created it. And he alone can authoritatively interpret it. It's the arrogance of the scoffer to have only an egocentric view of time, a self-centered view of time, a material-centered view of time.

He tries to explain everything that there is solely in terms of the material, solely in terms of things that he can see and observe and perceive with his own senses. And he says, well, that's all there is.

Well, that's like trying to judge the speed of that train with only a reference to the other train that you can see and no reference at all to the reality that you could see looking down from above.

But you see, the scoffer can't see that. He won't see that because he is egocentric. It's the very nature, the very heart of what human sin is.

It's to be self-centered. It's to see the world revolving around me. The whole universe is about me. Instead of being God-centered and seeing our whole purpose in creation as being to revolve around him and his glory and to serve him.

[20 : 13] You see, the truth is that time and world history and everything related to it can be explained properly only by the eternity that our time and history was created within, inside.

The Bible tells us the created must be explained by the uncreated, not the other way around. The visible must be explained by the invisible, not the other way around.

That's what Hebrews 11, verse 3 says, isn't it? The universe was created by the Word of God so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.

You see, the arrogance of the scoffer is to think that he can explain the unseen purely in terms of the visible, the seen. That he can do it by the empirical sciences and all sorts of things like that.

I say arrogance because that is what it is. To think that you can insist on what is absolutely unprovable, that's just arrogance. To insist that only the things that you can see and feel and touch and perceive, that those things alone are things that truly exist, that anything else is absolutely impossible, that the very concept of God and eternity is utterly impossible.

[21 : 33] That's the height of arrogance, isn't it? It's claiming total omniscience. It's one thing to doubt, of course, and say, well, I wonder at all whether there could be anything more.

But to pronounce as clearly as somebody like a Richard Dawkins does, that there absolutely is no chance remotely that there possibly is more than we can see or understand, that is to claim yourself to be utterly all-knowing, all-seeing, beyond contradiction.

Quite an extraordinary claim and certainly unverifiable by any kind of empirical evidence. But you see, the created being in time and space can no more explain the creator than a character in a play can explain the author.

William Shakespeare can tell you all about the character of Hamlet, but Hamlet has never even heard of William Shakespeare, has he? Sandy McCall Smith can tell you all about Mara Watsway and all the characters in the number one ladies detective agency, but even the great sleuth herself couldn't tell you a thing about Sandy McCall Smith because he created her.

She's inside a world of time and being and space that he, the creator, made to exist. And that's what verse 8 here is saying to us about the issue of time.

[22 : 55] With the Lord, one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day. He's quoting Psalm 90 verse 4 that we sang. A psalm all about God's permanence and man's transience.

God's infinite, everlasting nature and man's finite mortality. From everlasting to everlasting, says the psalmist, you are God.

But you return man to dust. You say, return O children of man, for a thousand years in your sight is but a yesterday when it's past as a watch in the night. And we're like grass, he says, flourishing in the morning yet by evening fading and withering.

Read the whole psalm later. It's very salutary indeed. But can we deny that? Where is Friedrich Nietzsche's bold comment now, God is dead?

Can you prove that? I can prove to you that Friedrich Nietzsche is dead. Dead and gone. So, the Bible says, come back to reality.

[24 : 04] Let's stick with the facts that God is the Lord of time and that Scripture, sorry, that the skeptic by deliberately suppressing that truth of Scripture is utterly wrong about who God is in relation to our world of time.

and therefore totally unqualified to call into question that promise that God makes that Jesus will come again. And we Christians ought to turn that question back upon the skeptics.

We ought to say to them, look, is it possible that the key to life's meaning really can just be found in this natural world alone? Is that possible? Is it realistic to think that we can explain all that we are and all that matters to us simply by virtue of the dust and the water that makes up our human bodies, for example?

Does what is visible really explain all that is invisible, all that is beyond the mere material, does it? Because if that's true, why is it that we constantly and instinctively feel deeply that that is not the case?

Why is it that you do not feel that that it's just a matter of dust and ashes when you stand at the grave of a loved one? Do you stand there thinking, well, that's all there is to it, dust and ashes, nothing much more, let's go home?

[25 : 37] Of course you don't. The life of your loved ones, the life of my loved ones, they can't be explained just by the dust and the water that their bodies are made of.

They can only be explained with reference to God their creator, the God who is the ruler of time and in relation to the eternity that we as human beings were created for and indeed in relation to the God, our creator that we were created for.

Only that can explain the reality about our lives that we know to be true and can't gain say. God is the ruler of time.

Unless we realize that we'll be wrong about everything. And secondly, when you're wrong about that, who God is in relation to our time, you'll also be wrong completely about what God is doing in our time.

And in verse 9, Peter makes clear not only that God is the ruler of time, but secondly, that God is the redeemer in time. Look at verse 9. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient towards you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

[26 : 55] You see, to the scoffer and to the skeptic who dismisses any thought of the coming again of Jesus in power and glory, to the scoffer, the slowness, the inaction of God, it seems, for 2,000 years, that means he's impotent.

It means he can do nothing. He's got no power. Or, like Friedrich Nietzsche, he thinks he's dead. But no, says Peter, you're totally and utterly wrong. You have no idea about God at all.

Because once again, your whole frame of reference is yourself. Your feeble, finite mind, your own selfish, sinful heart is the thing that's guiding all your thinking in this.

But God's slowness isn't powerlessness. It's patience, says Peter. And that patience speaks not of impotence, but of great, great power.

Scoffer, you see, says, God doesn't act to judge. There's no judgment. He can't judge. There never will be any judgment. So we can just do as we like and live as we please.

[28 : 01] But let me ask you this. Which parent is more powerful? The one who can't control his temper?

The one who lashes out immediately when a child wrongs him or crosses him and hits him? Or the parent who's controlled and measured and patient and administers discipline and right punishment at the right time and in the right way?

Which of those is more powerful? Patience is not impotence. It's evidence of power and of control. Proverbs 16, verse 32, says, whoever is slow to anger is greater than the mighty.

And you see, the God of the Bible is defined, his own name is defined by his slowness to anger. It's inherent in his very name, the Lord. That's how God revealed himself on the mountain, do you remember, to Moses, the Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

That's who God is. But that's what the skeptic loves to suppress, isn't it? They're very good at denying God's mercy and love just as they are good at denying his justice and his judgment on sin.

[29 : 26] If you read that disgraceful book by Richard Dawkins, you see, it's replete with ignorance and total contempt and sheer deliberate overlooking of the facts of Scripture about who God is and what he's like and what God is doing in time.

And alas, it has to be said that much of the ignorant dismissal of the Old Testament Scriptures that we find from some within the church who ought to know a jolly lot better is not much different to that.

But God is not slow, says Peter, as some count slowness. He's not powerless to do what he's promised. Nor is he vindictive or capricious as people like Richard Dawkins want us to believe.

He is a just judge. Peter's very clear on that. He will punish sin. But, says Peter, he's patient towards you. He's not wishing, says verse 9, that any should perish.

God is not a capricious, malevolent bully as Richard Dawkins and other skeptics want us to believe. No, he's a compassionate, merciful Savior. Those are the facts, says Peter the Apostle.

[30 : 38] That's the true God of the Bible, the Old Testament and the New Testament. Here's what he said through Ezekiel in chapter 18, verse 23, right in the heart of the Old Testament. God says, Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked?

And not rather he turn from his way and live? That's why there's a slowness in the coming of the last days, says Peter. It's not that God is impotent. He is infinite in his mercy towards you.

That's why. And so God, God creates time and he gives time to us so that we may reach repentance.

Because you need time, don't you, in order to repent. I guess that's why there can be no repentance for angels and spirits.

They're not in time. They have no time in which to repent for one thing. But God has created us in a world of space and time that in his wonderful, merciful patience he might give us time as a gift.

[31 : 48] Time to find that repentance. He's patient towards you. Not wishing that any should perish but that all should reach repentance.

Have you ever thought about that? Have you ever thought that the very purpose of your existence here in time is for that one thing that you should find repentance? And that through that you should discover through the great and precious promises of God to you in Christ that you should reach your destiny in sharing the glory, the divine nature as Peter calls it.

That's what the psalmist of Psalm 90 is meaning when he says teach us to number our days so that we might get a heart for wisdom, so that we might understand what the whole of life is about, what the years that God has given us are all for.

The scoffer scoffs, you see. Maybe you yourself feel that way. Maybe you join him in his scoffing.

Well, says Peter, don't overlook this one fact. That God is the ruler of time. That he created time and he alone can explain it.

[33 : 05] And God is the redeemer in time. That the time he's given you is for one chief purpose above all others. That you should reach repentance.

So let me ask, what have you been doing with the time that God has given you thus far here on this planet earth?

The question that he poses to each one of us is this, will you repent in time? Will you repent? If any of you have visited Chester Cathedral, you'll know that there's an old clock there that has an inscription on it, a poem called Time's Paces.

It reads like this. When as a child I laughed and wept, time crept. When as a youth I waxed more bold, time strolled.

When I became a full-grown man, time ran. When older still I daily grew, time flew. Soon I shall find in passing on time gone.

[34 : 24] Oh Christ, wilt thou have saved me then? Well, will he have saved you then?

Have you found that repentance yet? In time? You're still uncertain about the answer to that question, friends. Don't let today pass until you are certain.

Because now, now says the Bible, today is the day of salvation. Tomorrow, well, tomorrow might be too late.

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

That's why we're here while we are still here. So think about that before today turns into tomorrow, will you?

[35 : 34] let's pray. Today, if you will hear his voice, oh, harden not your heart.

Lord, we thank you for your grace and your mercy, your patience towards us, despite all our impatience towards you. Grant us, we pray, in time, the spirit of repentance, we might grasp hold with both hands of the great and precious promises that are ours in Jesus Christ and find in him the way everlasting.

We ask it in his name. Amen.