



Peter's Eschatological Understanding

By Mark R. Dunn

THE END OF THE INTERNET

Congratulations! This is the last page.
Thank you for visiting **The End of the Internet**.
There are no more links.
You must now turn off your computer
and go do something productive...
Go read a book, for Pete's sake.



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I FOUND THAT POSTING while browsing online recently. Though meant to produce a chuckle, these words, if true, would be devastating to many Internet addicts. The suggestion to do something productive, like reading a book, is intriguing. The essential book to read is, of course, the Bible. Its message regarding the end of time is far too important to ignore. Innocently the suggestion above refers to "Pete"; ironically the Apostle Peter wrote: "Now the end of all things is near" (1 Pet. 4:7).¹ and had some productive suggestions to do *before* the end.

Eschatology is the theological study of "the end of all things." Eschatology presents the last category of theological inquiry, following the grand doctrines of God, man, Christ, salvation, and the church. As a discipline, eschatology points to a future time when history will be changed so radically that a new state of reality must be described.²

Eschatology includes individual concerns such as death, judgment, resurrection, and afterlife, as well as cosmic concerns such as the end of history and the transformation

of the world.³ Among these issues, judgment is the central biblical concern. Judgment looms as God's final act in this era. Peter taught that God's pending judgment has grand implications for life prior to the end of time. God's judgment will be serious for all and devastating for many. From a biblical perspective, the impact of God's judgment on one's life cannot be overstated. Thus judgment is the most compelling reason to have godly productivity in one's earthly life. This expresses the core of Peter's eschatological message.

Peter's coverage of eschatological concerns is not exhaustive, yet both Petrine Letters are saturated by an eschatological outlook.⁴ Peter crafted his epistles to encourage readers to pursue the lofty goal of persistent righteous living despite suffering persecution and enduring the scornful pressure of false brethren. To encourage his readers, Peter appealed to eschatological hope. Peter showed that a basic eschatological understanding answers present challenges—to the pursuit of righteousness and faith.


In his letters Peter affirmed that things will not always be as they are. Though the promised end of the age seems distant, 1 Peter 4:7 declares its *nearness*—vindication and judgment approach. God's people must anticipate the arrival of the end. In his first epistle, Peter lightly referenced this teaching. But responding to continued suffering, Peter's Second Letter vividly explains more about the approaching end of the world.

Peter's declaration "the end of all things is near" appears amid his discussion of Christian suffering in a world saturated with immorality. His remarkable statement implies that Christian suffering will soon disappear. It follows

Above: Fragment of a sarcophagus cover; this panel segment shows a youthful shepherd leaning on his staff, clothed with a sleeved tunic with a belt and satchel on his back. With him is a shaggy dog. Two goats and sheep also appear in the frame. Found at the Villa Carpegna in Rome. Jesus spoke of separating the sheep from the goats at judgment.

LESSON REFERENCE

ETB: 1 Peter 4:7-19; 2 Peter 3:1-18



The Flavian Amphitheatre commonly known as the Colosseum. Construction began under Rome's Emperor Vespasian in A.D. 72. Many Christians were martyred here during the early persecutions, which lasted until Constantine, the first Christian emperor, declared Christianity the state religion in A.D. 312.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ KEN TOUGHTON (4/1/3)

the announcement in 1 Peter 4:5 that the abusers of Peter's readers will answer to the Judge of the living and the dead. Thus judgment, the core eschatological theme, prompted Peter's declaration that the end of all things is near.

That any biblical promise can be thought of as "near" is a troublesome concept for many. Peter stated that scoffers brazenly declare that life continues as it has since creation (2 Pet. 3:3-4). How does one handle the concept of time when discussing its ending? Peter asserted that God does not evaluate timing as humans do: one day has the significance of 1,000 years and vice versa (v. 8; see Ps. 90:4). This is hardly a concession to the skeptics. God does not watch the clock and neither must His followers. Far more important to God is human development. Peter's eschatological emphasis rests on how his readers should productively use their earthly lifetimes as the end approaches.

Jesus declared the nearness of God's kingdom in His ministry (Matt. 4:17; 10:7; Mark 1:15; Luke 10:9,11; 21:28,31). John the Baptist made the same declaration (Matt. 3:2). Paul asserted that salvation was now nearer (Rom. 13:11). James proclaimed that the Lord's coming is near (5:8). John twice stated that the prophesied events in Revelation were near (Rev. 1:3; 22:10). Each of these authors used the same wording as 1 Peter 4:7, showing the pervasive New Testament witness that the end is eschatologically near.

Old Testament prophecy also refers to the proximity of eschatological events that are distant in human terms.⁵ The end of time, with its dreadful events, influences present living because of its certainty. Though still future, its uncertain timing simply makes it too close for comfort. Thus the prophets called people to repentance and holy living.

Both of these emphases appear among Peter's eschatological remarks. *First*, Peter, a master at preaching repentance (Acts 2:38; 3:19-20), gave the clearest biblical explanation in 2 Peter 3:9 of the seeming delay in the end of time: God has paused so people will have an opportunity to repent. The final judgment will destroy ungodly people (v. 7). People will have no chance for repentance after judgment. Therefore, God delays. *Second*, Peter saturated his epistles with the word "holy,"⁶ quoting Moses' command to be holy (Lev. 11:44-45) and appealing for holy living at the climax of his description of events at the end of time (2 Pet. 3:11).⁷

Peter discussed the timing of the end. He asserted it would come as a thief (v. 10)—sudden and unexpected.⁸ He acknowledged that its coming is both near and delayed. His insistence on the unexpected nature of its arrival emphasizes the biblical concern for human progress toward repentance and life transformation. Heaven refuses to subject its spiritual objectives to the human demand for time tables. Thus Peter seriously taught that although the end is delayed, it is near and thus could happen any time.

To warn against complacency, Peter vividly painted "the end of all things" in 2 Peter 3:10-12. Fierce judgment is portrayed by apocalyptic conflagration. The heavens disappear with a "loud noise"—the "whizzing sound of rapid motion through the air like the flight of a bird, thunder,

fierce flame"⁹—resulting from the countless elements of the universe exploding into nothingness. Some think the word "heavens" refers to the sky and outer space;¹⁰ others see a reference to the unseen spiritual realm,¹¹ governing human life in this world. The word "elements" is also vague, referring to the physical universe beyond the earth in verse 10, but including the earth in verse 12 because a new earth is needed in verse 13. The apocalyptic vision is meant to be both vague and vivid to enhance the emphasis on judgment: Earth has lost its covering—it is now exposed to the judgment that has drawn near¹²—nothing hides its occupants from the searching eyes of the Judge.

Fire is the tool of God's judgment. Jesus often spoke of fiery judgment (Matt. 13:40; 25:41; Mark 9:43-48; John 15:6). The Old Testament had portrayed fire as a tool God used to bring judgment and to purify sinfulness and uncleanness (Lev. 10:1-3; Isa. 6:5-7; 66:24). The cosmic conflagration first burns away all elements to disclose the works of humankind. Thus in an apocalyptic flash, judgment faces humankind.

Simon Peter revealed two important signs of the approach of the end (2 Pet. 3:1-9). First, scoffers will challenge the truthfulness of Christ's promised return as Judge. Another sign is people would ignore the significance of God's Word. By God's spoken word, this world was created. All who live benefit from God's creative word. By God's word, the world was judged in Noah's day. God's tool of judgment was water, an element of



ILLUSTRATION PHOTO: DR. LOUISE KOHL SMITH (3/21/16)

creation. Now God's Word promises the end of all things by fiery judgment. Those who scoff at and ignore God's Word will be unprepared when the final day comes.

Peter's greatest contribution to eschatological study was his discussion of eschatological ethics. First Peter 4:7-11 provides four exhortations about how to live as God's people in light of the approaching end. Prayer tops the list, keeping open the vital link with the Lord and providing wisdom for facing suffering and preparing for judgment. Next, Peter told his readers to love others. Christian love encourages the saints and answers worldly hostility. Peter then commanded hospitality, echoing Jesus' command to go the extra mile even in the face of persecution. Finally, Peter encouraged the use of spiritual gifts to serve others. Instead of their watching the clock until the end of the age, Peter wanted his readers to live for Christ among people whose empty lives were getting alarmingly short.¹³

After describing the end, Peter discussed essential actions dictated by the approach of the end (2 Pet. 3:14-18). Believers must live in peace with God and pursue pure living. The believer's objective is to be found spotless on the day the Lord returns. Peter also warned his readers to be on guard to avoid being carried away by immorality into spiritual uncertainty. Above all, believers must grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Peter's final eschatological teaching was to glorify Christ. The purpose of all eschatological activity is God's glory. God's followers must reflect the character of the coming final events. The gospel message, Christ's followers, and eschatological passages have one goal: to glorify the risen Lord who has promised to return to receive His children and judge the living and the dead. **B**

1. All Scriptures quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible.
2. See "Eschatology" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (ABD), David Noel Freedman, ed., vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 575.
3. David E. Aune, "Early Christian Eschatology," ABD, 594.
4. Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 15; Norman R. Ericson, "Peter, Second, Theology of" in *Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 606.
5. See Isaiah 13:6,9; 19:19; 46:13; 51:5; Jeremiah 48:16; Ezekiel 7:7; 12:23; 22:4; 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:1; 3:14; Obadiah 15; Zephaniah 1:7,14; Zechariah 14:1; Malachi 4:1.
6. Holiness was consistently on Peter's mind; he used the word "holy" 13 times in his 2 epistles.
7. The build-up to this climactic statement follows the pattern of Peter's speeches in Acts 2-3.
8. Jesus (Matt. 24:42-44; Luke 12:39-40), Paul (1 Thess. 5:2), and John (Rev. 3:3; 16:15) used the figure of a thief to describe the unexpected return of the Lord.
9. Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol. vi (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1933), 176.
10. Michael Green, *The Second Epistle General of Peter and the General Epistle of Jude* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), 137; Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of James, Epistles of John, Peter, and Jude in New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 336.
11. Douglas J. Moo, *2 Peter and Jude in The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 189.
12. See especially Isaiah 21:1-3. See also Job 20:27-28; Psalm 18:15; Isaiah 47:3; 57:12; Jeremiah 49:10; Ezekiel 16:36-42, 57-58; Hosea 2:2-3; Matthew 10:26; Luke 12:2; Ephesus 5:13; Hebrews 4:13.
13. Scot McKnight, *1 Peter in The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 237-239.

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Left: Entrance to the Karanlik or "Dark" Church at Cappadocia. Many believers fled to the region to escape Rome's persecution of Christians. Such persecution heightened the eschatological expectations of early believers.

gospel spread. At Carthage, Tunisia visitors stand around a baptistry, now below ground level, where baptisms were done at the Doumas El

Karita, which was one of the largest Christian churches in the 3rd century. Baptism symbolized the cleansed life of the repentant believer.

Above: As persecution increased, the

REST IN PEACE

The judgment of the living and the dead is but one facet of eschatological events. Shown right, a gold funerary mask; from Jerusalem; 1st - 2nd centuries A.D. The masks were made from a wax mold of the deceased person's face. In Roman burials, such a mask was put over the face of the deceased en route to the burial site. Aristocratic families used the

masks as ancestral portraits to be displayed during family and community ceremonies. Also shown left, the front of this terracotta box urn depicts the duel between Eteokles and Polyneikes from the Greek legend of The Seven Against Thebes. An Etruscan inscription above identifies the deceased. The lid depicts a dead person reclining in her finery.

Such figures were not actual representations but offered an idealized image of the deceased. Dates to 225-150 B.C.

