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“What Kind of People?”
(2 Peter 3:1-14)

Today we continue in the season of the Christian Year known as Advent. The word *advent* comes from Latin, and it simply means “coming.” And that’s what the season is about—the coming of Christ.

During this special time, we not only prepare our hearts to celebrate the birth of Jesus—His first coming—but we also focus in a special way on preparing ourselves for His return—His second coming.

So Advent is about preparation, about living in such a way and being the kind of people that we’re ready for Christ’s return.

But what does that mean? What kind of people should we be in order to be ready for His return?

That’s exactly what Peter was dealing with here in this text we’re looking at today. In fact, that’s how he even phrased the question in verse 11: “What kind of people ought you to be?”¹

Peter was focusing in this part of his letter on Jesus’ return in glory, His coming again.

Thinking about the end times

Now when we begin to think about the teachings of the Bible about the end times, what scholars call *eschatology*, there are a variety of ways of interpreting what will happen. Some have even gone so far as to set specific dates about when Jesus would return or when this or that would happen. Those dates have all passed, and He has not yet returned, and those things haven’t yet happened. The fact is that in Matthew 24:36 and Mark 13:32, Jesus said that even He Himself did not know when these things would take place, but only the Father. I’ve always taken that as an invitation to humility about my knowledge of the end times!

But some things are clear from the New Testament.

For instance, it’s pretty clear from his sermon in Acts 2 that Peter understood that since the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we’ve been living in the “last days.” As he quoted the prophet Joel to explain what was happening as the Holy Spirit was being poured out on the church that first Pentecost after Jesus’ death and resurrection, in 2:17 he said: “‘And it shall be in the last days,’ says God, ‘that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh . . .’” Now Peter quoted that from Joel 2:28. But Joel 2:28 says, “It will come about after this / that I will pour out My Spirit . . .” (NASB). Peter interpreted the situation at hand that he was addressing as being the beginning of “the last days.”

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

The writer of Hebrews takes the same view. In that majestic opening of the book (1:1-3), he says:

In the past, God spoke to our forefathers through
the prophets at many times and in various ways,
but in these last days he has spoken to us by his
Son . . .”

So from God’s perspective, we’ve been in the *last days* for nearly 2,000 years!

Along with this, there are four things the New Testament is absolutely clear about, four things that the historic Christian church in all its faithful expressions has maintained throughout the history of the faith. You can remember them with four “Rs”: *return, resurrection, reckoning, and re-creation*.

According to God’s timing, Christ will *return* in power and glory. When He does, there will be *resurrection*—of the righteous to eternal life and of the evil to judgment (John 5:28-29). There will be a *reckoning* in the final judgment. And there will be *re-creation* as this world passes away in fiery destruction and God creates new heavens and a new earth where righteousness dwells.

Correction and challenge

This is precisely the framework Peter was speaking out of as he wrote in our text.

He begins by reminding his readers of the words of the prophets and the commandments of the Lord Jesus through the apostles (3:1-2). He wants to stimulate them to wholesome thinking as they think about these things.

He warns them about scoffers who will question Jesus’ promise to return. They will be intent on following their own evil desires, and will dismiss the Lord’s promise by saying, “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation” (3:3-4).

That was already happening as early as the last third of the first century. As first generation Christians who expected Jesus to return in their lifetime died, some began to question whether Jesus would indeed return, or whether maybe the sending of the Spirit at Pentecost was what He meant by His promise to return, or whether He had somehow secretly returned.

And we sometimes hear it today. In fact, some who claim to be Christian question whether Jesus will actually physically return. But the consistent conviction of mainstream Christianity in all its expressions has maintained that He will physically come again, this time in power and glory to raise the dead and judge the world.

Peter refutes the scoffers who would question Christ’s return by pointing to the power of God’s word in judgment. Just as God brought the present universe into being by His word in creation, He also pronounced His word of judgment on this world and destroyed it by the flood. And even now by that same word God is reserving this present heavens and earth for fire, keeping it “for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men” (3:5-7).

Peter then further refutes the scoffers by reminding his readers that God’s time and timing are not like ours. “With the Lord a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a day.” God will keep His promises. What seems like a delay to us humans is God’s longsuffering patience and forbearance toward us, because He does not desire for anyone to

perish, but wants “everyone to come to repentance” (3:8-9). So this time of waiting is an opportunity for repentance!

Then Peter describes in broad terms what will take place when Christ does return. His day “will come like a thief.” Jesus and Paul described it that way as well. The universe will be consumed by fire, with everything being destroyed and laid bare (3:10).

Broad strokes, not a lot of detail, but enough for us to know that the Lord Jesus will return in judgment.

And then Peter turns to the ethical implications of all this: “Since everything will be destroyed this way, what kind of people ought you to be?” (3:11-14).

To borrow from Shakespeare, “ay, there’s the rub!”²

As he discussed the coming of the Lord and warned about those who scoffed against the promise of it, *Peter called his readers to live holy, godly lives as they looked forward to the Lord’s coming.*

And now . . .

And now here we are, nearly twenty centuries later, still waiting for the Lord to return. So what does all this mean for us in the 21st century? Doesn’t the key for what this text means for us today lie in Peter’s question: “What kind of people ought you to be?”

I know that a good number of you have travelled abroad through the years, sometimes on mission trips, sometimes on pleasure trips.

Whenever you’re in another country, whether it’s intended or not, the people of the land you’re visiting view you as a representative of your homeland. For most of us here, that would mean representing the United States of America. Wouldn’t we want to live as we think a good American should in order to portray that to those we meet?

By the same token, if we want a good community to live in, shouldn’t we ourselves live as good, responsible, law-abiding citizens?

Well, if we are God’s people, followers of Jesus Christ, what kind of people ought we to be? Peter points to two things in particular.

First he says that *we must be people who are living holy, godly lives.* Since God’s seeming delay is for the purpose of allowing time for repentance, our lives should show what it means to have repented! The way we live should be characterized by holiness and godliness.

In 1 Peter 1:15-16, Peter picks up on a theme that recurs time and time again in the book of Leviticus about the character of God’s people: “You shall be holy, for I am holy . . .” (Leviticus 11:44, 45; 19:2; 20:7). Now this idea of *holiness* has to do not so much with purity as with being *set apart* for God’s purposes, and thus being *different* from the world around us in our character, values and behavior.

So while it’s important for the church to *engage* the culture to speak the gospel to it in word and deed, when the church starts looking, sounding, and acting like the culture, we’re in trouble! If this world hates Jesus Christ, and He said it does, then we must be *counter-cultural!*

Now think about the implications of that.

We really must live out who we truly are—those who have been *set apart by God* for *His* purposes. When we yield completely to the Spirit, God works in us and uses us to accomplish His purposes in this world.

² From *Hamlet*, Act 3, scene 1, line 10.

When this is the case, when this is what's happening in our lives, *our lives will be characterized by godliness*—we'll seek to live in a way that reflects *God's* character. Because we belong to Him we'll try to be like Him. Or better yet, we'll open ourselves to Him for Him to live out His life through us! And that will produce *godliness* in us!

Now here's the second thing Peter points out. *We must be people who are looking forward to the coming of the Lord.* What he's talking about here is our orientation in life.

Orientation is critical to navigation, isn't it? Back when sailors navigated their ships by the stars, they had to be careful to orient themselves to the North Star. If they set their navigation by any other, it was disaster! It's the same with our lifestyles. Our *orientation* is critical! If we're oriented toward earthly things, whether it's materialism or nature, we'll live according to that orientation. If we're oriented toward eternal things, we'll live in the light of eternity. When we're oriented toward eternal things, we'll be looking forward to the day of God, as Peter puts it, in the confidence that though this present creation will pass away, Christ will bring new heavens and a new earth!

So the proper orientation for the believer is the coming of the Lord, the *parousía*. We must be *parousía* people, always with an eye toward the Lord's coming. As we look to His coming, we remember that this present age and world will be destroyed at His coming, and that He will create new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness will be at home! Remembering that, even looking forward to it, keeps our focus and orientation sharp, and we order our lives accordingly.

This past week, our local National Guard unit mobilized for its upcoming deployment. These citizen-soldiers will get to see their families a couple more times before they go to Iraq. And then they don't know exactly when they'll see them again.

While they're gone, their families will have to continue their lives as normally as possible. But they will also be looking and longing for that day when their husband or father or son or brother will be returning. And they will orient their lives at this stage around that coming return. Shouldn't the same be true for us as we wait for Christ's return?

So what kind of people ought we to be? According to Peter, *parousía* people! People *who are living holy, godly lives, looking forward to the Lord's coming.* What kind of person will you be?

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