

2 Peter No. 12, “The Second Advent”

2 Peter 3:8-10

December 2, 2018

It is an ancient tradition during the season of Advent (a word that means “coming” or “arrival”) to preach on both of the *advents* of the Lord, his first coming when born a human baby to the Virgin Mary and his second when he will come in his glory to judge the living and the dead. Christ’s second coming is often referred to as the Second Advent. Indeed, when I typed those words into my manuscript last week, my spell checker highlighted a mistake: I had not capitalized the two words, Second and Advent. The period between his first and second coming is sometimes referred to the *inter-adventual* period, the time between the two advents.

Tonight, we will be thinking of the Second Advent from Second Peter 3 but in particular about its timing. It wasn’t just the scoffers who were interested in the fact that the Lord had not yet returned to earth. The early Christians, as every generation of Christians since, were also confused by the fact that the Lord had not yet returned. The Lord may have said that no one knows the hour of his return, that he himself did not know it – speaking as a man –, but that did not prevent his disciples from assuming that though no one knew for sure, it must be soon. But here we are some 2,000 years later. What are we to think about that?

Text Comment

- v.8 The reference is to Psalm 90:4, the only psalm in the biblical Psalter written by Moses. That reminds us that the problem Peter is addressing was hardly a new one in his time. In fact, it was a problem that even Jewish theologians were preoccupied with in those days. [Bauckham, 306-314] Where was the promised Messiah? If Jesus wasn’t the Messiah, then where was he? A millennium and a half and more – the time since the days of Moses – is a long time to wait!

It is worth remembering that Peter had been told by the Lord, as we read in the last chapter of the Gospel of John, that he would not live to see the Second Coming. He would die in this world. He was not, therefore, of a mind to be eagerly waiting for the Second Advent!

By the way, this verse, as so many other verses in the Bible, was very early taken to be a signal of the timing of the Lord’s Second Coming. It would occur a thousand years later. This accounts in part for the widespread expectation that the Lord would return in the year 1,000. That, of course, is not what Peter meant, but Christians have made a practice of finding in prophetic texts all manner of meanings that they were never intended to convey! There are no time-charts in the Bible and no information by which to construct one! But it is a striking fact of Christian intellectual history how many of the church’s wisest men succumbed to a fascination with times and seasons and came to believe that events happening in the world of their day portended the end of the world. Jonathan Edwards, for example, for all his intellectual power, was a practitioner of so-called newspaper-exegesis, finding current events in biblical prophetic texts. Like everyone else who has thought he could read current events as the fulfillment of prophecy he was

proved wrong by the mere passage of time. But this lesson has never been learned and people do today the same thing Christian folk have done for two-thousand years: find ways of putting dates to the biblical prophesies of the Second Advent. Do you have any idea how many scores of public figures have been identified as the anti-Christ whose appearance will presage the coming of the Lord? From the beginning, political figures from Roman emperors to Napoleon to Hitler to Gorbachev, to whatever American president happens to be in office, religious figures such as various popes, and cultural icons such as Bill Gates have all been identified as the anti-Christ, the figure who will usher in the last climactic struggle that will lead to the return of Christ. A 100% rate of failure, one would think, would give people pause, but never underestimate the gullibility of people!

Last time we considered Peter's refutation of the heretics' argument that we are to expect no divine interventions in human history. Life will continue as we know it; as it always has. But, of course, God has intervened in judgment and salvation. He did so in the days of the flood, proof enough that God has both the power to do so and the willingness to do so. But now Peter moves on to console the faithful.

The problem that Peter was addressing was a version of a much larger confusion that every Christian feels at one time or another. Why does God allow the world to continue as it does, with all the wrong and all the woe we see everywhere we look. Why does God tolerate this? If he has the power, as he surely does, why does he not intervene and crush man's rebellion against him. He has promised that this is what *he will* do, so why doesn't he do it? Another way of putting that same question is: why hasn't the Lord returned *after all of this time*?

There is something about the way the Lord's Second Coming was taught that led even the early Christians to expect him to return *soon*. After all, the Lord himself said that he was coming quickly. It even seems that the Apostle Paul earlier in his ministry may have entertained the hope that he might be alive when the Lord returned. It is at least possible that he implies this when he says to the Thessalonian believers, "*we* who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord will not precede those who have fallen asleep." Later it is clear he was no longer entertaining that hope. He expected to die before the Second Advent. If Paul did once entertain the hope that he would witness the Second Coming but came to realize that he would not, in that disappointment, in that dawning realization, he has been followed by vast multitudes of Christians ever since. It seems almost a rite of passage for Christians to expect the Second Coming in their lifetime only to realize that it is not to be.

Peter offers two reasons why the Lord has not yet come; two very important reasons. *The first is that God is eternal, not bound to time as we are.* We hardly know what that means, to be sure, but we have only to realize that past, present, and future are all immediately present to God to realize that our time-boundedness does not apply to him! It is in this mysterious sense that a thousand years are but a day to God. It is a human way of saying that the creator of time is not bound to it as are his creatures. What we think of as a long time is not a long time to him. The deists used to liken God to a watch-maker. He made the watch, he wound it up, and set it in operation. But the watch-maker obviously is not subject to the clock he made. Well, not in any deistic sense, but it is something like that in the matter of God and time. He created time, he

created us in time and for time; he set time going. As we now know in ways we did not for long centuries before, time and objects like ourselves are related to one another, depend upon one another, if you will. Now we know that without objects, time has no meaning. There is no absolute measurement of time because time is always related to an object. Time, we now know, can be affected by gravity. So time is also something God created. And so before there was either time or space, time or objects, there was the eternal God!

Indeed, it is easy for us to think that omnipotence works slowly because we see things happening over months and years and decades and centuries. Still, it is worth our remembering that, made in the image of God as we are, eternity is stamped on our hearts as well. This accounts for the fact that we too find time a strange thing. It can seem so long in one moment and can pass as swiftly as weaver's shuttle in another. We can long for years for something to happen, time can seem to pass so slowly, but we can look back over our lives and struggle to believe that we have aged as quickly as we have. As one commentator wisely put this point: "God sees time with an intensity we lack." [Green, 146] He sees what it all means, where it's been, where it's going, what it will finally lead to. We see just the moment before us and only a small part of its meaning. He sees every moment at once and all of its meaning; the connection between one thing and everything else, past, present, and future.

So, when the Lord Christ promised that he was coming quickly, precisely what was he promising? Quickly in whose perspective? Quickly compared to what? Remember, the same Jesus also prepared his disciples for a long wait for his return. He told a parable about a master who went on a long journey and was slow in returning, a delay that tempted his servants to misbehave thinking that their master would not come any time soon. This, of course, was precisely the temptation to which these false teachers had succumbed.

To sum up, the Bible is always warning us to be ready for the end, but it also warns us not to be curious about times and seasons. We must be ready for and preparing for the Second Coming of the Lord, for his judgment of the living and the dead, for his bringing human history to its conclusion; but we are specifically and emphatically told that it is not possible to know and so it is useless to speculate about when this will occur. Indeed, it is not only useless, it is a distraction from our proper business of living our lives in the world under the specter of the eternal future. [Lloyd-Jones, 176-177]

Peter's *second reason* why the Lord had not yet come, a reason that is even more compelling in our time than it would have been in Peter's, is that God desires the salvation of the world and is waiting for that reason. This is another way of looking at the statement that Jesus made in his Olivette Discourse in Matthew 24 that the end would not come until the gospel had been preached throughout the whole world. What God is concerned about is the salvation of sinners and he will not bring history to its end until every sinner who will ever repent has done so.

We may be impatient for his return, but we, of all people, should be grateful that the Lord has been patient, *or we would have been excluded from heaven*. We often forget that there are three divisions of the church; we usually speak of only two. The church *triumphant* is those believers who have died and are now disembodied souls in heaven. The church *militant* is those believers who are present in the world today, fighting the good fight and awaiting their ascension to

heaven. But there is a third division, the church *latent*, those who are yet to become believers, either because they are alive in the world but not yet Christians or because they have not yet been born but will in their time become followers of Jesus Christ. For all we know, and I think this more likely than not, the church latent today *is far and away the largest part of the eternal church*.

Consider that had the Lord come in the year 1900 the hundreds of millions of believers in South America, in Africa, and in Asia would never be found in heaven. There are those who are saying today that there are more Christians *alive* in the world today than have ever lived in previous generations! Remarkable. There are more *believers* in the world today than there were *people* in the world in Peter's day; more by far! And what may be still to come in the triumph of the gospel in the world? We want the greatest possible glory for God and for Christ our Savior, and what will bring that greater glory but an immense number of believers in heaven at last! But, you see, combining v. 8 and v. 9 we understand that God sees all the Christians yet to be as clearly as he sees those who are now before him in heaven and those alive in the world today. As Augustine put it, "God is patient because he is eternal." [Cited in Green, 146]

So there are Peter's two reasons for us not to be concerned at what seems to us a delay in God's fulfillment of his promise. We pipsqueaks know so little of what is happening in this world, or why. We have so little grasp of God's ways, God's perspectives, and God's purposes. That is the first thing. And the second is that God is more gracious than we are. If you remember, Israel languished for centuries in bondage in Egypt, generations of God's people came and went, *because the iniquity of the Amorites was not yet full*. That is, God would not judge the Canaanites, he would not dispossess them of their land, and he would not put them to the sword until every last opportunity for their repentance had been exhausted. Generations are a long time to wait for someone else to repent. We would not wait; but God will. And in the same way, he has waited long for the repentance of multitudes and, to a very great extent, he has not waited in vain. Consider the hundreds of millions, if not a billion new believers over just this past half-century. Would we now want Christ to have come sooner than he has? Would you want neither you nor your children ever to have known the grace of God because Christ had already brought human history to its consummation?

True enough, there is mystery here. It is God who determines who will be saved and when and where and how he or she will be saved. The Bible says that more often than it says that God desires the salvation of everyone. Nevertheless, this too the Bible says: that he wishes all to repent and to come to the knowledge of the truth. How to reconcile those two realities I cannot say. It is a question not unlike the question of what it means for God to be above and outside of time. It is simply beyond our capacity to understand. But for some reason and in some way God does not always gratify his own desires. But those desires do explain why this sad world continues on its way as it does and has for so long. That sad way is the way of opportunity for salvation.

So let's put the Lord's *delay* – we can fairly use that word (it is, after all, the idea the Lord Jesus himself suggested in his parable of the master on a long journey) – in perspective. Consider these facts.

1. Long lengths of time have been a feature of the Lord's fulfillment of his promises from the beginning. The seed of the woman that would crush the head of the serpent did not appear for thousands of years; the king who would come from Judah's line did not appear for almost two millennia; the possession of the Promised Land was many centuries after the first promise of the land to Abraham; the prophet like Moses did not make his appearance for more than 1400 years; the king promised to David was a thousand years in coming; and we have been waiting for the Second Coming of that king for now two-thousand years. Difficult in some ways, to be sure; a reason for longing in the Christian heart, to be sure. But get over it; every believer before you has had to wait. Our situation is hardly unusual. *But, in every case, the promise was fulfilled, the long-awaited event did in fact occur.* That is the key point!

2. The Scripture carefully and repeatedly prepares us for long lengths of time before the promises of God will be fulfilled in history. It spends a great deal of time preparing us for death. So much of what it says about the Christian life presumes that most of us reading its words are going to die before the Lord returns. Think of those classic statements on the death of the saints in John 11, or 2 Corinthians 5 or Philippians 1. None of them raises the possibility that death will not be our experience even though we know that there will be a generation of believers who will not die because they will be alive in the world when Jesus comes again.

3. The significance of the Second Advent is not in any way diminished for those who will not be alive in the world when it comes. The meaning of the event is as profound for those who die before it as it is for those who will witness it. It defines human life. Any human life not being lived in view of the coming judgment is a life gone awry. The reason these false teachers mocked the Christian belief in the Second Advent was because they also mocked the entire idea of the Last Judgment. In the final analysis, who cares whether it is coming tomorrow or a thousand years from now. Every human being will be there, and eternity will hang in the balance for everyone.

4. And if God is waiting to send his Son a second time because he has compassion on the world, then surely, we his children ought not to wish the Lord's coming a single day before the time is right and salvation is complete. Which person or groups of people, after all, who might live with us in heaven forever, would you be willing to exclude so that you might get to witness the Second Advent with your own eyes? Thinking this way puts the shoe on the other foot, doesn't it? *Are we to complain that Christ has not yet come again or rejoice that he has not?*

Whenever we are confused about what God is doing or what he is not doing, whenever we are flummoxed by his ways, the very first thing we ought to remember is that we know almost nothing about why God orders the life of the world and our own lives as he does. God is so infinitely far above us that it is always a great mistake to judge him from our perspective. As Peter reminds us here, he is eternal, and we are temporal and the difference between the two situations is so profound as to make it virtually impossible for us to appreciate what God is doing or why. We must never approach these questions, these confusions of ours as if we could ever understand the mind of God or the perspective that he has on our affairs. There is, as has often been said, an infinite qualitative difference between God and ourselves and we invariably get ourselves in trouble when we ignore that fact and presume to pass judgment on God as if he were like ourselves or subject to our way of thought.

But then we are to remember that all of God's ways are merciful and just. Our question, the pressing question for believers, is not *whether* God will intervene in the history of the world, but *when* he will intervene. But it is precisely here that the Bible reminds us repeatedly that God acts in keeping with his mercy and justice. When did the flood come? When God who had said, "My Spirit will not contend with man forever," finally reached the end of his patience. When did Israel enter Canaan to take possession of the Promised Land? When the iniquity of the Amorite was full, a process that took centuries. These were not dates on a calendar, they were moral conditions that finally were fulfilled. [Lloyd-Jones, 179] Paul says that it was the fullness of time when Christ was born. Precisely what does that mean? It was the right time, to be sure, but *why* was it the right time? Well, all sorts of answers have been given to that question, but they are all mere guesses. Certainly, among the reasons is that God was allowing the world to learn its own helplessness apart from divine intervention. But precisely why in 4 B.C? Who can say? We don't know why Christ was born when he was and not 500 years before or a thousand years later. But God knew it to be the right time because he knows *everything*!

Why was Jerusalem destroyed in A.D. 70 and the Jews driven from the Promised Land? Well, it happened, Jesus said, when enough time had passed, resistance to repentance among the Jews was so complete, that it was appropriate that the blood of all the prophets shed from the foundation of the world would be required of that generation. When would the end of history come? Well, said Paul, "When the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled." When will that be? He didn't go on to say. No doubt he didn't himself know. In the same way, when will the gospel have been proclaimed to the whole world? Jesus did not explain precisely how we would measure that result because it isn't up to us to measure it. We might think he meant that when the gospel had reached every nation on earth, but to what extent? When every living human being has heard the gospel well presented? When at least every part of the world has been evangelized to some extent? We simply don't know. That is God's business not ours. It is God's business to know when the day of salvation has reached its end. But it is precisely God's patience with sinful man that, at the last, will leave unbelievers without excuse.

What we must not forget is that God does not intervene in human history only now and again; only in those great cataclysms such as the flood or the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. This is his world. Its history is proceeding according to his plan and purpose. He is intervening every moment of every day. Thousands of times every day new life is being granted to souls all over the world as the wind of the Holy Spirit blows as it will.

So, when you are tempted to complain; when you are tempted to think God should be moving faster than he is, remember the eternity of God, how little you understand or can understand of his ways; remember how time does not bind God as it does us; does not affect God as it does us. Remember his patience and mercy toward his rebellious creatures; remember how many there will be in heaven because he waited and did not return when first Christians began longing for his return. Remember how many believers have waited as you are waiting and how happy they will be to be found in Christ's train when he does return to earth a second time. And remember this: the logical corollary of v. 9, of Peter's statement that God waits in hope of salvation, is that we his people should be at work seeking the salvation of others. If we want the Lord Christ to appear in the sky, we should at least be hard at work finishing the salvation of the nations in

every way that we can! Or to put it in another way: we have no right to complain or reason to if we don't share God's compassion for the lost!