

“Reminders For Right Thinking” Part 3

Holiness

Dr. Bruce Bickel

2 Peter 3:1-10

March 11, 2016

Bruce: Lou, let’s go into the presence of the Lord and prepare our hearts for what He might have for us today. *(Music.)*

Lord Jesus, there’s a sweetness about being together with members of our family. We thank You, Lord, for the body of Christ, for the church of the Lord Jesus. Father, we pray that You once again in Your faithfulness would open our eyes, that we might behold You in Your glory, for Jesus’ sake. Amen and Amen.

Let’s turn again in our Bibles, please, to 2 Peter chapter 3. Again we’ll be looking at verses 1-10. I promise we’ll get off of this one of these days. *(Laughter.)* It’s about our third week on this particular passage. But it’s so important for us to understand the warning that Peter is giving us. So let us listen to the word of the Lord, beginning in 2 Peter chapter 3, verses 1-10.

Peter writes this. *“This is now the second letter that I am writing to you, beloved. In both of them I am stirring up your sincere minds by way of reminder, that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets, and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles, knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. 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. But 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, and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. But by the same word the heavens and the earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly. 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. The Lord is not slow to fulfill His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. For the day of the Lord will come like a thief. And then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.”* This is the word of the Lord.

Men Thanks be to God.

Bruce: Amen and Amen. Now if I were going to be a scoffer, one of those persons with whom Peter is warning us about, I think I would probably take the similar approach that they would have by saying this. Since God has not done anything actively and there’s not much going on in creation, and God is not involved with us intimately; He just created the world and put its own methodology, and it just runs its own self. There is no external influence in the history of the world. And so they began to scoff at the predictions that the Lord Jesus would come again, reign in all of His glory, deal with sin, deal with the iniquities of this world, punish them and redeem those who are part of the elect.

And the scoffers were saying this. Since that has not happened yet, how can you really trust God? Now we’ve dealt with this over the last couple of weeks. If I were one of those men, if I were a scoffer, I think I would probably take this approach. The thing I would question most, I

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think, because of God’s seeming inactivity in being involved much in the history of the world, I think that I would attempt to doubt His power. I would just say that He doesn’t have the power to do what He said He was going to do.

Remember, the prophets had said that He was going to come in all of His glory, would redeem the lost, would redeem His own, and punish the wicked. And the scoffers were saying, “Since this has not happened in this generation, how can we really trust God?” And so they began to scoff at the ridiculousness of God saying that He would come in all of His glory at the Second Coming.

And I guess that if I were one of those scoffers, I would be challenged to say that God has threatened what He is not able to perform. God has said something that He can’t really do.

And if I were a scoffer, I think that I would doubt His power. I’d probably say, “The reason the world is so stable is that it doesn’t have any outside influence from God Himself, it’s because God is powerless to do what He said He is going to do.

Now Peter’s third defense against these scoffers is dealing with God’s power. He’s basically saying that these scoffers address the very issue—the power of God

We’ve already seen previously that God has addressed these scoffers. Peter, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit has said that you’ve got to remember a couple of things. You’ve got to remember God’s providence, God’s intervention in the world through God’s providential care. We discussed that.

Last week we talked about God’s perspective on time. A thousand years is like a day to the Lord, and one day is like a thousand years. We have to have God’s perspective on time.

And today we want to look at God’s perspective on power. Why does He delay? Why is it that God has delayed what He said He was going to do? Is there a reason? The scoffers were saying this. “He just doesn’t have the power to pull off what He said He was going to do. So Peter addresses them from this point of view. He utters the power of God by speaking of the character of God. God’s power is a function of His character. And Peter is going to defend the character of God by saying that you’ve got to understand what the reason is for God’s delay.

We’ve already seen that His timing is different from our timing. We’ve already seen that He is involved in the providential care of the elect and the people in this world. And so Peter now begins to say, “The defense that I have is a third thing to remind you of, and it’s this. Remember God’s power. And why is it the reason for His delay?

And Peter’s overriding principle is this. There is no proof of His divine power that is as great as His divine forbearance. That’s the greatest demonstration of His power. It’s God’s forbearance or patience.

Sig mentioned one of the Collects written for the Anglican church. Here’s another one that I would give you that is given before Communion.

How beautifully one of the ancient prayers says this. “O God, who declares Thine almighty power most chiefly in showing mercy and pity.”

Peter’s whole point is this. God knows what He’s doing. But you’ve got to understand. He has the power to do everything, but in His forbearance He is showing you that He is holding back what He said He would go because of His mercy, and b because of His pity. And that’s what we want to explore today.

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So in dealing with God’s forbearance, God’s mercy and God’s pity, Peter is addressing the improper line of thinking that can infer that because God has made a promise that He can’t keep that He is not powerful. He cannot be trusted. Therefore, it’s not going to happen, because God does not have the power to do what He said He is going to do.

So when people after a considerable lapse of time do not complete what they said they were going to do, we begin to think of it because of several reasons. They think this. Well, maybe He has changed His mind. Maybe God changed His mind. Maybe He changed His plans. Not only did He change His mind, but He changed His plan. His plans are different now than when He said what He would do. Maybe He has forgotten His promises. He has made promises and maybe He’s just forgotten about them. Maybe He can’t perform those tasks because He doesn’t have the power to perform them. And maybe it’s this last one. Maybe it’s a fault in His character.

Not that’s some of the logic that these scoffers might had had when they considered the idea that God is not involved because He has not brought about the Second Coming to deal with sin and retribution of the world, because He did not have the power to do it.

So to help us understand proper thinking, we need to understand God’s reason for delay. Now sometimes, men, to understand something that is true, you’ve got to look at everything that is false. In other words, we need to look at what isn’t true so that we can understand what is clearly true. Let me give you some reasons that are wrong reasons for God’s delay. These are wrong reasons for God’s delay that we would humanly conjecture, and say that God has not done what He said He would do. He may have changed His mind or changed His plans. He may not have the power to do it. He may have forgotten about it. Here are some of the wrong reasons for God’s delay that people might scoff at and come up with.

First of all, it’s this. *It’s not because of slowness.* His delay is not because of slowness. A man may delay something and not be slow about it. The person who is slow does not do it at the appropriate time. He does not do it at the appropriate time.

Now with God, his return is set, but it’s unknown to us. But it’s not because of slowness on His part.

Notice Acts chapter 1, verse 7. Scripture says, *“It is not for you to know the times or dates that the Father has set by His own authority.”* So we can’t say that it’s just because God is slow. God knows the right time. That’s why we spent last week discussing our understanding of God’s perspective on time.

How about Hebrews 10:37? *“He who is coming will come and will not delay.”* He will not delay.

So there is another reason why God has not done what He said He would do yet, according to these scoffers. God is the master of perfect timing.

The second reason I would suggest that these people might suggest in scoffing would be this. It’s not only not because of slowness. It’s also not because of *ignorance*. It’s not because of His ignorance. It’s not because of His not knowing the right time. God’s waiting is guided by His graciousness, His mercy and His pity.

I call your attention to Isaiah chapter 30, verse 18. *“The LORD longs”* (or waits) *to be gracious to you. He rises to show you compassion, for the LORD is a God of justice.”*

So you can’t say that the reason He hasn’t acted yet is because of ignorance. It’s because of His compassion.

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Participant: Would they say it’s a character flaw?

Bruce: Yes. They say it would be a character flaw. One of their attacks was this. Maybe there’s a flaw in His character. Remember, Peter’s defense is all about the power of god, which is an affirmation of His character. And ignorance would be a flaw in His character. Because God is holy, we know that He has no flaws. But with the logic of these men, these scoffers, this is some of their reasoning. And Peter is saying that “I’m reminding you of these things so that you will think correctly—to bring these to remembrance, to have right thinking.”

So it’s not because of slowness, nor is it because of ignorance. God’s timing is a function of His wisdom, and God’s timing is a function of His compassion. It’s a function of His wisdom—knowing the right thing at the right time for the right reason. It’s also right because of His compassion.

Thirdly I would suggest this. It’s only because He is not slow, and it’s not because of ignorance. It’s also not because of *forgetfulness*. Psalm 111 verse 5. “*He remembers His covenant forever.*” God has made a covenant with His people. He remembers that forever. So you can’t say that the reason that god is not done what He said He was going to do is because of His forgetfulness. God has promised to come to accomplish the deliverance of His own and the punishment of the wicked. And He does not forget what He has promised.

The fourth thing I would suggest is this. This is how these scoffers might have thought. It’s not because of slowness. It’s not because of ignorance. It’s not because of forgetfulness. It’s also not because *He changed His mind*. It’s not because god changed His mind. Men or people may change their minds out of the changeableness of their natures, but God does not change. Men may change because they do not foresee possibilities.

How about 1 Samuel 15, verse 29? “*He who is the glory of Israel does not lie or change His mind. For He is not a man, that He should change His mind.*”

It’s not because of slowness. It’s not because of forgetfulness. It’s not because of His lack of power, or because of forgetfulness or ignorance.

There’s one more that I would offer for your consideration, and that would be this. *It’s not because of weakness*. It’s not because of slowness. It’s not because of ignorance. It’s not because of forgetfulness. It’s not because He has changed His mind. It’s also not because of weakness. Men can only perform what they can do personally. Sometimes, they may have the desire to do it. They may have the cause to do it. But they don’t have the power to do it. They may have the reason. They may have the choice to do it. They may have the opportunity. But they do not have the power to do what they say they would like to do.

Look at 2 Samuel chapter 3, verse 39. It’s the story about David, who wanted to put Joab to death for murdering Abner. David says this. “*And today, though I am anointed king, I am weak, and these sons are too strong for me. May the LORD repay the evil according to their own evil desires.*”

It may be that you may have the opportunity. You might have the desire. You may have the possibilities. But you don’t have the power to pull it off. And that’s what David is saying. “I’m in the right position. I’m the king. My son has been killed. But the sons of this other king are too strong for me. I realize that what I want to do I can’t do, because I don’t have the power to do it.”

And these scoffers were saying that the reason that the Lord is delayed is because He doesn’t have the power to do it. God is able to accomplish all things in an instant by the word of His

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power. How did He create the world? He spoke and it happened. You see, He has the power to do it. At the word of His power He can do it whenever He wants to do it with the right timing.

So it’s not because of slowness. It’s not because of ignorance. It’s not because of forgetfulness or changeableness—changing His mind. And it’s not because of weakness that God delays. It’s because of His mercy.

Notice this. The Old Testament standard is this. *“The soul that sins shall die.”* The New Testament standard is this. It’s identically the same, but different phraseology. *“The wages of sin is death.”* Have you ever sinned? Then why are you alive?

Participant: Mercy.

Bruce: Mercy! It’s because of mercy. Do you realize that every human being in this world has experienced God’s mercy, because with the first breath I took when I instantaneously sinned, god would have taken my life.

The reason that God has not yet done what He says is not because it’s not the right time, but because of His mercy. The positive reason that Peter is going to teach us is because of the mercy of God.

How about Romans 9:22? *“What if God has chosen to show His wrath and to make His power known by bearing with great patience the objects of His wrath.”* He’s giving people a chance to come to saving faith, calling the elect. And we’re going to see two reasons why Peter says that He really hasn’t done this yet because of perfect timing. And the right reason, the only reason that the patience of God is showing goodness to sinners, in deferring their punishment, is to benefit the elect and to benefit the church. He holds it back and He is merciful to benefit the elect—those chosen of God before the foundation of the world—and to benefit the body of Christ. Let’s examine why Peter says that this is the real reason. It’s not because of slowness; it’s not because of these other things. It’s because of God’s mercy, mercy to two groups, the elect—God’s chosen from before the foundation of the world—and the church, the body of Christ.

Participant: Bruce?

Bruce: Yes, sir?

Participant: Aren’t the elect and the church the same thing?

Bruce: They are. But when I’m using the word *church*, I’m going to talk about people who are involved in the church who are not the elect. They benefit from our being there. That’s what I want to talk about, because God has held back the wrath against them because the elect are in the body, in the local church. He’s given them time to come out, to draw themselves out. And so the nonbelievers benefit from the fact that the church exists. And we’ll see that in a moment.

But the real definition of the church is the elect, the *ecclesia*. It’s the elect of God.

So let’s take a look at these. God’s delay should be regarded as proof of His forbearance and patience, and His desire that those whom He has given to Christ from before the foundation of the world should come to saving faith.

Now I really believe, men, that every sinner should consider this fact—that he is not cut down in his own sins, not as proof that God will not punish the wicked, but as the demonstration of God’s pity, God’s forbearance and God’s mercy. Everyone in this world has always experienced mercy. It’s just that they don’t know it yet! Any person who sins who is spared for even a moment should regard being spared as an act of mercy by a forbearing, patient God.

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You see, the real reason is this. God has forbearance and pity and mercy on those He will draw to Himself.

Let me give you a couple of illustrations of how this might work. One may have a sincere desire that others should not perish. And yet it may be, to be consistent, that they will perish. For example, a parent may have a desire, a sincere wish that his children should not be punished. And yet he has a moral necessity to punish the children.

A lawyer may have a sincere wish that no one should ever break the law and be punished. Yet he himself may build a prison and construct the gallows, because the law is to be executed in a just manner. A judge may have a sincere wish that no man should be executed, and that everyone arraigned before him should be found innocent. Yet even he, in accordance with that wish, and with the most benevolent heart, even with tears in his eyes, may pronounce the death sentence upon that person. You see, one cannot say that sinners will never be punished because it is unloving, or therefore that God has provided salvation for everyone.

Now there are a couple of things that we need to notice, men. There is a special application to these verses that apply to the elect and to the church. Certainly the apostle is speaking to believers when he says, *“with you.”* Notice: *“people of faith”*—chapter 1, verse 1. *“The destruction of the ungodly”*—chapter 3, verse 7. All things that God does in showing His pity and mercy is for the benefit of the elect. The reason for His delay in punishing sinners is because of the elect.

Now that’s because of this. Not all of the elect have been brought out of the system of this world. Providence is the proof found in God’s people. Matthew 24, verse 22. *“The days”* (of tribulation and violence) *“will be cut short for the sake of the elect.”*

Why does God hold back His wrath? Why does God hold back His wrath? So that those He gave to Christ from before the foundation of the world will come out of the degradation of humanity and be drawn to the gospel of Christ and come to saving faith. The reason that the Lord Jesus has not come back again in all of His glory is because all of the elect have not yet come forward. God still has elect in this world who have not come to saving faith. And He will not come back until that happens. That’s the reason why He will delay. It’s not because of slowness, ignorance, changeability or lack of power. It’s for the benefit of the elect. All those who He wants to come to saving faith will come to saving faith. And He will not return till all of those who have come out from the degradation of humanity will come to saving faith. It benefits the elect, the body of Christ, the church. Yes, please?

Participant: Bruce, I guess it would be selfish for us to pray, “Come, Lord Jesus.” I mean, we sort of want it now to get out of this miserable life, to the neglect of others. Maybe these people were making the same mistake.

Bruce: I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that. I mean, the promise is going to come. It might be that the elect are all here. We don’t know that. I think that sometimes, just in our own humanness and in our own weakness I can say that prayer because I have nothing else to say. In my weakness I just want to say, “Lord, just come. I’m powerless.” I think that when you pray that prayer, it’s more a demonstration of our powerlessness because we don’t have the power to handle something more than it is damage in your life. I think that it’s more of a character flaw in us. Yes, Ted?

Ted: I think that saying, *“Come, Lord Jesus!”* is found in the book of Revelation, right?

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Bruce: Correct.

Ted: So, you know, I think that if you look at the context and the occasion for which the book was written, they were a church under persecution and great difficulty. I think that’s a completely appropriate prayer.

Bruce: Yes, it is.

Ted: As you have said, when all human ability, strength, resources are gone.

Bruce: My adequacy does not come from myself. And when I feel totally inadequate, sometimes the only thing I can do is say, “*Lord Jesus, come.*” It’s a reflection of me, not of anything else. It’s just a reflection of me.

How about Paul writing in 2 Timothy to his young protégé in 2 Timothy 2:10? Paul endured “*for the sake of the elect.*” Now not all of God’s chosen people have been converted yet. That’s the point Peter is making. They have not been converted yet. If judgment should be hastened, many of the elect would be found in their natural condition and unsaved. But God desires that none of those persons will not come to saving faith so He delays His wrath. Even now some of God’s elect are hidden in the masses of polluted humanity, and they haven’t been drawn out yet by the gospel of Christ. But God will draw them forth in His timing.

How about John chapter 6, verse 37? Jesus said this. “*All that the Father gives me shall come to me.*”

You see, one of the reasons that God delays His wrath coming, His retribution against the wicked, is because in the midst of humanity and the degradation of humanity the elect still reside. They have not been drawn out yet. And when that ends, the Lord Jesus will come.

Thomas Manton, one of my favorite Puritans, writes this. “And God will draw them forth”—referring to the elect who are now found in the degradation of humanity and the polluted humanity of the natural state. “God will draw them forth in a way suitable to His glory and their temper as men, which requires time that will come through the years of discretion and pains to work upon their souls by commands, threatening and promises and alluring motives, and sometimes disappointments in their worldly concerns. And after every one of these multiplied one after the other, and after many refusals of His renewed offers and slighting means, they are at length gained and overcome by His powerful love.

He’s saying this. The elect who are now in the polluted humanity are going to experience all sorts of things. It may be the threatening of God. It may be the expression of their failures and their own accomplishments. Whatever it’s going to be, God is going to use all those things, and in the end they’re going to be overcome by one single thing—overcome by His love for them, as they come to saving faith. Jesus said this. “All that the Father gives to me, all will come.”

God works for the benefit and advantage of the church, the local church, the universal church. All things are for the sake of God’s elect. If the number were completed, time would be no more and the present state of things would be dissolved.

Unbelievers benefit because the church exists. How do unbelievers benefit from the church existing? (The church means the elect.) How does that happen? What do they experience?

Participant: Life, physical life.

Bruce: They have physical life, which is an act of what? Mercy! It’s an act of mercy! Remember this. “*The soul that sins shall die.*” Why doesn’t that happen immediately? It’s

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because of mercy. That’s why we are M-8s that we’ve talked about over these years. M-8s—Mission-Minded Members of a Movement Motivated by Mercy for Ministry in the Marketplace.

What motivates us to continue the ministry of Christ? It’s the fact that God has been merciful to whom?

Participant: To me.

Bruce: To me! And because He has been merciful to you, He has been merciful to those who are not in Christ. If the church did not exist, the elect would be gone and the world would be doomed. The reason the world exists is because God has not called out His elect yet. And so everybody benefits from the local church. It’s just that they don’t know that, because God is waiting for the time when all the elect will come to saving faith. Then the church will no longer be because it will be universal and we will be with Him in heaven, and the world will be dissolved. And Jesus will come in all of His glory. You see how that works? The world benefits from the local church because of one thing—mercy!

In some cases, justice and punishment cannot be inflicted on bad men without laying a considerable share of it on good people, the elect. God spares them for the present so that the righteous might not suffer. Either way, both of these are blessings. Nonbelievers receive God’s mercy because He delays His punishment of sin.

Now to those who say that God’s delay in punishment is because God is powerless, I would say this. Consider how we deal with Him every day of our lives. How do we deal with Him? We highly provoke Him. We grieve Him. We weary Him with our iniquities.

Then consider how He deals with us. How does He deal with us based upon how we deal with Him? He is patient with us. He presents us daily with the blessings of goodness, prolonging our lives by permitting us to live!

So then, consider these truths of God. He is not obligated to forbear with us at all. He’s not obligated to do that. But He does. He spares us when He could ruin us. He’s patient even when we’re challenging His justice to punish us, and to evoke His power to destroy us.

But I would say this, men. If you want to pray the prayer of power, ask God to show you the power of mercy. That’s what Peter is saying. It’s not because of slowness. It’s not because of ignorance. It’s not because of Him changing His mind. It’s not because He changes. It’s not because of His lack of power. It’s because of one reason. It’s the power of God to be merciful, to forbear with us so that all the church will come to saving faith. When the Scripture says, *“but for everyone to come to repentance,”* He’s referring to whom?

Participant: The elect.

Bruce: The elect. If you hold any other position than that, you’re asserting universal salvation and you might as well forget everything we’re learning. We see that the reason God holds back is for the elect, for the benefit of the church.

And men, the important thing is this. The people of this world who are not in Christ benefit because the church exists, because God is merciful to draw from the degradation of humanity those whom He gave Christ from before the foundation of the world. And the rest of the world experiences His mercy. It’s because the church and the elect exist. It’s not because He doesn’t have the power, folks. He has the power to be merciful.

Let’s pray. Father, I just thank You for Your mercy in my life, where for reasons only known to Yourself, You were pleased to write my name in the Lamb’s Book of Life from before the

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foundation of the world. There’s no reason I can think of that justified your doing that, Father, other than You are merciful to me. Father, let us consider how merciful You are to us this day, even though we may frustrate You. We may challenge You. We may commit iniquities against Your holy name. Yet You are merciful to us. Father, help us realize, by the greatest demonstration of Your power, Your forbearance for the sake of the elect and for the sake of the church. And may it be so. Justice may it be so. Come, Lord Jesus, with all of Your power. Amen and Amen.
(Applause.)