

The Day of the Lord



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *2 Pet. 3:1, 2; John 21:15–17; 2 Pet. 3:3–13; Ps. 90:4; Matt. 24:43–51; 2 Pet. 3:14–18.*

Memory Text: “Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness?” (*2 Peter 3:11, NRSV*).

In ages past people who didn't believe in God were seen as untrustworthy, even potentially dangerous. Why? The idea was simple: if they didn't believe in God, then they didn't believe in any future judgment in which they would have to answer before Him for their deeds. Without this incentive, people would have a greater tendency to do wrong.

Though such thinking is rather antiquated (and “politically incorrect”) today, one cannot deny the logic and reason behind it. Of course, many people don't need the fear of a future judgment in order to do right. But at the same time, the prospect of answering to God could certainly help motivate correct behavior.

As we have seen, Peter was not afraid to warn about the judgment that evildoers would face before God, because the Bible is clear that such a judgment will come. In this context, Peter speaks unambiguously about the end of days, judgment, the second coming of Jesus, and the time that the “elements shall melt with fervent heat” (*2 Pet. 3:10*). Peter knew that we are all sinners, and thus, with such prospects before us, he asks: “What manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness?” (*2 Pet. 3:11, NKJV*).

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, June 17.

The Line of Authority

Peter warned his readers about the kind of dangerous teachings the church would face. He cautioned against those who, while promising liberty, would lead people back into the bondage of sin, the opposite of the freedom that we have been promised in Christ.

Unfortunately, this wasn't the only false teaching that would confront the church. Another dangerous one would come. However, before Peter gets to this specific warning, he says something else first.

“This second epistle, beloved, I now write unto you; in both which I stir up your pure minds by way of remembrance: That ye may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us the apostles of the Lord and Saviour” (2 Pet. 3:1, 2).

What point is Peter making here about why his readers should listen to what he is writing? See also John 21:15–17.

In 2 Peter 3:1, 2, Peter reminds them of the inspired words that had come before in the “holy prophets.” Thus, he was again pointing them back to the Bible, to the Old Testament. He was reminding them that they had the “sure word of prophecy” (2 Pet. 1:19). He wanted to be clear that their beliefs were grounded in the Word of God. Nothing in the New Testament justifies the idea that the Old Testament was no longer valid or of little importance. On the contrary, it is the testimony of the Old Testament that helps establish the validity of the New and the claims that Peter was making about Jesus.

But there's more. Peter then asserts a clear line from the “holy prophets” of the Old Testament to his own authority as one of the “apostles of the Lord and Saviour.” He was clear about the calling that he received from the Lord to do what he was doing. No wonder he spoke with such conviction and certainty. He knew the source of his message.

Why must the Word of God, and not culture or our own judgment or reason, be the ultimate authority in our lives? (After all, why else would we keep the seventh-day Sabbath other than because of the Word of God?)

The Scoffers

After seeking to make his readers “mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us the apostles of the Lord and Saviour” (2 *Pet.* 3:2), Peter gets into his specific warning. Perhaps, knowing how dangerous this teaching would be, he sought to impress upon it the authority with which he was writing.

Read 2 Peter 3:3, 4. What arguments will skeptics of Christ’s return advance?

There’s an important similarity between those who promoted false liberty and those who were expressing skepticism about the Second Coming. The first group walked “according to the flesh in the lust of uncleanness” (2 *Pet.* 2:10, *NKJV*); meanwhile, those who were denying the return of Christ were those who were “walking according to their own lusts” (2 *Pet.* 3:3, *NKJV*).

(It’s not just a coincidence that sinful passions can lead to false teachings, is it?)

The scoffers, Peter warned, will ask the pointed question, “Where is the promise of his coming?” (2 *Pet.* 3:4). In doing so, they will challenge the long-standing belief of Christians that Jesus will return to this earth, and soon. After all, especially because he is talking about the last days, these scoffers will bring up the undeniable reality that many Christians have died, and things do indeed continue to go on as they always have.

On the surface, it’s not an unreasonable question. Even holy Enoch, Ellen G. White wrote, saw that the righteous and the wicked “would go to the dust together, and that this would be their end” (*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 85), and he was troubled by it. If even Enoch, who lived before the Flood, struggled with this question, how much more so those living during the thousands of years afterward, and even down to the “last days”?

And what about us today, as Seventh-day *Adventists*? Our very name promotes the idea of Christ’s second advent. And yet, He still has not come. And yes, we do face the scoffers, just as Peter had predicted we would.

In your own faith experience, how do you deal with the fact that Christ has not returned yet? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.

A Thousand Years as a Day

In 2 Peter 3:8–10, how does Peter respond to the argument that the scoffers will bring? What does he say that even now can help us to understand why Christ has not yet returned?

Peter responds to the issue of the unchanging nature of the world. He reminds his listeners that it is not true that the world has continued unchanged since Creation. (Notice how Peter goes right back to the Word of God as his source and authority.) There was a time of great wickedness, after which God destroyed the world with a flood (*2 Pet. 3:6*). And indeed, the Flood brought about a great change to the world, one that remains with us today. Peter then says that the next destruction will be by fire, not water (*2 Pet. 3:10*).

Peter also wrote, “One day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day” (*2 Pet. 3:8*). In saying this, Peter may have been reflecting on the words of Psalm 90:4: “For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night.” In other words, our conception of time is not like God’s; so, we need to be careful in the judgments we make about time.

From a human perspective, there does seem to be a delay in the return of Christ. But we are looking at things only from our human perspective. From God’s perspective, there is no delay. In fact, Peter is saying that extra time has been granted because God is showing His patience. He does not wish that any should perish (*2 Pet. 3:9*). The extra time, then, has been allowed to provide opportunity for many to repent.

Yet, warns Peter, God’s patience should not be taken as an opportunity to postpone a decision about Jesus. The day of the Lord will come as unexpectedly as a thief in the night. A thief who comes at night probably expects to sneak away unnoticed. But while the day of the Lord will come like a thief, it will certainly be noticed. As Peter says, “the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat” (*2 Pet. 3:10*). Thus, Peter’s message is like Paul’s: “Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (*2 Cor. 6:2*).

So What?

A young man tried to witness to his mother. He told her about the death of Jesus and the promise of His return. He was fairly proud of himself, thinking that he had done quite an eloquent job. When he finished his mini-sermon about Jesus and the Second Coming, his mother looked at him and said: “So what does that have to do with me now?”

Read 2 Peter 3:11–13. How does Peter answer the question, “So, what does that have to do with me now?” See Matt. 24:43–51.

As we have said, our very name Seventh-day Adventist reveals our belief in the reality of Christ’s return. The teaching is foundational; our whole Christian faith would become meaningless without the return of Christ and all that it promises.

But are we not in danger of becoming like the wicked servant in the parable of Matthew 24:43–51? We might not be doing the specific kind of evil depicted in the parable, but that’s not the point (it is, after all, a parable). Instead, what the parable warns about is that it could become easier to lower our standards, especially regarding how we treat others, and to become more like the world and less fervent in our belief in the Lord’s return.

Sure, now and then we do face those who, with their charts and prophetic calculations, claim to have the date for Christ’s return. But for the most part the danger facing Seventh-day Adventists is not that they are setting dates for Christ’s soon return. Rather, the danger is that as the years pass, the promise of the Second Coming starts to play a much smaller role in our thinking.

Yes, the longer we are here, the closer we get to the Second Coming. On the other hand, the longer we are here, the easier it is for us to imagine His return as so far away that it really doesn’t impact our daily lives. Scripture warns against this kind of complacency. As Peter said, if Jesus is to return, and we are to face judgment, Christians should live lives of holiness and godliness (*2 Pet. 3:11*). The reality of the Second Coming, whenever it happens, should impact how we live now.

How much does the reality of the Second Coming affect you in your daily life and thinking? What, if anything, does your answer say to you about your life and faith?

A Final Appeal

Peter ends his epistle with a theme that has pervaded it from the start: living holy lives and being careful not to be led astray by “the error of the wicked” (2 *Pet.* 3:17).

Read 2 Peter 3:14–18. To whom is Peter appealing, and what is he warning about in this appeal?

How interesting that Peter ends his epistle with an appeal to the writings of “our beloved brother Paul” (2 *Pet.* 3:15). Paul also wrote of the need to live at peace while waiting for the second coming of Jesus and to use the time to develop holy lives (see *Rom.* 2:4, *Rom.* 12:18, *Phil.* 2:12).

Also notice the way that Peter’s reference to the writings of Paul shows that Paul’s writings were highly valued early in Christian history. Whether or not Peter is referring to the whole collection of Paul’s writings now found in the New Testament or only a subset of them cannot be determined. Nevertheless, Peter’s comments show that Paul’s letters were highly regarded.

Finally, Peter comments that Paul’s writings can be misconstrued, just like other Scriptures. The Greek word *grapha* literally means “writings,” but in this context it clearly means “sacred writings,” such as the books of Moses and the prophets. Here is very early evidence that Paul’s writings had taken on authority, like the authority of the Hebrew Bible.

And considering what we read earlier about false teachers who promise liberty, it’s not hard to imagine people using Paul’s writings about liberty and grace as an excuse for sinful behavior. Paul strongly emphasized righteousness by faith alone (*Rom.* 3:21, 22), but nothing in his writings gives people a license for sin (see *Rom.* 6:1–14). Paul himself had to deal with this error in regard to what he had been preaching and teaching about righteousness by faith. Yet, Peter warns, those who twist his writings do so at the risk of “their own destruction” (2 *Pet.* 3:16).

What are choices you can make right now that can help you to live the kind of life that we have been called to live in Christ Jesus?

Further Thought: From our perspective, it can seem as if the Second Coming is greatly delayed. Jesus obviously knew that we would feel this way, and in some parables He warned against what could happen if we weren't careful and watchful during this time. Take the parable of the two servants in Matthew 24:45–51 (mentioned in Wednesday's study). They both expected their master to return. But they reached two different conclusions about his return. One decided he must be ready for the master to return at any time. The other said that the master was delayed, and therefore he took it as an opportunity to act in an evil manner. "Because we know not the exact time of His coming, we are commanded to watch. 'Blessed are those servants, whom the Lord when He cometh shall find watching.'" Luke 12:37. Those who watch for the Lord's coming are not waiting in idle expectancy. The expectation of Christ's coming is to make men fear the Lord, and fear His judgments upon transgression. It is to awaken them to the great sin of rejecting His offers of mercy. Those who are watching for the Lord are purifying their souls by obedience to the truth."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 634.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In class, discuss your answer to Monday's question about the Second Coming. What are some ways in which we deal with the fact that Christ has not yet returned? What can we learn from one another's answers?
- 2 What teachings, practices, and beliefs do we hold as Seventh-day Adventists that do not come from culture or reason or tradition but are solely from the Word of God?
- 3 As we saw during the week, Peter linked sinful tendencies and passions with false teaching. The lesson had this statement: "It's not just a coincidence that sinful passions can lead to false teachings, is it?" Why is it not just a coincidence? What could be the various links between the two?
- 4 Albert Einstein presented to the world the amazing idea that time is not absolute. That is, depending on where you are and how fast you are moving, time in your frame of reference will be different from someone else's in another frame of reference. The point is, time is something very mysterious, and it acts in ways that we don't fully understand. How might this idea help us to realize that time for God is not the same as it is for us, especially in the context of Christ's having not yet returned?

Mother of Many: Part 2

Every week, we talked about God and read from the Bible. We prayed together, and then we ate. At first, I think they listened just to be polite and get a hot meal. But as time went by, they became more interested in what I was trying to teach them.

Soon the boys were treating me like a mother, confiding in me and trusting me. Some of them told me about their desire to get rid of their drug habits or about things they had stolen. I listened and counseled them about how to live a happy, honest life instead. I told them about the joys of hard work and honest labor. I told them about people in the Bible and how they resisted temptation and followed God's plan, often changing the world around them. The boys listened and were inspired to trust God to change them. I encouraged the ones who had parents to return home to their families. It took a lot of talking, but eventually some decided to go home.

One boy, Pierre, had run away from home when he was only seven years old. He had lost some money he was supposed to take to his mother, and he was afraid of being punished. So, he ran away. Eventually he arrived in the capital city, where he lived on the streets for the next eight years. After I told him the story of the prodigal son, Pierre agreed to return home. But he was afraid to go by himself. So, I agreed to go with him.

We went to the bus station together and bought tickets to his hometown. When we arrived, we walked down almost forgotten streets until he found his house. His mother stared at the tall young man standing in front of her, unable to tell that this was the little boy she had lost so long ago. She thought her son was dead. She stared at Pierre for a long minute. When her mind at last grasped whom she was seeing, she threw her arms around him and hugged him tightly, weeping for joy. Then she began calling her neighbors to see her son, who had been lost but had come home. That night there was joy in one home over a lost child who had returned.

I stayed in Pierre's town overnight so I could take him to visit the local pastor. I explained that Pierre had recently accepted Jesus as his Savior and returned to his mother's house. He would need lots of nurturing.

To be continued in next week's Inside Story.