

THE GOSPEL OF GOD

Study Four

THE GOSPEL AND THE END OF THE AGE:

1 PETER 1 AND 2 PETER 3

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THE END OF THE AGE IN THE PROCLAMATION IN ACTS

Throughout the sermons recorded in the Acts of the Apostles there is regular reference, at least implicitly, to the coming day of judgment marking the end of this age and the beginning of the age to come:¹

With many other words [Peter] warned them; and he pleaded with them, ‘Save yourselves from this corrupt generation’ (Acts 2:40).

Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets (Acts 3:19–21).

[Jesus] commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead (Acts 10:42).

In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:30–31).

As Paul discoursed on righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, ‘That’s enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you’ (Acts 24:25).

It is impossible to think of the apostolic proclamation of the gospel without having the end of all things and the inauguration of the new age clearly in view. The end of this present age and the movement into the age to come is centred in the final judgment by the risen Lord Jesus Christ. The current age is a time of forbearance and patience on God’s part with regard to the ignorance and idolatry of the human race, but the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the sign to the world that a day has been set for judgment with justice (Acts 17:30–31). In that judgment all evil will finally be brought to an end, and the full restoration of all things in the righteousness and holiness of God will be finally accomplished.

¹ All Bible quotations are from the New International Version.

The judgment and the restoration at the end of the age are the culmination of the work of Christ in his death and resurrection. They are not additional to that work, but rather that work's great out-flowering in history. Jesus' triumphant cry, 'It is finished!' (Gk: *tetelestai*) (John 19:30; cf. Matt. 27:50; Mark 15:37) was his assertion that the plan of God in history had been accomplished. The judgment and restoration at the end is not the accomplishing of what is incomplete in Christ's work at the cross but rather the consummating and unveiling of that work as the great power which has ruled history. Revelation 5 shows us in visionary form the truth that it is the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ who rules creation and history—under and with the Father—guiding all things to their appointed end.

This Age and the Age to Come

The New Testament word 'age' (Gk: *aion*), also often translated as 'world' in older versions, is used of both this age and the age to come. The two stand in opposition to each other. *This* age or world is not only the created reality but also more particularly the system of demonic and rebellious human activity which is set against God and His purposes in creation and history.² This age is typified as being under the rule of 'the prince of this world' (John 12:31, 16:11) or 'the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient' (Eph. 2:2). Energised and driven by this prince, Satan, human beings are dead in their sins and seek the gratification of their flesh's desires, following along whatever it (the flesh) desires and thinks (Eph. 2:1–4). This means that there is a wisdom which governs the action of this world, seeking to fashion those who are of the world (Rom. 12:2) but it is not the wisdom of God, and in fact opposes that wisdom as Satan, the god of this age, seeks to shut out that true wisdom to his 'children' (2Cor. 4:4, 1 Cor. 1:20ff).

Paul speaks of the whole of history in the lead up to Christ as 'ages' (Gk: *aionon*). Throughout these ages the mystery of the gospel has been hidden—Colossians 1:26; Ephesians 3:9. In Jesus Christ the ages have reached their end, they have come to finality and so the whole human race from the incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ are those on whom the end of the ages have come (1 Cor. 10:11; Heb. 1:2; 9:26). Jesus Christ is the end of the ages precisely because he brings the end of the ruler of the age, the prince of this world.

The cross must be seen as conflict—Satan seeking the destruction of God's Son and God's kingdom (Luke 4:13; 22:3), and Christ working the Father's plan that the devil's works be destroyed (1 John 3:8). What is most important is that we understand that the conflict was between light and darkness, holiness and evil, obedient sonship and rebellion, and not simply through two powers seeking to assert 'power'. Apart from that understanding, there is no way of understanding the truth that Jesus Christ was crucified in weakness (2 Cor. 13:4). The weakness of God is stronger than the strength of all evil; such strength-in-weakness baffles evil.

Colossians 2:13–15 tells us:

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the power and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

Geoff Bingham writes:

² John uses the Greek word *kosmos* in the same way, indicating both the created reality and the system of demonic and human rebellion.

Some see the bond [=written code in NIV] as the record of our law-breaking, some as the accusations of the principalities and powers written against us both as human failures, and practitioners of sins. Whatever it was—whether it be called ‘the curse’, ‘the sins’ or ‘sin’ (as a whole), Christ both bore them all, and even became them, for Paul said, ‘[God] made him to be sin, for us’.

Whatever our conclusion may be, we see that the evil powers were there to accuse and to raise the evil deeds of man for God to see, and to condemn. It was as though evil saw some predicament God was faced with. God loved His world, but He must punish—even destroy it. How could He save it? By some sophistry, some casuistic escape clause, some embezzlement of His great holiness? No! He must Himself bear the sins of the world. That was what God was doing in Christ. Satan and his hosts, the world, the flesh, and all evil were pressing up against the Holy One of God.³

Hebrews 2:14–15 indicates that Satan’s grip on the world is through the fear of death, and 1 Corinthians 15:56 shows just how he works that fear of death. Death’s sting is from sin, and power of sin’s sting is drawn from the law—Satan, the prince of this world, maintains his reign of terror through the guilt of the race. As Christ bore the sins of the world, he bore all the accusation and tormenting of Satan against humanity in himself, and refused its terror and its craven denial, but rather he owned it before the Father, confessing the holiness of the Father which opposed and judged such evil, as it was opposed and judged in his own body. The holiness of this confession was the power of the cross.

So, Christ’s cry, ‘*Tetelestai!*’ marks the end of the ages and the beginning of the ages to come, a new heaven and new earth in which righteousness dwells. The final judgment is the unveiling of all that is accomplished in his death and resurrection.

The Judgment of the Wicked

For those who belong to the ‘corrupt generation’, this judgment will be severe—he ‘will be completely cut off from among his people’ (Acts 3:23)—and so those who hear are warned to take care about how they hear (Acts 13:41), lest what the prophets have spoken of (which in context must be judgment) should happen to the hearers. This certainty of judgment at the end of all things is implicit in the urgent call to repentance and faith by the proclaimers of the gospel. Ignorance is what typifies the corrupt generation (Acts 3:17; 17:23, 30; see also 1 Pet. 1:14; 2:15; 1 Tim. 1:13) and this is in its essence idolatry and unbelief. The ignorance of this generation (Adam’s descendants) is a *moral* issue related to their (our) suppression of the truth by wickedness, their substitution of the truth with a lie, and their exchanging of the glory of God for images and idols (Rom. 1:18, 22, 25). In particular, with the establishment of the gospel by Christ, and its proclamation by the apostles and the church, this ignorance, which is suppression of the truth, is *unbelief in the gospel itself*. Faith in the gospel, or its lack, is the primary criterion for judgment:

He will punish those who *do not know God* [ignorance] and *do not obey the gospel* of our Lord Jesus [unbelief]. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marvelled at among all those who have believed. This includes you because you have believed our testimony (2 Thess. 1:8–10, emphasis mine).

Everything about this age comes to crisis and finality in that day of judgment:

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

³ Geoffrey C. Bingham, *The Clash of the Kingdoms*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1989, pp. 132–3.

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 (2 Pet. 3:10–12).

The Restoration of All Things

The day of judgment is not only destruction, but also restoration—the destruction of all that is evil and the restoration of creation in the righteousness of God. (In fact we will see that there will be no salvation without the destruction of all that is evil; the two are the one act.) In proclaiming Jesus as the Lord and the Christ appointed by God, the apostles were indicating that all the Old Testament prophecies and promises concerning the glory of the future to be established by the Messiah, the Servant, the Seed, were secured in and by him.⁴ Much is made in the sermons in Acts 2 and 13 of Jesus' bodily 'incorruption' in his death (in contrast with David to whom promises of incorruption were made). In Acts 13:34 the fact that Christ was raised from the dead, never to decay, is a fulfilment of God's word of promise that the holy and sure promises given to David belong to him. Jesus in his resurrection is the beginning of the new creation, the irruption into this age of the age to come in resurrected, glorified flesh and blood reality. So, until the end of the age Jesus remains in heaven, until the time comes for God to restore everything (Acts 3:21)—but from there, even now, times of refreshing come from the Lord, particularly as men and women hear the gospel, repent, believe and find that their sins are wiped out (Acts 3:19).

In 2 Peter 3:13 we are taught that the day of judgment and the restoration of all things issues in a new heaven and a new earth, which is the home of righteousness. There will be nothing of sin, death, the devil, the world, nothing of any evil in the new world. (See Rev. 21:3–8 where this is not only purging of the tragic elements of life [v. 4] now, but also final judgment of the evil and immoral [v. 8].) What there will be is a creation, ruled by a renewed humanity all in full accord with the righteousness of God. This is the goal of the gospel.

Luther's comment on this verse lifts the heart!

How that is to pass away we cannot know, except that the promise is that such a heaven and earth are to exist. Therein no sin, but righteousness only, and the children of God shall dwell. Paul also says, there shall be pure love, pure joy, and nothing but God's kingdom (Rom. 14:17).

Here some may disquiet themselves as to whether the saints shall exist in heaven or on the earth. The text seems to imply that man shall dwell upon the earth, yet so that all heaven and earth shall be a paradise where God dwells, for God dwells not only in heaven, but in all places. Wherefore, the elect shall be also even where he is.⁵

Questions for discussion

How much has the matter of future judgment—to destruction or to restoration—featured in the proclamation of the gospel which you have undertaken or which you have heard?

What could make the proclamation of these matters difficult for us in our day and our culture?

filled with hope and joy, working in godliness

⁴ See Martin Bleby's study from last month, *The Gospel and the Whole Counsel of God*, pp. 6–12, to get a good introductory sweep of these promises in the Old Testament.

⁵ Martin Luther, *Commentary on Peter and Jude*, Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, 1990, p. 285.

The church created by the gospel in which the proclamation of the end of the age has its right place is essentially a community of hope and joy in which there is a dynamic outworking towards godliness in life. Listen to Paul's rejoicing about the effect of the gospel in the Thessalonian church:

For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction . . . They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath (1 Thess. 1:4–5, 9b–10).

Hope is not to be understood merely as being 'positive about the future', which it seems to have come to mean for many today. Hope in New Testament terms is to have one's heart and mind focussed on the day of judgment when Christ comes and ends this age and establishes the restoration of all things in the age to come. The coming of Christ is a constant matter on the tongue of those who believe, and it shapes all their action in this world. This is the recurrent theme about those who believe the gospel in the New Testament. Paul speaks of his own personal hope as he anticipates the end of his earthly ministry in this way:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing (2 Tim. 4:7–8),

and in Titus 2:11–13 he speaks of all Christian living and purposeful godliness now to be done in the light of our waiting for the fulfilment of the blessed hope:

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

This hope is deeply linked with deep joy for believers. Peter's exalting doxology at the start of his first letter shows the deep joy of hope:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls (1 Pet. 1:3–9).

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the source, the creative power of new birth and of the hope into which God in his mercy has brought us (v. 3) and also of the imperishable, unspoil- ing and unfading inheritance that awaits us (v. 4). Jesus' ascension and session at the right hand of the Father is the safeguarding of our future ('kept in heaven for you'—v. 4b), and his intercession there means that we are safeguarded by God's power now against all attacks which would seek to close that future to us (v. 5). Jesus Christ is our future; we will be taken into the fullness of all he is. John puts it this way in his first letter:

Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure (1 John 3:2–3; cf. 1 Pet. 1:5, 7).

It is the dynamic of hope issuing in joy that sustains us against despair in the face of various trials and difficulties (v. 6). Hope recognises that the trials are serving a purpose towards the end—proving the genuineness of faith in us (v. 7). On the day of the revelation of Jesus Christ, there will be great praise and glory and honour for all that the Father has done in his great mercy.

This joy and hope is not understood by the surrounding world, especially as hope trains us to not live according to the mores of the surrounding world, shaped as they are by the powers and dynamics of this present age, this corrupt generation. In 1 Peter 2:11–12 Peter exhorts us to abstain from sinful desires which war against the soul—that is, which stand in opposition to the salvation of our souls which God is working through Christ. In this world we are to live lives shaped by the future, the new heaven and new earth where righteousness dwells, and the expectation is that those who live according to the dynamic of this age will be able to make no sense of this life we are called to, and in fact will think it foolish and even evil:

Live such good lives among the pagans that, though accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us (1 Pet. 2:12).

For you have spent enough time in the past doing what the pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you. But they will have to give an account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead (1 Pet. 4:3–5).

It is essential for godliness and holiness in the life of God's people now that we have large in our vision the future end of the age in which all things will be restored. Cutting hope short is like cutting the roots of a tree; there is no flourishing growth of holiness in the life of God's people. And with this loss there is the loss of true witness to the gospel in the world.

Questions for discussion

How does the loss of future hope work out in the loss of godliness in life now?

What are the implications of the hope and joy of the gospel, and the freedom that this implies, for the manner of our mission? How does hope stop the mission of God's people becoming fossilised into particular set forms?

'IN WHICH RIGHTEOUSNESS DWELLS'

The new heaven and new earth are the home of righteousness (2 Pet. 3:13). 'Righteousness' in this setting means the substantial and full rightness, justice, goodness and truth of God, seen to be permeating and filling all things so that all things themselves share in that righteousness. The goal of God's justifying us (His declaring us righteous) in Christ is that we come to participate fully and unalloyed in his righteousness. Karl Barth said that in the doctrine of justification:

... we have to do with the turning, the movement, the transition of the existence of man without God and dead into the existence of man living for God.⁶

Righteousness is not meant to remain an objective and external declaration—God's justification of us finds its full fruit in our participation in his righteousness.

⁶ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 4, part 1, p. 520, quoted in Carl E. Braaten, *Justification: The Article by Which the Church Stands or Falls*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1990, p. 67.

At the end of his fine collection lectures for a gathering of largely young ministers, *The Work of Christ*, P. T. Forsyth has a fine chapter entitled 'The Threefold Cord'. In this chapter Forsyth shows the intrinsic and deep connection of the triumphant, satisfactory and regenerative aspects of the work of Christ. Of these three he says:

The first emphasises the finality of our Lord's victory over the evil power or devil; the second, the finality of His satisfaction, expiation, or atonement presented to the holy power of God; and the third the finality of His sanctifying or new-creative influence on the soul of man. The first marked the Early Church, the second the Medieval and the Reformation Church, while the third marks the Modern Church.⁷

His concern in this chapter is to show the deep inter-connectedness of these three, centred in the cross in which the active and effective principle:

. . . was the perfect obedience of holy love which He offered amidst the conditions of sin, death, and judgment. The potent thing was not the suffering but the sanctity, and not the sympathetic confession of our sin so much as the practical confession of God's holiness. This principle (I hope to show) co-ordinates the various aspects which have been distorted by isolation . . . it is in this moral medium of holiness (if I may so say) that these three effects pass and play into each other with a spiritual interpenetration.⁸

The purpose of this study is not to review Forsyth's whole argument here, but he does help us to see the deep connection between God's justifying and sanctifying work in us:

God alone can create in us the holiness that will please Him. And this He has done in Jesus Christ incarnate. But it is in Jesus Christ as the creator of man's holiness, not as the organ of it, as man's sanctifier, and not merely man's delegate. Christ is our reconciler because on the Cross He was our redeemer from sin's power into no mere independence or courage or safety, but into real holiness; because the same act that redeems us produces holiness, and presents us in this holiness to God and His communion . . .

Christ's holiness is the satisfying thing to God, because it is not only the means but also the anticipation of our holiness, because it carries all our future holiness latent in it and to God's eye patent; because in His saving act He is the creative power of which our new life is the product. It is not only that Christ conquered for Himself and emerged with His soul for a prey, but, He being what He was, His victory contained ours. If He died, all died. It was not only that all the sin of the world, pointed to its worst, could not make Him a sinner. It was that by all the holiness of eternity He had power to make the worst sinners saints. Of course, there is no way to sanctification but by deliverance from sin, by being 'unsinned.' But no sinful man can 'unsin' himself, however he amend. It can only be done by the creation in him of a new life.⁹

Forsyth reminds us that one of the great Reformation truths was that faith is the most mighty and active thing in the soul, springing up to a constancy of good works. He says:

. . . that our faith is our all before God, that it is an energy of the whole person, that good works are done by this whole believing person, and that faith by its very nature, as trust in God's love, is bound to work out in love.¹⁰

What is most important to see here is that righteousness and holiness are not secondary and responsive to the justifying work of God in us in Christ, but are deeply connected. This is because both our righteousness and sanctification (as well as our redemption) are in the

⁷ P. T. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ*, New Creation Publications, Blackwood, (1910) 1994, p. 199.

⁸ Forsyth, p. 2012.

⁹ Forsyth, pp. 208–9.

¹⁰ Forsyth, p. 218.

solidarity of Christ with us: ‘All turns upon [this] solidarity’.¹¹ It is he who has been made all this for us:

We are justified only as we are incorporate (not clothed) in the perfect righteousness of Christ, our Regenerator, and not in proportion as the righteousness of Christ has made palpable way in us. It is not as Christ is in us that we are saved, but as we are in Christ. It is this being in Christ for our justification that makes justification necessarily work out to sanctification, and forgiveness be one with eternal life.¹²

¹¹ Forsyth, p. 214.

¹² Forsyth, p. 215.