

2 Peter 3:3-18 (Frank Binford Hole) 157956

2 Peter: Briefly Expounded, 2 Peter 3 (3:3-18)

Chapter 2, THEN, is a very dark one. It introduces by way of parenthesis a very necessary warning. With the third chapter the apostle Peter returns to his main theme, the immense importance of true prophecy. The true believer, being born again, has a pure mind. Yet though pure it needs to be stirred up to constant mindfulness of what God has said whether by the holy prophets of Old Testament days or by the apostles and prophets of the Lord Jesus in New Testament Scripture. The chapter plainly shows us what is the effect of bringing prophetic truth to bear upon the pure mind of the believer; he is thereby separated in heart and life from the world that must come not only spiritually but also materially under judgment and so disappear (see, verses 10-14).

This, be it noted, is exactly the opposite of what is found in chapter 2. There it is the iniquitous teaching of the false prophet with the inevitable effect of entangling its votaries in the world and its corruptions. Here it is the light of truth given through the prophet raised up of God, which has the effect of separating those who receive it from the world and its corruptions.

This distinction stands true everywhere and always. So much so, indeed, that we may be able to judge of the truth and soundness of any teaching set before us by asking ourselves this simple question,— if I receive this teaching as truth will it have the effect in my mind of separating me from the world or of confirming me in it? There are other tests, of course, which we must not ignore, but this one alone is quite conclusive.

It would seem that immediately the apostle Peter returned to the subject of true prophecy he was conscious of the fierce antagonism to it on the part of adversaries. Hence first of all he issues a warning and that especially as to the opposition to be expected in the last days from scoffers, walking after their own lusts. Wishing to give free rein to their carnal desires they deride that which most would put a check upon them.

There have always been scoffers of this sort. Verse 4 however predicts that in the last days they will base their scoffing upon the steady continuity of all things from time immemorial, which, they will assert, makes any sudden catastrophe, in days to come, such as the coming of the Lord, an unthinkable thing. Verse 5 follows this up by stating that to fortify their denial they will also deny that such a catastrophic intervention as the flood could ever have taken place in times past. They “willingly [i.e., willfully] are ignorant” (ch. 3:5) of it. The thing is hid from them because they will to have it so.

This prediction of verses 3 to 6 is really most cheering for us. Here is a prophecy of the Scripture the fulfillment of which is being dinned into our ears almost every day. During the last century there has been a greatly revived expectation of the coming of the Lord amongst true Christians, and during at least the last half century the idea of His coming has been resisted with increasing scorn, for it cuts right across the evolutionary theories which are all the rage. To a mind obsessed with evolution the flood of the past, as recorded in Genesis, and the personal coming of Christ in the future are equally unbelievable. They remain willfully ignorant of the one and they scoffingly deny the other. For over nineteen centuries scoffers have scoffed. Only during the last half century have they scoffed on these grounds. But the scoffers are to scoff on these grounds in the last days. Therefore the conclusion is definite and unmistakable: we are in the last days. This is indeed most cheering. We may well praise God! This day is this Scripture fulfilled in our ears (see, Luke 4:21).

How did the flood take place? The answer is, “by the Word of God” (ch. 3:5). By “the same Word” the existing heavens and earth are reserved unto fire in the coming Day of Judgment. The Word of God overthrew the flimsy unbelief of men in the past and it will do so again. The eye of faith sees written upon the finest construction of men’s hands, the ominous words, “RESERVED UNTO FIRE” (ch. 3:7).

The mocking question of the scoffer springs of course out of the fact that many centuries have elapsed since the Lord left this earth with the promise that He would come again quickly. We have therefore to recognize the fact, stated in verse 8, that God’s ideas of time are very different to ours. A thousand years are as one day to Him, as indeed Psa. 90:4 had told us; one day is also as a thousand years, as is illustrated in verse 10 of our chapter. We must not therefore count Him slack if much time has elapsed to our way of thinking.

The reason for the long waiting time is not slackness but long-suffering. The second advent will mean the striking of a tremendous blow in judgment. This though necessary is no joy to God. He does not desire that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. The alternative is very clearly stated in these words. It is repent or perish.

Yet the judgment blow will be struck when the time arrives. The Lord will come when men do not expect Him, as a thief in the night, and thus usher in His day. That “day” will comprise a thousand years as other Scriptures show. It will commence with His coming and not close until the passing away of the earth and its surrounding heavens, dissolved by fire. This will not take place until the end of His thousand years’ reign is reached, as stated in Rev. 20:7-11. That same destruction of the heavens and the earth will usher in the “day of God” of which Rev. 21:1-8 speaks—the eternal state. The “day of the Lord” (ch. 3:10) and the “day of God” are like two circles touching each other and just overlapping at the point where the heavens and earth are destroyed, so that their destruction may be said to be in both of them.

The day of the Lord is the period especially characterized by the exaltation of Christ, as Lord and Administrator of the will of God, when righteousness will reign. It lasts for 1000 years. The day of God is the succeeding eternal state in which God shall dwell with men in a new heaven and new earth and there righteousness shall dwell without a solitary foe to challenge its peace.

These things are plainly declared in the prophetic Word and we know them. But to what end are they made known to us? The answer to this question is found in verse 11 and in verses 14 to 18. All is designed to have a present effect upon our characters and lives.

We know that the dissolution of the earth and all its works is decreed by the Word of God. Then we shall be marked by “holy conversation” (ch. 3:11)—i.e., a separate manner of life—and godliness. We shall be as those who expect and hasten the coming day. The Christian who spends all his energies in making the best of this world may affirm that he knows these things, but he hardly believes them in the true sense of the term. Lot struck his roots deeply into the soil of Sodom but it was because he did not know its doom was decreed. What would he have done had he known it? In very deed the light of true prophecy has a separating and sanctifying effect.

We know too that we shall enter into the blessedness of the eternal state in the new heavens and the new earth. Then we shall be diligent—here Peter returns to the word he had used in chapter 1:5—to walk now in peace, spotless and unblameable. The eternal state will be a scene of peace because no spot nor blame shall be there. Well, we shall aim at the characteristics of the new heavens and new earth before they actually arrive.

Further, we shall account that the present longsuffering of our Lord is salvation, consequently we shall not chafe under the waiting time it imposes upon us. We shall know that every day of waiting and perhaps suffering which is entailed for us means the salvation of multitudes. And not only this—for the “accounting” will not stop with a mere mental recognition of the fact but express itself in action—we shall bend our energies to the setting before men of that which is ordained for their salvation, until the Lord comes. The gospel of God is “the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth” (Rom. 1:16).

As Peter opened his first epistle (1:12) it appears as if he referred to Paul’s labors amongst these dispersed Jews. Now at the close of the second Epistle he specifically names him and not only “all his epistles” (ch. 3:16) in a general way but also some special writing or epistle which he had addressed to them, according to the wisdom given him from on high. So evidently Paul wrote to the Hebrews. It may of course have been a writing not intended for preservation as part of the Scriptures, and hence not extant today. It is much more likely to be that wonderful Epistle to the Hebrews that we possess for our soul’s rejoicing. In that Epistle he does indeed “speak of these things” (ch. 3:16). See particularly chapter 12:25 to 29. He speaks of them in his other epistles too.

Notice how Peter writes of Paul, the man who had to withstand and rebuke him once at Antioch (See Gal. 2:11). Not a trace of bitterness is there, nor a trace of that Judaizing spirit which Paul had to withstand. Martyrdom was approaching for both of them, and it is, “our beloved brother Paul” (ch. 3:15). Delightful—is it not? The freest flowing forth of Christian affection and the fullest acknowledgment of the grace and gift bestowed upon another than himself. We can see the warm and loving heart that beat in Peter without the taint of egotism, which marred it when he was young, and thought he loved more than all the other apostles.

Yet he had to say that in Paul’s epistles there were things “hard to be understood” (ch. 3:16). In so saying he wrote doubtless as the apostle to the circumcision identifying himself with the believers of his own nation. All the truth concerning the church, its place in the purposes of God, its privileges, its composition of an election gathered from Gentiles as well as Jews, all that which Paul speaks of, in short, as “the mystery of Christ” (Col. 4:3) was bound to be “hard” to a Jew. It cut across every fiber of their national feeling which had been fostered for centuries. The truth was simple enough from an intellectual point of view but the eyes of their hearts needed opening to see it. This was recognized by Paul in Eph. 1:18, where the word “understanding” should be “hearts.” Except we too have the eyes of our hearts opened, we have to sadly confess when we read God’s Word it is hard to be understood.

Scripture too may be wrested or distorted to the destruction of those who so treat it. Those who do so are “unlearned and unstable” (ch. 3:16). “Unlearned,” or “untaught,” means of course untaught, not in the wisdom of the world, but in the things of God. Here Peter may have been especially referring to a Gentile danger, the sort of thing that Paul himself warns Gentiles against in Rom. 11:13-29. If Gentiles misunderstand and misuse God’s truth so as to become “wise in their own conceits” they are very near destruction. Still, even if Peter did especially refer to this, his words are capable of a much wider application. Let us all beware of twisting the Word of God!

Now, we have been forewarned. Thus we are forearmed against the error of the wicked, lest we should fall. The error of the wicked was fully exposed in chapter 2. It is not enough, however, to be warned against evil; we must be in the positive enjoyment of truth. The way not to go back is to go on. Like a man on a bicycle, the Christian must go on if he would avoid falling off. Hence we must “grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (ch. 3:18).

This word just summarizes the main teaching of the Epistle. Spiritual growth was the great theme of chapter 1 and to it the apostle returns in his closing words. All true growth is in grace, the grace of God. Then as we expand in grace, we grow in graciousness of spirit. All true growth too is in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus, in whom the grace of God has reached us.

Who shall set a limit to our expansion in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord? Both are alike illimitable. Planted here, we are like trees that have struck their roots down into a subsoil of fertile richness that is without a bottom!

“To Him be glory both now and forever, Amen” (ch. 3:18).

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