

# ***“What Friends Don’t Let Friends Forget”***

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***The right answer is God. The right response is repentance.***

***1 Peter 3:1-10***

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## ***Three pandemic options***

Last weekend I distributed a survey to the congregation about our fall programs. It’s really important to me that you know I heard you. In addition to the numbers of people who answered various multiple choice questions, the 88 pages of comments fall into three main categories. Here’s a summary of each.

Option 1: “Don’t rush back to normal.” Jesus, Paul, and Peter all tell us to submit to the governing authorities. We should model good citizenship for Jesus’ sake, and also for his sake we should honor our responsibility to “the least of these.” People are at risk all around us for various reasons. Leaders should teach and model safe practices: no mass gatherings, wear masks, practice social distancing, so we can help shut down the pandemic. We do this as a way to love God and love our neighbor.

Option 2: “We should not fear what the world fears.” God is bigger than the coronavirus. 90% of deaths in America this year are for causes other than COVID, but we don’t isolate or shut down the economy and education because someone might get sick from the flu or die in a traffic accident. Politicians, scientists, and media don’t know the whole truth and don’t necessarily tell all they do know. Our freedom as Christians is under attack. The Bible says don’t forsake our assembling together.

Option 3: “There is no 100% right answer.” As Christians, we should pray for those who are making tough decisions in government, in education, in business, and in the church. We should be people of patience and grace. Trusting in the Lord means we

don't have to push for our own way or force others into certain choices. One size won't fit all as we move forward, so let's regather cautiously and incrementally.

What struck me is that each option is not only sincere, but, at least in that person's mind, thoroughly consistent with Christian faith and a biblical worldview. I will also confess that I have held all three views over the course of the last four months. Sometimes in the same day! So, it's not difficult to give each one the benefit of the doubt that it arises from a personal faith in Jesus.

One reason I asked for names in this particular survey is that I wanted the respondents to remember they are writing to a person, to your pastor, to a friend. We speak differently to our friends. Four times in the last chapter of 2 Peter, Peter calls his readers "Beloved" or, in some translations, "Dear friends." He's writing a very pastoral letter. We're going to take two weeks to unpack what he wants to say to these "dear friends." Let's start by looking at this section verse-by-verse.

### ***Wake up!***

Verse 1 – "Dear friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both of them as reminders to stimulate you to wholesome thinking." The theme of reminding, remembering, and not forgetting runs throughout this letter. The word "stimulate" is literally "arouse," as in "wake you up." Peter knows his "dear friends" will live right if they think right. "Wake up!" he says.

Verse 2 – "I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles." Although it wasn't fully collected yet, Peter is here referring us to the entirety of the Bible – Old Testament, Gospels, and Epistles. That's the authority for "wholesome thinking."

Verse 3 – "Above all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires." This is obviously important because Peter starts with "Above all you must understand...." The "last days" in the New Testament refers to the time between Jesus' first coming and second coming – so it fits both Peter's time and ours. We should never be surprised when "scoffers" come. The root of this word is "play," as in "child's play." The idea is that it's a very childish (as opposed to childlike) thing to mock and scoff and bully – not so much with a solid argument as with ad hominem attacks, insulting and despising with words. That approach belies an egotistical inner mind – "their own evil desires."

Verse 4 – "They will say, 'Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.'" Peter has listened to the scoffers. He's actually stating their point in their own words. I find I am most effective presenting my case if I can express the other person's point as well as or better than they can. That's the reason for my sermon introduction today. Whatever

you think about the pandemic, or politics, or racism, are you able to express another viewpoint fairly and objectively?

The argument Peter has heard is that Christians hold to a view that Jesus will come again and change everything. Their objection is that nothing ever really changes.

Verse 5 – “But they deliberately forget that long ago by God’s word the heavens came into being and the earth was formed out of water and by water.” Don’t get too lost here, either critiquing or defending Peter’s cosmology. His point is that it’s rather evident that the universe had a starting point. Everything hasn’t always been the same. At some point in the past there were no heavens, there was no earth or water.

Verse 6 – “By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed.” Once again, I’m not going to spend time arguing about the biblical account of the flood because it misses the primary point. How can you ever say, “Nothing ever changes” when what we call “natural disasters” – floods, earthquakes, volcanoes, hurricanes, tsunamis – which even the unbelieving world calls “acts of God” – have obviously altered the planet? We even had a mild earthquake in North Carolina today.

Verse 7 – “By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.” This is the only passage in the Bible that refers explicitly to the destruction of the earth, especially by fire, so it’s a little difficult to interpret in my view. The more common biblical focus is on God making everything new. Meanwhile, don’t forget Peter’s primary point – just because things never seem to change, don’t assume they won’t. God will hold you accountable. God will judge. God will have the last word.

Verse 8 – “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.” This seems to be a direct reference to Psalm 90:4, which says, “A thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by.” I love how Peter is doing what the writers of Scripture consistently do – taking our minds off our current situation into a higher view of God. The reason we think things never change is because our view of time is so limited. Christian or not, everybody knows that we are but a tiny blip on the timeline of history and eternity.

Verse 9 – “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” Why does God wait to bring judgment? To give greater opportunity. He’s patient. He doesn’t want to judge anyone. This moment and every moment is a chance to repent.

Verse 10 – “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 done in it will be laid bare.” Be careful tying this in too quickly to your understanding of the end times. While this phrase “like a thief in the night” is used in

one system to refer to what's called the rapture of the church, this doesn't seem like it's describing anything like that. The focus here is that God's not on your timetable. Once again, if you think nothing ever changes, look at the world. Look at history. Who would have thought five months ago this pandemic would shut down the globe?

### ***Friends don't let friends forget....***

As was true of chapter 2, he's written an entire section without telling you what to do except, "Do not forget." Essentially the whole Bible, but especially the New Testament letters, have two emphases – what God wants us to know and what God wants us to do. Doctrine and duty. Belief and behavior. Faith and practice.

The first ten verses of chapter 3 are doctrine. They're about "wholesome thinking" (1), what "you must understand" (3), what his readers must "not forget" (8). Those are all cognitive words.

Beginning in verse 11, Peter will ask, "Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be?" We'll cover that section next week. For now, what does he want you to understand? What does he want his "dear friends" not to forget? Here are a few observations.

*You're my friend.* Peter has had some harsh things to say in this letter. It's hard to tell at points whether some of the false teachers and scoffers are among the intended recipients. We can't know for sure. Jesus said it's not our job to pull out all the weeds; we're likely to uproot some wheat in the process (Matthew 13:24-30).

As he closes the letter, he addresses all of his readers as "Dear friends" – four times! Remember, they're living a long way away from him. We somehow think we've invented impersonal conversation – reviews of products and places, comments on social media, letters encrypted in fake handwriting or typed on a keyboard. I've received some of those anonymous-but-biting communications in my life. Maybe we all have.

I asked for names on my most recent survey not only because I wanted respondents to see me as a friend and pastor, but so that I could see you that way as well. As we offer perspective and feedback, we need to hear it from "dear friends." One definition of "friend" might be someone with whom you can be both honest and kind. Someone to whom you can speak truth with grace. We need to see one another that way in the Body of Christ.

Remember Proverbs 15:4, "A soft answer turns away wrath." Remember that Jesus said we'll give "an account for every careless word we speak" (Matthew 12:36). Paul said, "Let your conversation always be full of grace" (Colossians 4:6). Paul even says about false teachers who have been taken captive by the devil, "Don't be quarrelsome" and "Gently instruct them" (2 Timothy 2:24-26).

Whether you're behind a screen or face-to-face, say what you have to say as if you're speaking to someone who believes in your Jesus and is trying to do the right thing, and someone who is your "dear friend."

*Truth draws skeptics.* Maybe the Lord sent this pandemic upon us in part to teach us more about how to engage differences. In today's world we are increasingly sorted by churches and organizations and even neighborhoods into people who think similarly. I've actually been surprised at how deep the fault lines run within churches – and not just our church. If you think everyone on the political right wants to be in church in person right now and everyone on the political left is staying home, I can tell you that is not the truth. This pandemic has divided otherwise united families, workplaces, and houses of worship.

If you want my opinion, nobody knows yet the full truth about any of it – where the virus came from, how it spread and is still spreading, exactly how it affects the human body and perhaps more importantly what long term the spiritual, educational, political, economic, and social ramifications will be. There will be Ph.D. studies on the year 2020 in every field for at least a generation. We should all be rather humble about our pronouncements because we're all going to be eating some of our words.

Whatever the truth is, however, you can bet there will be counter-truth, or, in Peter's vocabulary, false teachers and scoffers. It's always been that way and always will be. That's why I try to be so careful about all but the most critical essentials of the Christian faith – that there is one God in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God created all that exists. Jesus Christ is his eternal Son who was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, was crucified, buried, and raised in a body, and that he will come again to judge the living and the dead. The Holy Spirit is the third Person of the Trinity who indwells and empowers and guides believers. Beyond that, I can tell you what I think the Bible is saying, but I hope my response will convey humility. I could be wrong.

What is getting Peter riled up in 2 Peter 2 is that one of these essential truths – the Second Coming of Jesus – is the object of ridicule by the scoffers. There are some non-negotiables for Christian orthodoxy, and this is one of them. It shouldn't surprise us that this truth will draw skepticism. Truth always does. We just have to know when and where to draw our bold, hard boundaries of belief.

*The right answer is God.* I love how, in this "instruction" or "doctrine" section of 2 Peter 3, he grounds his response to the scoffers in good theology. God is eternal and timeless (8). God is patient and gracious (9). God is unpredictable and surprising (10).

I'm fairly sure God utters at least a chuckle when somebody predicts with great confidence the end of the world or the Second Coming of Christ. If I can take that a step further, I can even imagine God saying, "Well, OK, I was planning on that date – but since you're so sure I think I'll wait a little while longer." Not really, of course, but really? Britannica.com has [an article](#) titled "Ten Failed Doomsday Predictions." From

ancient Mayans to Montanists in the Second Century to doomsday prophets at the end of the first millennium (who used 2 Peter to say that “the day” of the Lord must mean “a thousand years” after Christ’s first coming) to William Miller to early Jehovah’s Witnesses to Harold Camping and Harold Lindsell to Y2K to the Gulf Wars and various earthquakes, the one thing all doomsday and Second Coming predictors had in common was that they were wrong. Jesus said no one knows the day or the hour.

Where Peter wants your focus is not on your predictions but on who God is and what God is like. He’s not bound by our temporal limitations. He’s not impatient, nor is he dependent on us. He won’t be put in a box. He’s God – omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, eternal, immortal, invisible, God only wise.

*The right response is repentance.* Brock Long, former FEMA Director, led my Sunday School class last week from his broad experience in emergency management. His basic point was that disasters – that is, deviations from the norm – should never take us by surprise. The fact that we find ourselves unprepared for everything from a hurricane to a pandemic is on us. Let’s not blame the government or, for heaven’s sake, God. Brock used the Bible’s own predictions of an unpredictable Second Coming to make the point. We have to expect the unexpected.

Brock also reminded us of a pivotal passage in Jesus’ own teaching, Luke 13:1-5. In that passage Jesus addresses two specific disasters – one which was manmade cruelty (one of Pontius Pilate’s infamous human slaughters) and one which was an accident (essentially what we would call a construction site failure, when a tower fell and killed 18 people). In both cases, Jesus says that those who died were not worse sinners than those who survived. In both cases, Jesus added, “But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

This is in keeping with what Peter is saying. Don’t let this passage get you caught up in arguments over the age of the earth or Noah’s flood or the pandemic or Pastor Bob’s survey. Have you become so focused on your way of looking at it – whatever that is and wherever it came from and whoever is in your corner or isn’t – that you have forgotten your core as a believer in Jesus?

The right response to any disaster – personal or global, actual or theoretical – is not to judge who caused it or figure out what God was doing or how it plays out into the end of the world scenario. The right response is to examine our own lives for the need to repent, to make a U-turn from a self-absorbed life to asking, “Lord, where am I stuck? How are you trying to change me? Where can I refocus my life on your calling?”

Friends never let friends forget *that*. Amen.