

Remembering the God who Acts

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Date: 13 May 2018

- [0 : 00] So let's pray as we begin this passage. Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be now and ever acceptable in your sight.
- O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen. Amen. So let me put the passage we're thinking about tonight in the context of the whole letter, in case you've not been to all of the series.
- I haven't been to any of the series, but I have listened to all of the sermons. It's a letter which is written to a church under pressure. If it's the church in Rome, as some think, then there will have been persecution and pressure from outside.
- But more dangerously and probably more pertinently to this letter, there's false teaching inside the church. And the letter is written to combat that false teaching and to encourage the church to right faith and right behavior.
- So chapter two, the middle chapter, just prior to tonight's reading, is quite a dark chapter. And I have to say, I'm happy that I've got the reading I've got tonight. It's a very dark chapter, chapter two.
- [1 : 23] It condemns the false teachers in no uncertain terms and predicts their destruction in no uncertain terms. I was thinking about this and I was thinking it's a tone of condemnation.
- We only hear in Jesus a tone that he reserved for those he saw as leading astray, those he described as the little ones.
- Sometimes for the Pharisees, who so minutely interpreted the Jewish law in a way that laid impossible burdens on the ordinary Jew.
- And when they prevented people who came to Jesus experiencing God's compassion and healing, those were the kind of occasions on which Jesus used condemnatory terms of that sort.
- Now the letter as a whole has got a number of themes running through it. And we've sung about some of them. There's a theme of promise. There's a theme of prophecy. And they tend to come in contrasting pairs.
- [2 : 31] And tonight from chapter three, verses one to seven, I'm going to pick out three contrasting pairs. However, I am going to be working probably a bit backwards. So I'll try and keep you on the page with me.
- And you should have a handout, which kind of helps you know where I am when I'm talking about those contrasts. Makes sense to me. Let's see if it makes sense to you.
- So although the character of the false teachers is described in chapter two and their fate, the exact nature of the heresies they taught isn't clear.
- And it may well be that there were many of them. But as we turn to chapter three, we hear Peter turning back to the recipients of the letter and to what he's trying to do in the whole letter.
- And he's focusing down on a specific issue rather than talking vaguely about false teaching.
- [3 : 35] And the issue is this. Jesus' followers had been promised that Jesus would return in glory to judge the world and usher in the new creation.

It was Ascension Day on Thursday when a part, at least, of the Christian church remembers Jesus' going up to his Father in heaven to sit at his right hand.

And Luke's account of the Ascension in the book of Acts, in the first chapter, contains already the promise of Jesus' return. Men of Galilee, angels said to the wandering disciples, why do you stand here looking into the sky?

This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.

And we can see, as we read Paul's letters on the subject, that this second coming, this parousia, as the Greek has it, is the same event as the day of the Lord.

[4 : 41] The Jewish people awaited the day of the Lord, the definitive judgment on God's enemies, and the vindication and the raising to life of the righteous dead.

And in Paul's letters, we see that that day of the Lord is the same event as Jesus' second coming in glory to judge.

But as time passed, the problem was, Jesus didn't return. And didn't return. And didn't return.

I don't know whether you've ever been in that situation. I was the other day, where you know you've got an appointment with somebody, and you go and you ring the doorbell, and nothing happens. So you wait a bit, maybe they were in the bathroom, and you ring the doorbell again, and it's working because the dogs are barking.

But they still don't come. And eventually you start to think, am I wrong? Did we make this appointment? Is the person going to come? I certainly had that experience during the week.

[5 : 48] The person did come eventually. She'd been distracted by helping someone. But Jesus didn't return in the time frame that the early Christians expected him to return in.

And they became a bit worried about that. And you know, I honestly think we have to have some sympathy with them. After all, 2,000 years later, Jesus still hasn't returned.

And I guess it must be a rare Christian who hasn't, at least sometimes, wondered about that. So it was an issue for the early Christians as time passed.

And in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, we see that the Christians in Thessalonica were bothered because Jesus hadn't returned and some of their number had died. And so they said, well, had they missed out on the resurrection?

And Paul deals gently with them, explaining why they didn't have to worry about that. What would happen when Jesus came again? And by his second letter to the Thessalonians, some of them had solved the problem by insisting that, contrary to appearances, the second coming, the day of the Lord, had in fact come already.

[7 : 09] And Paul had to explain why that couldn't be true because certain things had to happen before Jesus' return. And so the writer of this letter to Peter also deals fairly gently with its recipients on this matter.

And in verses 8 to 10, which aren't our material for tonight, he explains the situation. So genuine doubt is one thing and calls for teaching and explanation.

But the people that Peter calls scoffers come in for his condemnation. So what's the difference? The difference is, I think, between genuine doubts and a complete rejection of God.

Let me read verse 4, in which the writer says, people like this can be expected in the last days. They will say, where is this coming?

He promised. Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation. Now for me, there are clear echoes in that of the Old Testament.

[8 : 29] In the first half, where is this coming? He promised. I hear echoes of the Psalms. My tears have been my food day and night while people say to me all day long, where is your God? Psalm 42, verse 3. And Psalm 115, verse 2. Why do the nations say, where is their God?

It's the mocking unbelief of the pagans towards God's people. The second half of that saying of the scoffers, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation, echoes for me the nothing new under the sun of the writer of Ecclesiastes, a book which struggles with the difficulty of understanding the word, the world, from a human perspective alone.

So here's the first of our contrasts. On the one side, there's the worldview which says, God's promises don't hold up, God doesn't intervene, in fact, maybe, there is no God.

God. And that reminds me of the 18th century. In the 18th century, in Europe, and America, I think, many intellectuals who came from Christian cultures, but were exposed to new philosophical and scientific ideas, became disenchanted with the traditional ideas of God, and disenchanted with organized religion.

[10 : 08] And they espoused deism. Now, deism is a philosophical belief that posits that God exists and is ultimately responsible for the creation of the universe, but does not interfere directly with the created world.

God, as it were, wound up the universe and left it to tick along by itself. No miracles, no relationship with humankind, no incarnation, no intervention, no salvation, no judgment.

Now, I'm a scientist, as some of you will know, and such a view is not inevitable if you're a scientist, because God, I believe, created an ordered universe which generally behaves according to laws we can rely on.

I can rely on the fact that the wooden step that I'm standing on will hold me up, or at least if it doesn't, is because it's been weakened by woodworm or some other dreadful thing that the vestis will have to sort out.

It would be a very chaotic world if there were no laws of physics. But the point is, it's God's creation. The laws are God's laws, and he can suspend them, or indeed use them, to intervene if he so wishes.

[11 : 32] And that's what we read in verses five to six. But God has intervened. He created the world, and the writer says he sent the flood in Noah's time to deal with the wickedness of people.

And if you've been here and listened to the sermons on chapter two, there's already been a reference to that in chapter two, and also to another event, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah for its wickedness, wickedness, and the rescue and salvation of Lot, who was a righteous man.

And then verse seven says, God can subject the world to fiery destruction on the day of judgment. Now, some of the commenters get a bit hooked up on the picture of fire and water and the interplay between the two, and I think we need not to get too hooked on that.

It's what's called apocalyptic writing, literature of the revelation about the end of time. It's picture language.

It wouldn't be unfamiliar to Jewish readers. Now, we mustn't get too hooked on what will happen precisely, but the point is, there will come the day of the Lord.

[12 : 57] So in verses four to seven, the first contrast between, on the one hand, those who say that God, if God exists, will never intervene, either for good, salvation, or for judgment.

And the truth, the contrast between that and the truth, on the other hand, that there will come a day in which God will intervene decisively in judgment and in salvation, which are two sides of the same coin.

Now, the scoffers are not just scoffing. They are, verse three says, following their own evil desires. Now, when I first read this passage in prospect of preaching this sermon, I thought, sorry?

What's the connection between scoffing and evil desire? Then, I remembered something I said to some young people in the context of a sort of mini-talk testimony at a scripture union camp nine months ago.

I was talking about how a bout of clinical depression in my early 20s had robbed me of God, the God I had loved since I was a child.

[14 : 21] God went AWOL. Obviously, he didn't, but that was my experience. As I was trying to explain to the young people the chaotic life consequences this led to over a period of time which I didn't describe and which I'm not going to describe for you, while I was trying to explain this, I remember saying, and if God's not there, you don't have to do what he says.

Now, observation will tell you that Christians are not all morally perfect and that many, perhaps most, non-Christians have a sense of what's morally right and try to live by it.

But it was about if I had a desire which was against God's laws, then if God was not there, I could pursue it. And I think that's the connection between God not being there and evil desires.

So that second contrast is between the evil desires which you have no need to curb if you believe God is not there or won't intervene to judge. The contrast between those evil desires and what Peter calls wholesome thinking or as the NRSV puts it, sincere intention.

It's pure thinking, pure thinking with a purpose. And we can see two implications in this expression.

[15 : 50] We need to think in a way guided by the truth, which is the mind, intellect side of it, but that will lead to wholesome intentions and godly behavior.

And that's what Peter wants to encourage this church under pressure from false teaching to be involved in, to be involved in wholesome thinking, which will have an effect on their behavior towards God.

But how do we get to be wholesome thinkers? Well, what Peter says is by recalling and, if necessary, being reminded of God's truths.

truths. The problem is that the scoffers have deliberately forgotten, he says, the truths about God. So again, it's not genuine doubt which needs explanation and thinking about, but it's deliberately forgetting the truths.

That suggests they've known them already, perhaps they're Jewish people, perhaps they were people who had apparently come to Christian faith. but they've deliberately forgotten the truths about God.

[17 : 09] And this letter is written, the author says, to remind the church under pressure of those truths. Verse 2 of this chapter, I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles.

Even at that time in history of the church, there was plenty of witness to the truths about God. In the Old Testament and in what had been passed on by spoken and written word by the apostles, what had been passed on of Jesus' life, of Jesus' teaching, of his death, of his resurrection, that intervention.

So our third contrast, if you like, is between forgetting what God has said and done and taking care to recall all that God has said and done, richly recorded for us, of course, in the scriptures.

And I suppose it's the positive antidote to false teaching. I think Simon talked about how to recognize a false teacher. He did suggest that I might be one if you weren't looking hard, but how to recognize a false teacher.

But you need a positive antidote to that false teaching, don't you? So soak yourself in the scriptures.

[18 : 51] Read them. Meditate on them. Let them inform you about God's character and his mighty acts in the world, supremely in the incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension to glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Christ. Let's pray. Father God, we thank you for the reminder that you are able to intervene in our world and that you will intervene decisively at the end of time.

and we pray that we will soak ourselves in the scriptures which teach the truths about you so that we may remember that and so be led into right thinking and godly behavior and be found in Jesus should he come while we are still here.

amen. Amen. Amen.

Thank you.