

# GOD WILL PUT A PERIOD.

A Bible study for presentation  
& discussion at Craigville  
Theological Colloquy 19 (2002)  
on 2 Peter 3

Brothers & sisters,

in growing up I was taught by science that the universe is infinite (which was wrong) & by the Bible that it is finite (which is right). As finite it has, as it were, a bang at both ends. Gracie Allen left Geo. Burns a death-note in which she said "Never place a period where God has placed a comma." That leaves open what you are to do about where God has placed a period. This Bible study is titled "God will put a period." The world to come is not this world, this dis/order.

1 In preparation for this Bible session I spent weeks restudying the Bible's last book, which powerfully relates visions of the world above & the world to come to the Christian ways of worship & witness. Negatively, I wanted to deliver this canonical Christian apocalypse from the hands of the intellectual terrorists who've kidnapped it. Positively, I wanted to bring to eschatological clarity & joy my liberal coreligionists. And, a year ago, I did some writing where that Roman political exile, whom the Greeks call Jn.the Theologian, wrote his ecstatic visions, viz., the island of Patmos.

But not many days ago I inwardly heard repeated the question "Where is the promise of his coming [i.e., Where is his promised coming, his re-presencing as promised?]" And I concluded that a look at Second Peter, whence this question (3.4), would better match our Colloquy theme & the jittery mood of post-9/11 America. So I moved my attention from the Apocalypse of John to the proto-Apocalypse of Peter, our canonical "2P." (Writing in what they believed to be the spirit of Peter, some 2nd-&3rd-generation Christian leaders produced the Petrine corpus: two letters, the Apocalypse, the Gospel, the Acts, the Teaching, & the Preaching.) (In the Bible, collections have personal names: Moses [5 items], David [150 items], Solomon [3], Paul [14], Peter [2], John [5: gospel, 3 letters, apocalypse].)

2 Since in a secular degenerate culture it takes only six days to become an atheist & profligate, Lord's day public worship is not optional for Christians committed to staying on message & under obedience to the Lord. Each Sunday we need to be reminded of who is God & who we are under God & what that Word is that can move us without slacking toward the new heaven & the new earth. To that end, 2P. is a polemic appropriate to worship & witness in our time. In this brief Bible-study we have time only for a few highlights. I'll refer to the underlined chap.-&-vs. numerals on your Worksheet. But 1st a rapid oral reading:....and a reminder that you can find more detail on this Bible-study's Thinksheet.

## Chapter 1

4 The gospel is about the present future of the past: it's "promises" which, faithfully lived, provide both a fire "escape" & the final fulfilment of love. The escape is from do-your-thing, follow-your-bliss, libertine "corruption" (moral rot) "because of lust": & the fulfilment, becoming "participants of the divine nature," will be because of love for the One in loving whom we become like in devotional & moral holiness of life. 5-11 spells out the Christian character of that life, which is informed, formed, transformed, "effort"ful, "eager," & (12) "established in the truth."

16 The Christians who heard 2P. read in church had been fed not "myths" but the apostolic witness ("eyewitnesses") of & to the "power" (in Jesus' resurrection, as Ro.1.4) & "coming" (the parousia, the Second Coming, prefigured in the transfiguration (Mt.17 & parallels) "of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Before we get into the horrors of chap.2, let's notice that 2P.'s stance is--to use the 1st type in H.Rich.Niebuhr's CHRIST AND CULTURE (1951)--"Christ against culture." Observing, in some lax Christians, the correlation between doctrinal deviance & moral downturn, this 2nd- or 3rd-generation Christian leader seeks to forestall a general slide of Christians & churches into the mere culture-Christianity of Niebuhr's 2nd type, viz. the "Christ of culture": no longer rejection of the world (the surrounding culture), but assimilation to it, as in the chapter's last vs. (dogs returned to their vomit). In the terms of Ralph Sockman's 1942 famous sermon-title, 2P. aims to provide comfort & strength to the culturally afflicted, & only secondarily to afflict the culturally accommodated and comfortable.

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## Chapter 2

1-3 The middle chap. of 2P. delineates the particular "false teachers" who were having some success seducing believers into becoming cafeteria Christians, picking up from the apostolic teaching on faith & morals only what they didn't have a problem with. Against this latitudinarianism, rigorist 2P. reminds Christians that they by baptism ("cleaving," 1.9; cf. 1P.3.21) have lost their false freedom in becoming slaves of the "slave-owner" (δεσπότης *despotes*), who "bought" (ἀγορά.) them (though he doesn't mention Jesus' blood as the price). They were in danger of forgetting that "perfect liberty is perfect obedience to the perfect law" (Fosdick), & that other obediences are so many forms of false slavery--specifically here (17-22) "slaves of corruption." (The slave-*agora* is the control analogy in 2P.'s warning-diagnosis.) The deviant teachers are themselves slaves of "greed," charging as much as the traffic in religion would bear. But runaway sex, "lust" ("licentious," 3x in this chap.), is the most noticeable effluent from their false teaching. Our true teacher here, 2P., has not lost his capacity for outrage nor his courage of outcry against greed & lust (have we?). 4-10a(if, then) The "lawless" (anomic, antinomian) "despise authority," are "depraved," & cannot escape "the judgment," though by repentance "rescue" is possible. 10b-16 The errorists & their dupes face exterior judgment because they have rejected the interior judgment of conscience in favor of being "creatures of instinct" (φυσικά *physica*), their appetites "unstoppably" swamping reason, violating the virtues, dominating life. No longer longing for the fulfilment of God's promises, they have forgotten God, with two baleful narcissistic-infantile results: God has collapsed into the self, & worship (expressing the soul's longing for God) has collapsed into sex (expressing the body's genital longing for another body)--two potential glories become, by overheating, two pathologies, two sinkholes of sin. When the two urges to merge (longings to unite) themselves merge (as, e.g., in clergy sex-scandals), the devil could not be happier. 17-21 As logomachy is a battle of words, elpidomachy is a battle of hopes: the heretics are offering Christians an alternative hope in world-conformity. But their false promise can lead only back into "defilement" (Gk.-Eng., "miasmas").

## Chapter 3

1-2 "Aroused" memory of the prophets, Jesus, & the apostles is our best Christian defense against heresy & moral decay. 3-4 The scoffers, rationalizing their "lusts," deny (in Hebrew fashion, by question) that Jesus will re-"presence" himself (παρουσία *parousia*) apocalyptically, which was expected before the first generation of the Faith died off (1Cor.15.51; Mt.24.34; M.9.1,13.30). From the Second Coming's delay, they generalize endless continuity in line with the regnant science of the time, that of Aristotle, ignorant both of our present two-bang quantum-mechanics theory of the universe & of Stephen Wolfson's dictum that "The continuum is a fiction." 5-7 2P. replies that everybody but Noah & his family thought as the errorists think, that history is an uneventful continuity, & were they surprised! (Noah also at 2.4-10a, which adduces also the surprised residents of Sodom & Gomorrah after Lot & his family left). And one of these days the whole world will be surprised: history as we know it will end not by flood but by fire (as in the spiritual: "God gave Noah the rainbow sign; no more water, the fire next time" [so the Jas.Baldwin title, leading to a NYT 9/11 editorial "The Fire This Time"]). Fire (here & 10 & 12) is unique to 2P.: no prior instance in Jewish or Christian literature. Jesus warns, against false security, that humanity is to fear the ultimate intrusive Terrorist, who can "destroy both body and soul in hell" (Mt.10.28; L.12.5). 8-9 As God intends the delay to provide further opportunity for "repentance," 2P. intends his fire-apocalypse as an incentive to renewal & evangelism. 10 No escape from the fiery disclosures of the Parousia-Judgment, here "the day of the Lord." 11-13 Second Coming, second creation: the fire-destruction opens onto "new heavens and a new earth," to which "lives of holiness and godliness" lead. ("Righteousness": Mt.6.33.) 14-16 "Peace," the inner serenity of the Presence now & to come, is the engagement ring for the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. 17-18 So "beware" of backsliding, & "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." Jesus was both prophet ("Repent!") & sage ("Consider the lilies"): on your knees because all depends on God, on your feet because God depends on you.