

# Water and Fire

A Sermon by Robert Jackson

The text for this sermon is **2 Peter 3:3-13**

## 1. Faith

- The passage opens with a conversation with some opposers of Christianity. There is a New Testament theme (from the book of Acts onward) of the Gospel *going out*, but being *opposed* – and the more it spreads the more strongly it is opposed. However, the church is always strengthened by overcoming that opposition.
- Peter presents us with 2 arguments from scoffers, and also with 3 of his own counter-arguments. We can isolate each part of the argument in this way:
- **1<sup>st</sup> argument:** The world is stable, nothing will change. When we look at history, it is always the same old story. Why should we ever believe in an interventionist God? Why believe that the future will be any different from the past? This view is called *Nihilism*: the world has no point – it's going nowhere.
- **1st counter-argument:** God *created* the world, and also *destroyed* it and then *remade* it in the flood. How easily people forget all that God has done! God intervenes all through history – look at the story of the Exodus from Egypt... We cannot even imagine how many other times God has worked radically in the world. This universe is *not* stable! It is a world where the living God is active.
- **2nd argument:** God is slow in keeping his promises. “Why?” is a hard question to ask in times of hardship. Another gut-wrenching question is “*How long?*” How long must I suffer/struggle/endure? When will God prove himself to be faithful? When will God fulfil his promises? When will he be my shield? We struggle with thinking that God is slow in keeping his promises.
- **2nd counter-argument:** A day is like a thousand years to God. Time is nothing to God. He sees the beginning and the end. *Blackboard illustration:* If time is a line of events written on a blackboard, God is standing outside of it – he can see all time at once before him (Luke 20:38). How presumptuous we are to question God's timing! God can see the end – he knows all the angles – we don't. We should always trust that God will work when it is best.
- **3rd counter-argument:** God is not slow, he is *patient*. When God waits or is silent toward us, this doesn't show disinterest, but how patient he is with us. This shows God's mercy – he gives everyone time to change and overcome; he allows us to be refined through trial. God wants all people to come to him: **Ezekiel 18:23**.
- **Conclusions:** The world looks for outward signs, but faith is in what is unseen, namely the promises of God. We need to be people of the promise, not people who look for signs.
  - But the truth is, evidence of God is all around us, if only we look through eyes of faith.
  - Don't build your life believing in a stable universe; this is a world where God is *active!*

## 2. The Word

- This passage teaches that God created the world by his powerful word – his declaration, his command. The passage also teaches that the universe is *sustained* by his word. As the song says: “The waves and winds still know his voice who ruled them while he dwelt below.”
- On one level, this reference to God’s “word” could refer to the Bible. It is recorded in Genesis 1 that God said “Let there be light.” It says in Isaiah 66:26 that “With fire God will execute judgement on all men.” It says in Colossians 1 that all things are held together in Him. The point is that the *Bible* records that God made the world, sustains the world, and will recreate it one day. So, in a sense, 2 Peter 3:5-7 refers to the Bible – the recorded revelation.
- However, this is *not* the primary sense of the passage. Primarily, it refers to God’s actual voice. The universe exists because God is speaking it. His voice represents his *creative power* and *authority*. The universe does not exist by its own power, but by God’s strength. It is not a self-ordering system – it is ordered by God, and the physical laws which God has established.
- And so, everything is sustained by God’s powerful word. “Word” translates the Greek “*logos*” (used in John 1). Often, we think of a “word” as a stationery, dead thing on a page. But this is not the *logos*! The *logos* can be translated as a *poem*, a *speech*, a *story* told by a storyteller, a *parable*, a *conversation*... it is the *spoken* word, the word in action, the living word, the word that has gone out into the world, the word in a poem that inspires us, in a parable that convicts us... Jesus is the *Logos* because he is all God ever wanted to say to us.
- Everything is held together because God is speaking it. God’s living word sustains us and gives us hope. Implicit in this passage is the fact that one day, God will stop speaking and everything will come to end. However, the purpose of this is to bring in a new birth, a new creation, which leads to the last point...

## 3. That Day

- The first big thing Peter wants to say about Judgement Day is that it will come like a thief. Romans 13:11: Our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed... A very interesting verse! All we can be certain of is that today, the end is nearer than yesterday!
- It seems that much in this passage could be figurative. Will there really be a roar (v10)? Will everything melt? Peter is writing in the only language he knows – the apocalyptic language of God’s judgement from the Old Testament prophets. However, one thing seems very certain:
- Over and over Peter says that the world will be *burnt by fire*: v7, 10, 13. God is a consuming fire. The heavens and the earth will be destroyed by fire. We need to get this right. The words *heavens*, *earth* and *elements* are all used interchangeably... the “heavens” refers to the physical universe. Genesis 1 says “God created the heavens and the earth”. This does *not* refer to the spiritual and physical realms, but to the *earth* and *outer space*. The “heavens” means *outer space* – the universe outside of earth. Only recently have we stopped using the English word “heavens” to refer to the sky and everything beyond it.

- Everything will be burnt with fire and *destroyed*. On the day of Judgement, this will *not* be a cleansing or purifying fire. It is not a trial or a test. It will bring the world to an end – lay the earth bare – the heavens will be laid bare – and the state of all things will be *revealed* – nothing will be left hidden. That Day will be the ultimate revelation – everyone will see the truth about God and about themselves.
- Then comes a rhetorical question in v11. Look closely at it. (Peter answers himself, in case we were wondering what the answer was!) Often, we are tempted to skip over all the theology in a chapter and say “OK, what have I got to do? Just give me the applications.” If we do this in 2 Peter 3, we say “Look, I don’t understand all this water and fire stuff, where are the commands?: OK, I need to be *holy, godly, spotless, blameless...* Great; where does that leave me? These are the hardest commands I’ve ever seen!”
- But this is *not* how the Bible presents it! God always starts from our *heart*, he always gives *reasons* to obey, he always seeks to *inspire* and *empower* us to follow Him. Maybe you’re not interested in theology. But what is theology? *Theology is your understanding of God*. The Bible is full of theology – it is there to help us to know God – to see his heart, see his plans, understand his promises – and there are many promises here in 2 Peter 3! When we know God, this will be our motivation to serve Him.
- Our focus in reading the Bible should be God’s nature – following God comes from this. The Bible makes this clear in v11: *since* you know this, *since* you live before a God who’ll destroy the world, *since* you know how it will all end, *how will you live?* What will you do with your life? Will you live as if this is it – this is world is all there is? Or will you live a life pleasing to God?
- Peter underscores this by following his challenge with a glorious promise: **v13**. The new heavens and the new earth are one and the same – in the world to come, there will be no distinction between the physical and spiritual realms. It will be a new world of spirit triumphing over matter.
- We are told that heaven is the home of *righteousness*. The *physical* laws of this universe will all be superseded in heaven – the spirit will reign. However, God’s *moral* law will continue – the moral law is an extension of God’s heart – it will never change.
- And heaven will be *Home* - a resting place for our soul: A permanent dwelling place. Heaven is the ultimate promise of the Bible – it means that our life is leading somewhere, our life is meaningful, and our actions have an eternal effect. The knowledge of heaven gives our lives a greater scope and glory than we can even imagine. Praise God for His glorious promises, and praise God that He is always faithful!

## Summary

- Faith must be grounded in the knowledge that God is active in our lives, and that we can always trust that God will uphold his promises.
- I looked at how the world is sustained by God’s voice, and that one day, he will stop speaking, and everything will be renewed.
- Finally, I analysed various aspects of the day of judgement, and reminded us that heaven is what we’re living for.