

The Clock of God Counts Down to the End of Our World

2 Peter 3:8-13

The front page of the Minneapolis Star Tribune reported a British study that tracked the significant decline in animal life over recent decades. It focused on insects, butterflies and other animal life and claimed that our world is rapidly nearing a great “extinction event” that may eliminate most of life as we know it on earth. What was interesting is that the tone of the article was not speculative. It was more matter-of-fact.

If life on earth is coming to an end, how is that going to happen? What will it be like? When will it happen? These questions, of course, are not new. They were asked 2000 years ago by Christians who were speculating about the future. And it was in answer to these questions that St. Peter wrote the words of 2 Peter 3:8-13:

But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.

Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.

Peter starts out by telling us how God keeps time.

There is a clever old saying in our English language that the young talk most about the future and the old talk most about the past because we all talk

about whatever we have the most of. When you are ten years old it seems like you will live forever. When you are 90 years old you know that most of life has already been experienced. It is a difference of perspective.

God has a different perspective, not because he is young or old but because he is eternal. God has lived forever and he will live forever. He is not bound to time as we are. God can take his time to do whatever he wants because he has an infinite supply of time.

We say that “timing is everything” but we also could say that “everything is time.” If you are going to have a baby, don’t wait until you are fifty. If you want to be an astronaut, don’t put it off until after retirement. If you want to refinance your home mortgage, apply before the rates go up. Timing is important for the major decisions of life. But, imagine what it would be like if you could make decisions without time being a consideration, if the major decisions of life were based upon what is good and right and best and time were not a serious consideration in the making of those decisions.

God does not decide as we decide. He does not see time as we see it. “*With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.*” That may be hard for us to understand because everything for us has a beginning and an end. We are finite. We have schedules. Time is a limited commodity for us, but not for God. When we realize this we can at least get some insight into the way God relates to history. In all probability, a billion years from now we will see time in much the same way that God sees time today.

Sometimes we are prone to think that God is too slow. He doesn’t do what we want him to do and he doesn’t do it

when we want it done. That was especially true to Peter’s readers who were a little disgusted that years had passed, a generation had passed, and Jesus had not yet returned to earth as promised. So Peter ex-

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plains in 2 Peter 3:9, “*The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*”

This actually raises another issue. Some of us don’t want God to be in a hurry. There was a seminary professor who every year used to ask his students who were headed toward pastoral ministry how many of them wanted to go to heaven that day. A few would raise their hands. Most of them preferred to wait. Heaven would be a good thing some day, but probably not today, not now. Then he would switch the question and ask how many would like to live in a world where there was no pain, suffering, sickness, hunger, poverty, injustice, crime, sin or death. Every hand would go up. The professor would then tell them that if that’s the kind of world they want then heaven is the place they want to be.

First century Christians wanted Jesus to return to earth. They wanted him to judge the injustice in the world and get on with a much better future. It seemed to them that God was slacking off, that he wasn’t keeping his promise. But Peter explained that God isn’t slow; he’s patient. When the great cataclysmic events finally come it will be the end of history, at least this chapter of it, and eternal destinies will be fixed forever. There will be no second chance to repent, no second chance to believe. But God wants everyone to go to heaven; he wants no one in hell. So he keeps granting time extensions. He stretches history out one more generation at a time. God really cares.

On multiple occasions I have visited food distribution centers in famine-stricken parts of the world. Most memorable for me were the Sahel of Africa during drought in that area south of the Sahara desert and in the outskirts of Buenos Aires in a devastated economy. Although the politics and the geography and the people all look different it is pretty much the same routine no matter where the location. People line up before dawn for rice and other staples. When it comes time for the food center to close and the workers to go home there are still dozens or hundreds of people waiting. How do you close when it means people will starve? So, the workers extend the hours. Just like God! “*The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repen-*

tance.” Who knows? You may be the last one God is waiting for!

But God will not be patient forever. He will not eternally tolerate sin. He will not allow history, with all its problems and all its evil, to go on and on forever as it is now. At some point, God is going to intervene. He is going to cut off the line and move on to fulfill the predictions and promises he has made, including judgment. As Peter said it, “*The day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.*”

The point here is not that God is a thief but that when he comes to judge it will be swift and unexpected. Suddenly everything will be completely different than it was before. The big issue will not be next week’s school exam or this year’s political election. All of life and history will be interrupted by God. He picks the time, whether that time is convenient to us or not.

When God intervenes to judge our world it will not only be sudden, it will be dramatic. “*The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.*” The word “heavens” in the Bible does not refer to the home of God. The Bible uses the word “heaven” in three different ways: 1.) The sky, the clouds and the atmosphere that envelop our planet; 2.) The sun, moon and stars; and 3.) The home or the headquarters of God. In this case it is referring to #1 and #2. Our physical world as we now know it will be devastated.

Could this actually happen? Let me tell you about Paul Chotis who works at NASA in a program called The Near-Earth Object Program. It was Chotis who took questions from the press not long ago when an asteroid came within 26,000 miles of the earth. You could see it with binoculars. In space distance, that is very close. It missed . . . this time.

In the movie *Deep Impact* a much larger asteroid approaches earth. The United States government shoots missiles at the space rock to save the planet. After the missiles are deployed the President of the United States addresses the nation to report on whether or not the missiles have been successful. “*The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.*”

How should Christians live in anticipation of what will someday happen? Should we live in fear? Should we carry signs down Main Street declaring that the world is coming to an end? Or should we “eat, drink and be merry” because the world might come to an end later today? Peter answered the question in 2 Peter 3:11-13:

Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives, as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.

How are we to live? Christians are to live holy and godly lives. That is a recurring theme throughout the Bible. In the best of times we are to live God-pleasing lives. In the worst of times we are to live God-pleasing lives. When we think we know what is coming we are to live God-pleasing lives. And when we are filled with uncertainty about tomorrow, we are to live God-pleasing lives.

When candidates run for office they develop “stump speeches” and repeat themselves in hundreds of different places and occasions. In 1960 at the peak of the Cold War John F. Kennedy was running for the White House. Reflecting upon the threat of nuclear holocaust in a battle between the Soviet Union and the United States, he ended many of his stump speeches with a story about Colonel Davenport, the Speaker of the Connecticut House of Representatives in 1789. One day as the House of Representatives was in session the sky over Hartford became so dark that some of the representatives feared it was the end of the world. There was a call for immediate adjournment. Davenport stood up and said, “The Day of Judgment is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. If it is, I choose to be found doing my duty.

Therefore, I wish that candles be brought in.”

The same goes for us. We are Christians who live our lives in such a way that we honor God and follow Jesus. We do what is good, just, compassionate, generous, diligent, holy and godly. If God’s judgment comes, we are ready. If God patiently postpones his judgment, we do our Christian duty.

Maybe this all sounds ominous and threatening. Actually, it is full of promise. *“In keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.”*

God wants everyone to go to heaven; he wants no one in hell. So he keeps granting time extensions. He stretches history out one more generation at a time. God really cares.

I remember a beat-up old house that one day was torn down. It was overdue. The place was a dump. There was no point in trying to fix one more thing. When it was demolished the rubble was taken away and the builders arrived to build a mini-mansion where the old cottage once stood. What a huge im-

provement! I doubt that the residents ever think about the way it used to be.

That is what God promises to do. Our earth will reach a point where God will call it quits and create *“a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.”*

Would you like to live in a place where God is honored, where there are no allergies or colds or cancers or heart attacks, where there is no abuse or violence or corruption, where righteousness is always at home? That is exactly what God has on the drawing board for heaven and for earth . . . for every Christian!

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