

ADVENTure: Back to the Future
By Jason Huff
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Joel 3:9-16; Luke 21:25-31; 2 Peter 3:3-14

Our final Scripture reading is from 2 Peter 3:3-14. May God add His blessing on His holy and inerrant Word. “First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.” But they deliberately forget that long ago by God’s word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. 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 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. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.”

We’ve had quite an adventure the last two weeks! Just as a refresher, two weeks ago we traveled into truly ancient history with the help of our handy dandy Wayback Machine. We looked at the 4000+ years before Jesus and saw some of the main signs, symbols, prophecies, and promises that God made about the Messiah. Last week, we moved forward into the time of Jesus. We crashlanded and spent several months in Nazareth and Bethlehem around the time of Jesus’ birth, investigating what it might have been like as a typical Jewish citizen who happened to know Mary and Joseph. We got a fresh perspective on how Jesus’ birth looked to the world in His day.

But today, we’re going to do something radically different. Last time, we messed up the Wayback Machine by setting the controls to the wrong date. But this time, we are giving the Wayback Machine an even harder task – heading into the future. Specifically, the future that we see described for us in Scripture.

The Wayback Machine can’t actually travel into the future, but it can take us into the possible futures that people understand Scripture might be telling us about. So not only do we put in “Jesus’ second coming” as our travel date, we give the Wayback Machine a ton of data. We feed in all the Scriptures related to the subject, including all the Old Testament passages about the Day of the Lord and the coming of one like a Son of Man. We also input commentaries and sermons on the topic from throughout history, from the earliest days of the church to modern times. And the Wayback Machine has a lot of possible futures to show us.

One possibility is that known as postmillennialism. (I'll give you the proper names for them – you don't have to remember them unless they're useful for sorting things out.) In this scenario, surprisingly enough, the world just gets better and better. As the gospel of Jesus spreads throughout the world, people get calmer, wars start to cease, everyone starts to get enough food. We see peaceful co-existence. There is a symbolic thousand year reign of Jesus that spiritually started at His resurrection but now breaks into our world literally. After everyone start singing "Kum Ba Ya" but before we all head into space with our Star Trek style perfection, Jesus returns to lead His people home and judge the world.

Now this view started in the 17th century and was really popular as technology and science progressed to a point where we could see the whole world being evangelized. In its early days, conservative Christians like the famous Reformed preacher Jonathan Edwards held this. But by the early 20th century, this was expected mostly by liberal theologians who weren't really sure about the second coming at all but thought the world's progress was a good thing. This view nearly died out after the pessimism and decline of Christianity in Europe following World War I and II, and it's never made a comeback, but it's one possibility.

The Wayback Machine then takes us on a fascinating trip both to a real past and a possible future. The Wayback Machine goes back to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD and shows us how many events in Revelation have parallels to how Jerusalem fell to the Romans. In fact, many prophecies people assume are about future events are actually about past events.

In this possibility, some of the apocalyptic events of the Bible are repeated a second time at Jesus' second coming, but a lot of them have been fulfilled. In this, what's known as the preterist possibility, Jesus judged the Jewish people in 70AD. He will come back again in the future to put an end to the world as we know it, to recreate it, and bring judgment and final reward. But in this scenario, we aren't sure what will happen at the second coming because some of the events in Scripture have already been fulfilled. .

Then it takes us to another possibility. This is the one popularized by the Left Behind series and all sorts of variations. It's called premillennialism, and there are tons of different things we see here. In some versions, before a major tribulation happens, Jesus comes back to rapture away all believers. In other versions, the rapture happens after the tribulation.

But in any case, in this possibility, all the prophecies in the Bible about the Day of the Lord, all of the book of Revelation, every symbol and sign in them is taken literally and matches up with a real-life counterpart. There's immense conflict around the world, maybe another world war with billions of lives lost. Christians are persecuted everywhere and martyred. And just when all hope seems lost, Jesus returns again on the clouds to start a thousand year reign on the earth, to take His people into the New Jerusalem, and judge evil once and for all.

Now these are not the only options the Wayback Machine shows us. In fact, there are dozens more, variations on a theme, changes here, changes there, a timeline difference, an odd belief here or there. The ancient church believed in some options that would really make us look at them funny. They loved apocalyptic literature – it was a genre they knew and understood far better than we do – and they had ideas that were unique to their day.

And it's also clear that no one church has a lock on any one idea. Many Reformed and Presbyterian people like us have differing views on which one is going to happen. There is no one Catholic or Protestant view. Whether you're Baptist or Anglican or Lutheran or some other Christian group, you probably don't have everyone seeing eye to eye on this.

And that's because number one, it's the future, and number two, the information about the second coming of Jesus is spread out among multiple books written by multiple authors talking from multiple viewpoints in multiple contexts. For example, Paul talks about the rapture of Christians being taken up from the earth on Jesus' return, but it doesn't appear anywhere else. What we heard from 2 Peter today is not found (directly, at least) in Revelation.

When Jesus came the first time, the prophecies about Him were scattered all across the Old Testament...some in the law, others in the prophets, others in the psalms. And because each one had its own context, some were more subtle than others, sometimes the scribes and Pharisees completely missed that certain verses were about the Messiah. Only with hindsight, only looking backward, did everything make sense.

But did you catch one thing? In every scenario, in every possibility I mentioned, what was the one thing that was absolutely agreed upon, even if some took it literally and some took it figuratively? *Jesus Christ is coming back.* No matter how it all pans out, Jesus is going to return to judge the living and the dead, to send some to eternal judgment and others to eternal life. He will eventually bring the age to a close, and this world and its universe will no longer exist, and a new heaven and a new earth will take their place. Eternity is marked by the return of Jesus.

Everyone is agreed in this. It is not a game of baseball where everyone gets a certain number of innings. It's like basketball or football, and the timer is running. No one knows how long is left, but once the timer hits zero, those are your results. There is no overtime. There are no do-overs. When Christ comes back, that's how things stand with regards to judgment.

There's no escaping this doctrine or this idea. As Peter wrote in today's passage, though the LORD may seem slow to us, He is anything but. His delay is so that more people do not perish without Jesus. Some scoff and say, "The world is just as it always has been." They have no thought of a final reckoning. But both the Old and New Testament are unanimous on this verdict. While there are reckonings here and now at various times and places, there is a final one coming. And Advent, as a season, is meant to get us thinking about that fact.

So what do we do with this idea? If parts of the church decided it was a good idea to spend a month of the year concerned with the second coming of Jesus, we should be paying attention. There are important ideas for us to remember about the second coming: don't panic and don't procrastinate but prepare.

First, let's go with "don't panic." The second coming of Jesus can be a frightening topic because many passages about the Day of the Lord and Jesus' return include destructive imagery, fiery judgment, the actual heavens and earth coming down. When God appears throughout Scripture, the chief reaction of the people He appears to is abject terror. And the response of God and His angels almost every time is, "Do not fear."

We are not meant to be terrified by the second coming. The world will weep and mourn because they'll have missed out; they'll learn that everything they were striving for is nothing but dust and wind, and it will be too late to change their minds. It will be a catastrophe for them because the God they have rejected and ignored will prove Himself, and they won't be able to avoid His wrath.

But as 2 Peter says, we're looking forward to it. We look forward to the new heavens and the new earth. We look forward to all this because we know that God is good and He is gracious to us and has given us salvation through His son Jesus. In Luke 21 and Isaiah 51, both passages about God's coming salvation and the calamity before it, we're told to "raise our heads" and "lift our eyes." We don't need to be worried because God is on our side. Panic is not in our nature anymore as believers.

We don't panic by taking an unhealthy interest in the date and time it might happen. Jesus taught His disciples in Matthew 24 and Mark 13 that the exact moment of the second coming is an event left only for the Father to know. If Jesus Himself, at least in His human life, did not know the hour of His second coming, we should not be worried about figuring it out. In fact, Scripture warns that many will predict its coming – and we're to avoid those people.

Is the time ripe for the second coming? Absolutely. But most periods of history have thought the same thing. So many cults have set the date and time for the end of the world only to live right on through them. So while we should take note of signs in our days, we should not assume that they mean the end is near.

This also means that we don't panic by giving up our jobs or taking a stance that we should *only* wait. Paul wrote two letters to the church in Thessalonike because the believers there kept being led astray by rumors that Jesus had come back and they'd missed it. Some had given up working, some may have been fasting waiting for the day...it was a big deal. And Paul taught them to continue doing good and living Christian lives, and not to sit around holding hands waiting for the end to come. In the same way, we should live in preparation and expectation, with joyful anticipation and not worried anxiety.

That leads to the second point: first, don't panic, second, don't procrastinate but prepare. The temptation is there to think that there will always be more time. And that's simply not the case. Every day is an opportunity to honor the Lord; every day is a chance to do what is right in His eyes, to grow closer to Him, and to prepare for what is to come. Being prepared rather than procrastinating is the key to not panicking.

Here is how Peter describes our preparation: "You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming." Then in verse 14: "So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him."

Often times, we think, “I have time to build my spiritual life later. One day I’ll read the whole Bible. One day I’ll start up daily devotions. One day I’ll ask Pastor Jason to mentor me in becoming a better disciple.” The problem is, “one day” is always one day later than now. When something genuinely interests us, we find a way to make it happen and happen soon. Somehow we got Star Wars tickets on opening weekend despite that tickets were hard to find and we had church events Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. We made time for that because it matters, at least to the boys and me. (I’m not going to throw Catha under the bus on this one!)

What you put off, you likely won’t do. And when either Christ comes or you reach the end of your life, you don’t want to go to Jesus with the line, “I was going to start being a better disciple tomorrow.” Paul tells us that the Christian’s deeds will be examined like the unbeliever. What we build on Christ’s foundation will be our reward in the afterlife. In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul describes that some win a great reward, while others will be saved but as though escaping through the flames. And if you haven’t truly pledged yourself to Jesus, if your salvation is at stake, then there’s even more reason not to procrastinate. How eternity looks for you changes drastically on whether or not you are in the Lord’s family.

So prepare. Think about holiness and godliness in what you do. Do your hobbies, your work, your play, your family life, do they reflect what God would have for us? This does not have to become an obsession where we can’t move in fear that we’ll get it wrong, but it does mean we know God through His Word well enough to live in confidence that we are living rightly in front of Him. When it says to “make every effort to be found spotless, blameless, and at peace with Him,” it means it’s going to take time and exertion.

Here’s the good news: God is not going to hop in the Wayback Machine and condemn everything we once did in our past if we come to Him and make the turnaround, change our ways, and turn to Him – if we repent. Our pasts aren’t spotless and blameless; maybe even our recent pasts are spotted after we turned to Him. That’s OK – turn back again. Don’t delay thinking your past rules your future. You have the opportunity to do what’s right now. That is what God looks at – where are you now? Are you His child now? Are you following His Son now? The past is gone, and our sins are covered by what Jesus did on the cross for us. So prepare, knowing that God is not worried about where you were – He’s guiding your now.

Friends, I hope our trips in the Wayback Machine have been helpful and even a little fun. We’ve seen the past, present, and possible futures as the Bible describes them. As we head from Advent into Christmas, it’s my prayer for us that our preparations and joy about Christ’s second coming would not be limited to a few weeks in December but would influence us year round, that with joyful hearts we could call out the cry of the church over all the ages: “Come, Lord Jesus.”