

THE SECOND LETTER OF PETER - PART IV

PREPARATION FOR THE FINAL JUDGMENT

I. The final chapter then takes on the denial that God will come again in glory to judge all things.

A. The section begins by cross-referencing the First Letter of Peter and saying that both that letter and this one are meant to remind the readers of doctrines they already know that they may be fervent again in their "sincere disposition" toward Jesus.

1. The letter again emphasizes that the message presented here is consistent with the words of the prophets and the commandments of God.

- The prophets (that is the writings of the Hebrew Scriptures) often of a new kingdom come on earth after a time of judgment that would involve the passing away of the world as it is currently known. See, e.g., Is. 4:2-6, 8:23-9:6, 11:1-954:1-60:22; Jer. 3:11-18, 23:1-8, 31:1-20; Ez. 47-48; Dan. 2; Hos. 2:18-25, 14:2-9; Amos 9:8-15; Zeph. 3:6-20; Hag. 2; Zech. 12:10-13:6; Mal. 3. But, as Jesus points out, the final kingdom will occur when there is a final judgment at the end of all things. See, e.g., Matt. 24:29-51; Mark. 13:24-37; Luke 17:22-37; see also Is. 66:22-24; Dan. 7.

- Jesus had warned both that such days were coming and that false prophets would prematurely say that they were going to come at some known time. See Matt. 24:4-6; Mark 13:21-23. This letter warns more about those who deny that the judgment will ever come.

- The letter reminds the readers of the commandments of Christ to be prepared for this judgment. The parables of the kingdom, which are especially prevalent in the Gospel according to Matthew, emphasize the theme of preparing for the final judgment. See, e.g., Matt. 20:1-16, 21:22-22:14, 25:1-46; Luke 19:11-27. While those Gospels may or may not have been written at the time of this letter, the accounts in them and similar parables would have been handed on orally.

2. The letter also says that the commandments of Christ were given "through your apostles." Some argue that this phrase indicates that the writer was not an apostle and in fact was writing after the most of the twelve apostles had died. See, e.g.,

New Jerome Biblical Commentary 64:23. However, the term "apostle" also means "one who is sent," or a sort of missionary. Thus, if the author was St. Peter, he could simply mean by "your apostles" that the original missionaries to the readers (who were probably first Christians in Asia Minor.) See 1 Peter 1:1.

- In any case, the joint references to the prophets and the apostles indicates a continuity of thought between the prophets of the Old Covenant and the apostles of the New Covenant.

B. The letter then directly addresses the false teachers who deny the Last Judgments.

1. The letter refers to the false teachers as "scoffers" who "follow their own passions." Thus, the errors are not innocent mistakes, but rather deliberate doubt that comes from a desire to avoid moral demands. The author is not necessarily saying that the scoffers do not believe what they are saying, but rather that their error is still blameworthy. Cf. Catechism 1859-60. Jesus likewise, while willing to answer questions asked with honesty, see, e.g., Luke 10:25-37, John 1:45-51, also denounced those who were blind because of a hardness of heart. See, e.g., Matt 23:1-36; Luke 11:29-32, 37-54. (There is also some middle ground, where Jesus answers a question, while criticizing the lack of understanding, but not with particular harshness. See, e.g., Mark 12:13-27; John 2:1-15.)

2. The letter quotes their argument, i.e., that the world has not changed

dramatically from the time "of the fathers" to the present.

- Many Greeks and Romans thought that this world, while lesser, was still without beginning or end. They thus saw this world, not as a testing ground, but rather as simply a place to be for a while until "enlightened" and allowed into a higher realm. Thus, moral demands about how to act in the world would not be considered particularly important. Getting along with the world so that one could more easily engage in contemplation would be considered more important.

- The fathers that the letter refers to could mean the first Christians, the patriarchs of the Old Testament (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and his sons) or even the first people of known civilizations. In any case, the argument of the scoffers is that, if the world has not changed much so far, it will never change.

C. The letter first refutes this argument by saying that, if one goes back long enough, one will know that there was once no earth, and then there was water but not land, and then the emergence of land. Furthermore, since that time, the Great Flood destroyed the known world, and civilization began again. The argument is that, if God has brought about two or three such dramatic changes (depending on whether one combines the first two together), it is to be expected that He will do so again.

- The letter is combining the Jewish notion of the creative power of the word of God, the Platonic idea that all of this earth came from the heavens and will one day be returned to it, and the symbolism of purification by fire that the prophets, John the Baptist and Jesus Himself used. See 1 Gen. 1; Is. 55:10-11; Wis. 18:14-15 (the creative power of God); Is. 1:25; Zech. 13:9; Mal. 3:2-5 (the prophets on the purification of the people of God); Matt. 3:11; Mark 9:49; Luke 3:16, 12:49 (John the Baptist and Jesus Himself on the purification with fire.)

D. The letter goes on to say that, in God's time, in the scale of eternity, any amount of time is the same and that the reason God delays judgment is so that more people can repent.

1. It begins with a paraphrase from Psalm 90:4, a psalm of lament that seeks refuge in the Lord as it contrasts the frailty of the human condition with the eternal love of God. There is perhaps also a reference to the fact that God said to Adam and Eve that they would die on the day they ate of the forbidden fruit, but Adam in fact lived for almost 1000 year later. See Gen. 2:17, 5:1.

2. It then refers to the theme that God does not destroy evil immediately because He wants to give a chance to repent. See, e.g., Wis. 11:17-12:22; Ez. 18:2-23, 33:10-11; Rom. 11:22-24; 2 Tim. 2:1-4; 1 Peter 3:20.

3. The letter then picks up on the image from both St. Paul and Jesus Himself that the Lord will come as a thief in the night. See Matt. 24:43; Luke 12:39; 1 Thess. 5:2, 4; Rev. 3:3.

- The image of a thief is somewhat paradoxical, for it would not seem like a positive one. But the idea is that, if we consider our possessions, time, and even life to be our own, God will disprove that claim. Nothing is really our own and, as Jesus indicates, while death and judgment seem like thieves, in fact they restore all things to the true Master of the house, for whom we are meant to be good stewards. See Matt. 24:45-51; Luke 13:41-48.

- There is also the implication that, as a house will not be broken into if the owner properly guards against it, so too, we will not fail if we properly guard against failure.

E. This passage then ends with the vivid imagery of a great crashing sound and a fire over all the earth that will put an end to this world in preparation for the next. As the next verses will make clear, the idea is not to indicate that this world is irrelevant, but rather to see it as a testing ground in preparation for eternal life. See Vatican II Council, *Gaudium et Spes* 39 (1965).

II. The letter then moves on to the moral exhortation based upon this doctrinal premise.

A. The letter then calls for the reader to act "with holiness and devotion" for such things will last, while the world will pass away. The idea is that faith must of necessity show itself by a life that reflects it. See, e.g., James 2:14-26.

B. The letter says that we should be "waiting for and hastening" the day when the world will be consumed by fire in preparation for the new heavens and new earth "in which righteousness dwells."

- The idea of waiting for and being prepared for that day is simply common sense. But the letter seems to go further and says that we can, by a righteous life, even hasten that day.

- Some argue that the term here (*speudontas*) means more being anxious for that judgment. Those who strongly desire holiness and righteousness will eagerly await the judgment of the day of the Lord. See, e.g., Luke 12:49; Acts 1:6; Rom 8:18-23; Rev. 6:10. Precisely because the righteous would desire the day of the Lord, Jesus had to warn against false prophets who would say that it is immediately at hand. . See Matt. 24:4-6; Mark 13:21-23; 2 Thess. 2:1-3.

- It could, however, also mean that righteous conduct will in fact make judgment come quicker, whether that means the final day of the Lord, or the more common fact that God brings an end to all corrupt things even during the course of human history. See, e.g., Ps. 2:9, 149:6-8.

- Once again, there is a reference to judgment by fire, in preparation for the new heavens and new earth. See, e.g., 1 Cor. 3:10-17. The new heavens and new earth indicate a new glorious creation of which this creation is but an image, infected by sin. See Is. 65:17, 66:22; Rev. 21:1-7.

C. The letter thus calls for the readers to avoid the blemishes or stains of sin, and thus at peace with God and each other.

1. They are not called to feel blameless, but rather to be found by God blameless. The question is not their judgment of themselves, but rather the objective judgment of God. See, e.g., Matt. 25:31-46; Phil 3:7-11; Rev. 2-3.

2. The letter then confirms that St. Paul's letters say the same thing about judgment as St. Peter is saying here. Almost all of St. Paul's letters have a doctrinal section, and then follow up on that section with a moral exhortation, or alterations between the two. See, e.g. rom. 12:1-14:13; Gal. 5:13-6:10; Eph. 4:17-6:20; Phil 2:12-18, 4:1-9; Col. 3:1-4:1

- It is clear from this passage that St. Paul's letters were well read, were considered inspired, and had led to other comments, including some misunderstandings.

- St. Peter warns that passages in St. Paul and other scriptures could be misunderstood either because of ignorance or instability, i.e., those who live in the vices referred to earlier. See 2 Peter 2:17-19. Precisely because of this difficulty in interpreting some passages of Scripture, Church doctrine is needed in addition to the Bible. See St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica II-II q.1 art.9 reply obj. 1; cf. Vatican II Council Dei Verbum 10.

II. The conclusion summarizes the purpose of the letter and commends the readers to grow ever closer to Jesus Christ.

A. The letter once again says that it is giving these warning so that the readers may not be deceived by unstable and lawless men.

- Again, there is a warning that the liberty of Christians does not mean there is no law at all, but rather the law of the Spirit, which guides one to rise to the higher realms of God. See, e.g., Rom. 7:23-24; 8:2-3; James 1:25, 2:8. For, there are three levels of law. The old ritual law was as a guardian to give the Jewish people a standard to fulfill, although of itself it could not bring holiness because the law of sin and death still infected the human race. However, Jesus by His teaching gave us the new law of the Spirit and, by His death and resurrection poured forth the grace that enables us to live it out on this earth and eventually arrive in the realm of the Spirit. In St. Paul's letters, especially Romans and Galatians, he argues that the old ritual law is good but insufficient to bring us to holiness. His opponents are people who sought justification through that law. Here this letter is arguing against those who use the freedom from the ritual law to live according to no law at all. However, if one departs from that law, one becomes unstable and is instead once again under the law of sin and death. See Rom. 5:8:13; Gal. 3:15-5:26.

- One thus should not cling to the false security of this world, which is really unstable in the eyes of eternity, but rather to the lasting stability of the kingdom of God.

B. The letter then concludes by commending the readers to know Jesus and live in His grace that they may arrive at this new life.

C. The letter concludes with a phrase "to Him be glory both now and to the day of eternity" that is similar to a phrase that St. Paul liked to use. See Rom. 11:36, gal. 1:5, Eph. 3:21, Phil 4:20, 1 Tim. 1:17, 2 Tim :28; Heb. 13:21. However, instead of saying "into the ages" as St. Paul generally did St. Peter uses the image "to the day of eternity." By focusing on a never-ending day, St. Peter is emphasizing more the idea of stability and continuity. See also Rev. 21:25 .