

Last night I heard J. J. Wright's "O Come, Emmanuel" at the Notre Dame Basilica,
with the Notre Dame Children's Choir.

The song, O Come, O Come, Emmanuel is an adaptation of the "O Antiphons" –
a set of early medieval advent prayers.

In Wright's setting, he has the children sing "O come, O come, O come..."
probably 50 times over.

And the way he does it doesn't get boring!

With at least three different parts, staggered in waves –
you hear wave after wave of voices crying out –
pleading "O come, O come, O come, O come..."
echoing thousands of voices over hundreds of years –
voices crying out for salvation crashing over you!

The cynic says "Where is the promise of his coming?!"

Yes, they had asked that for 500 years after the restoration of Jerusalem!
And from the time of Malachi to the time of John the Baptist
there were 400 years of silence.

We are waiting – indeed we are hastening – the coming of the day of God.
And as we wait – and as we hasten – that day,
we would do well to imitate the faith of those who cried out through all ages:
"O come, O come, O come, O come!?"

Come quickly, Lord Jesus!

Peter's central concern in our passage tonight is to encourage us
with the *promise of his coming*.
To encourage us to be *patient* – and wait – and look eagerly –
waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God.

There are lots of voices around us that would call us away from our stability.
We need to make sure that we are listening to the voices of the apostles –
Peter and Paul and the rest of the scriptures.

Indeed, 2 Peter 3 helps us think about what it means for the apostolic teaching to be *scripture*.
Peter speaks of Paul's letters as being equivalent to the OT scripture –
"the other scriptures."

Peter himself reminds his hearers about his first letter –
which *probably* refers to 1 Peter,
but could also refer to a lost letter

(presumably Peter wrote more than two letters in his lifetime!).

Some people have asked “what would happen if we ever found a ‘lost’ apostolic letter?

We know that Paul wrote at least three letters to the Corinthians –

and it is almost certain that the apostles wrote far more
than we have contained in the N.T.

But while the apostolic teaching has always been *canon* –

the standard by which all Christian teaching must be measured –

that does not mean that we should add something else to the Bible.

There is a certain providential consideration that we should take seriously –

namely, if God saw fit to withhold a particular letter for 2,000 years,
then it obviously was not necessary for Christian faith and life!

So even if we find a letter that could be proved to be a genuine letter from an apostle,
it should not be included in the Bible,

because the apostolic church did not consider it worth saving.

So when Peter says that this is the second letter that he is writing,
it is entirely possible that it is a lost letter.

1. Water and Fire: The Flood and the Final Judgment (v1-10)

This is now the second letter that I am writing to you, beloved. In both of them I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder,² that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles,

Verses 1-7 are all about remembering and forgetting.

In verse 1, Peter reminds them to pay attention to the prophetic predictions,
and in verse 5, he says that the scoffers “deliberately forget.”

What does Peter want you to remember?

The predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord Jesus
through the apostles.

In other words,

remember that there a future judgment –
that the Lord Jesus will return!

And so therefore, remember the commandment of Jesus
that you have heard through the apostles.

What does he mean by “commandment”?

Well, as we keep seeing throughout 2 Peter,
what you believe must translate into how you live.

Peter uses the singular – “commandment,” instead of “commandments” –
because this what Jesus said in Matthew 22 –

what is the great commandment,
love the Lord your God with all your soul, mind, and strength –
and love your neighbor as yourself –

on these two commands depend all the law and the prophets.

Or as in John, this is my commandment that you love one another.

Douglas Moo summarizes this well:

“the basic demand that believers conform to the image of Christ,
becoming holy even as the God who called them is holy” (Moo, 164)

Our ethic is a eschatological ethic!

The command of our Lord and Savior through the apostles
is rooted in the predictions of the holy prophets.

And this eschatological focus continues in the rebuke of the scoffers in verses 3-7:

³ knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires.

By now you won't be surprised to hear that the adjective “sinful” is not in the Greek text.

The scoffers are simply “following their own desires.”
For the NT, any desire that is not oriented around the love of God and neighbor
is inherently problematic.

In our day, we tell people ‘follow your desires’ – ‘follow your heart’!

But the apostles reject that counsel.

Your desires will lead you astray.
Your desires will trip you up.

Do not follow your desires – do not follow your heart!

Deny yourself, take up your cross, and *follow Jesus!*
And if you *love God* with *all your heart* –
if you seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness –
then he will take care of all your needs!

He knows better than you what you really need!

And notice that the pattern of our Lord Jesus Christ

does not suggest that we just sit around and wait for things to happen!
No, rather, we need to be busy with *doing the things* that Christ calls us to do!
Because as we are busy in the work of loving God and neighbor,
we find ourselves in the place where God can do his work
of providing all that we need!

But the scoffers both neglect the command of the apostles *and* the predictions of the prophets:

⁴ They will say, “Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.” ⁵ For they deliberately

overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God,⁶ and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished.⁷ But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.

Think about how Peter says this:

The heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God...

Genesis 1 tells us that the Spirit of God hovered over the surface of the “deep.”

In other words, God formed the earth out of the “waters” by his word –
when God separated the dry land from the waters.

We often assume that “in the beginning was outer space” –
but Genesis starts with “the deep”!

And Genesis also talks about the *destruction* of the world by water:

and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished.

That’s a strong way of putting it!

But Peter is reading the Genesis story of the Flood the way it was written!

Nowadays we sometimes debate the question of the “extent” of the Flood.
Was it a local flood that destroyed all of humanity,
or was it a world-wide flood that destroyed the whole earth.

Peter argues for a third reading:

it was a *cosmic* flood that destroyed the heavens and the earth that then was.

Note how Peter compares then “then world” to the “heavens and earth that now exist”
in verse 7:

⁷ *But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.*

After all, if you read the Genesis account carefully, the Flood was not contained to the “earth”!
The windows of the *heavens* were opened! (Genesis 7:11)

In Genesis 1, when God separates the waters above from the waters beneath,
he establishes the “firmament”
as a barrier between the heavenly waters and the earthly waters.

In Genesis 7, the windows of heaven are opened –
and the heavenly waters come crashing down (until Genesis 8:2,
when God *closes* the windows of the heavens).

Some people have tried to provide scientific explanations for all of this.

But I would suggest that we need to be careful
not to try to read modern science back into the text.

(And creation science is just as modern as evolutionary science –
both are operating with a very modern view of the “universe”!)

Peter says that the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished.

And *that's what happened!*

A few years ago Darren Aronofsky made a movie about *Noah*.
A lot of Christians got all upset because he “messed” with the story!
But if you watch carefully,

everything that the bible says happens in Aronofsky’s *Noah*.
It may not happen in the way that your Sunday school teacher taught you!
But everything in the text is in the movie!

In other words, if Aronofsky had filmed the Flood –
if he was just the videographer, capturing it on live tape –
the story in the Bible would be *exactly true*.

We need to remember that the truth of the Bible
does not guarantee the truth of our interpretation of the Bible
(a point that Peter himself made back in chapter 1, verses 19-21).

And Peter compares the Flood to the Final Judgment:

⁷ *But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.*

Peter has been using the Flood and the story of Sodom and Gomorrah
as his examples of the coming judgment.
The Flood shows us a picture of utter destruction.
Sodom and Gomorrah shows us a picture of destruction by fire.

Put them together and you have utter destruction by fire!

Throughout the scriptures there is an important relationship between water and fire.
The basic principle is “first use water – if that doesn’t work, try fire.”

It’s an important principle in dealing with “clean and unclean.”
If a garment – or a house – has a spot of mold or mildew,
you first try to clean it with water.
If that works, great!
If not, burn it!

(And given what Ginger’s family has experienced with toxic mold,
I would point out that American society may need to consider

the general equity of that principle!
We seem to assume that houses will last forever –
but in the damp climates that prevail in much of North America,
we should expect to see many old houses in need of “cleansing by fire!”)

But the principle extends beyond houses and clothing!
In the Flood, God applied the same principle to the whole world!
Sin had contaminated humanity – it had infected the cosmos –
and so God cleansed the earth with water.
But the infection continued to spread –
water was not sufficient.

If water doesn't work, try fire!
And God gave warning of this by destroying Sodom and Gomorrah
with fire from heaven.

Indeed, you also see this in the two baptisms of Jesus.
He was baptized with water at the Jordan River –
he was baptized by fire at his death.
As Jesus said in Luke 12:49-50,
“I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it was already kindled!
I have a baptism to be baptized with,
and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!”
Jesus came to bring a fiery judgment on the earth.
But before he can baptize with the Spirit and fire,
he must himself first *be baptized* with the Spirit and with fire.

After all, if Jesus cast fire on the earth *before* his death and resurrection,
he would destroy all the earth – and all of us! – with that fire.

He underwent the fire of judgment so that we might be saved by the cleansing water of grace.
And so in a very real way, the principle still remains true:
if water does not cleanse you (in your baptism)
then all that remains is fire.

And that is the warning that Peter gives in verses 8-10:

⁸ *But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years,
and a thousand years as one day.*

Apparently, some thought that Jesus was taking a long time to return.
Some were interpreting Jesus words in the gospels
to mean that Jesus would return in their own lifetimes.
But Peter reminds us that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years,
and a thousand years as one day.

The scriptures are very clear that we will not know the day or the hour of Christ's return.
“the day of the Lord will come like a thief”!

Of course, the scripture also indicates that we will see the signs of his coming!
But the signs of his coming have been in place now for 2,000 years –
and every generation since the days of the apostles
has recognized those signs!!

Peter explains in verse 9 *why* the Lord is “taking his time.”

⁹ *The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, [a] not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.*

Why has Jesus not returned yet?

Because he is patient.
He does not want any to perish – but that all should reach repentance.

Some take this in the global sense:

The gospel must spread to the ends of the earth!
And while the cause of the gospel has suffered in Europe and N. America,
the good news of Jesus has now spread to every nation under heaven!

And that's true –

but Peter's point is more focused:
the Lord is patient toward you.

He does not wish that *you* would perish – but that *you* should reach repentance!

Because when the day of the Lord comes,
that will be the day of judgment.

And verse 10 then sets forth what that day will look like:

¹⁰ *But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies^[b] will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.*

In verse 10, the phrase “heavenly bodies” (also found in verse 12)
is the Greek word *stoicheia* – which the KJV translated “elements.”

Modern chemistry has identified 118 elements –
but that modern sense of “element” is almost certainly *not* what Peter is thinking!
But it is probably closer than “heavenly bodies.”
In the ancient world, the elements were earth, air, fire, and water.

Some translators think that heavens and heavenly bodies
are in view in the first part of the verse,
while earth and the works done on it are in view in the second part –

but if you look down to verse 12,
that would suggest that the fire of the final judgment
is restricted to the heavenlies
(the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved,
and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn),

whereas Peter seems to be quite clear in this passage that the heavens and the earth
will all go up in flames –
and so verse 12 should also be translated,
“the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved,
and the elements will melt as they burn.”

The fiery judgment is coming –
and when it comes, “the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.”
God will judge each one according to his deeds.

And that is why Peter then exhorts you in verse 11:

2. He Is Coming! The New Heavens and New Earth (v11-13)

“Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies [elements] will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.”

This heavens and this earth is going to go up in flames!
And we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

First let me deal with the obvious question:

What does Peter mean by a new heavens and a new earth?
There are two considerations that should help make sense of this.
First, consider the Flood.

Peter has spoken of the destruction of the *cosmos* that then was.
Did God actually destroy the heavens and the earth in the Flood?
Probably not.

But in the utter obliteration of all of humanity (except for Noah and his family)
God wiped out the world!

In the same way, the language of setting the heavens on fire
and melting the elements probably does not need to be taken literally!

But it should be taken *seriously*!

And that brings me to the second consideration for understanding what is meant here.
Consider Jesus.
If you would understand the relationship between the heavens and the earth that now is

and the new heavens and new earth,
then look at the glorified body of Jesus!

Not just the resurrected body of Jesus (which we see in the gospels) –
but the glorified body of Jesus (which we see in the book of Revelation).

Paul talks about this in 1 Corinthians 15 –
our current bodies are *soulish* bodies –
characterized by flesh and blood.
But the glorified body is a *spiritual* body –
characterized by the Spirit of God.

It will still be a *body* – it is still physical!
But it will no longer be characterized by corruption and decay.

In the same way, the new creation – the new heavens and new earth –
will be characterized by righteousness.

But notice the verb that Peter uses to describe us:
“waiting” (verses 12, 13, and 14).

This word translated “waiting” in verses 12, 13, and 14
is a word that has to do with *looking forward*.
The Christian is one who *looks forward* –
because this “waiting” is not a passive thing.

Notice how our “forward looking” influences our actions:
verse 12 – waiting and hastening
verse 13 – waiting for new heavens and a new earth...
and verse 14 – since you are waiting for these,
be diligent...

How is it that we *hasten* the coming of the day of God?
Well, as the gospel goes forth to the ends of the earth –
we are hastening the coming of that final day!
If we pray, “Come quickly, Lord Jesus” –
then we should be busy with the *work* of bringing the good news of Jesus
to those around us!

What does it look like to bring the good news of Jesus to those around you?
It’s mostly a matter of saying, “Come and see.”
Bring your friends and colleagues to church – to small group –
to Village during the summer.
And, for that matter, if you have a few friends who are interested,
let’s do a Bible study together!
That’s kind of how the Monday night group got started.

Making disciples, according to the Lord Jesus
consists of baptizing and teaching them to observe all that Jesus commanded.

In our baptism we are joined to the life of the Triune God –

as Peter said at the beginning of 2 Peter (1:3-4)

“His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness,
through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence,
by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises,
so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature,
having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of desire”
(again, the word “sinful” isn’t there in the Greek).

Peter is contrasting *faith* with *desire* –

our desires lead us away from faith.

But by *faith* we already begin to participate in this new creation –

this new heavens and new earth – and so:

3. So Be Diligent to Be Found by Him Without Spot or Blemish – and at Peace (v14-18)

¹⁴ Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace.

We saw in the previous chapter how Peter describes the false teachers

as “blots and blemishes, reveling in their deceptions, while they feast with you.”

Now you are called to be *diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish – and at peace*.

This is who you are!

Peter has already said that you have been cleansed from your former sins (1:9) –
don’t forget that!

You have been joined to the life of the Son of God!

So be diligent in following the pattern of Christ!

¹⁵ And count the patience of our Lord as salvation,

Don’t be like the scoffers!

The scoffers use the patience of the Lord

as a pretext for following their own desires!

“Oh, Jesus is taking a long time to return?

I’ll just go do my own thing for a while –

I’ll have time to get ready later...”

Jesus himself warned that such an attitude could result in getting a nasty surprise later!

So count the patience of our Lord as salvation –

just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, ¹⁶ as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as

they do the other Scriptures. ¹⁷ *You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability.*

Peter seems to see a certain “antinomian” streak
in those who “twist” Paul to their own destruction.

That’s hardly surprising!

Paul himself saw the same danger.

In Romans, Paul seems to realize that some people will say,
“let us sin, that grace may abound”!

In other words, “I like to sin, God likes to forgive – we make a great team!!”

But Paul soundly condemned that attitude –

and Peter here joins his caution –
if your interpretation of Paul leads you to ignore

the commandment of our Lord and Savior through his apostles,
if it leads you to downplay the important of Christian ethics,
then you are twisting Paul to your own destruction!

We must always interpret Paul in harmony with the rest of the NT.

I have known some who seem to take the stance that Paul is the lens through which
we read the rest of the Bible.

That approach has been a hallmark of antinomian teaching since the days of Marcion!

So – since you know that there is a tendency to twist Paul in that direction –
take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people
and lose your own stability.

Instead,

¹⁸ *But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.*

Peter’s closing benediction reminds us of the central point of his epistle.

The Christian ethic is primarily an eschatological ethic.

In reply to those who get fixated on trying to “fix” the here and now –

Peter urges us to grow in the grace and knowledge
of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

He is coming again!

And so therefore our life in the present age must be centered around him
(to him be the glory *now*)
as well as in the age to come (and to the day of eternity).

Come quickly, Lord Jesus!!