

2 Peter 3:9

Introduction

We've seen over the last couple of weeks that scoffers will arise even within the church, saying things like this:

- 2 Peter 3:4 — “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.”

Peter responds to this irrational scoffing in four different ways, but his last response comes in verse nine:

- 2 Peter 3:9 — 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.

We saw last week that the meaning of “patience” in this context is a “postponing” of judgment in order to give “time” for repentance. And why does God postpone judgment in order to give time for repentance? Because He does not wish that any should perish. This is a verse that's often quoted by those who reject the doctrine of God's election.

I. Embracing “tension” and mystery in God's revealed truth

The doctrine of election is the biblical teaching that God, before the foundation of the world, elected or chose in Christ all who would be saved, not based on anything that he foresaw *in them* (not based on their good deeds or their faith or their choice of God), but based only and exclusively on the good pleasure of His sovereign will (cf. Eph. 1:3-6, 11; Rom. 9:10-13; 2 Tim. 1:9; Jn. 15:16; Acts 13:48; 1 Thess. 1:4-5; 2 Thess. 2:13-14; 2 Tim. 2:10).

There are many mysteries in this doctrine, and so we have to be careful that we don't *reason* from this doctrine to other conclusions that are not biblical. For instance, some might say: “If God has elected some and not others to salvation, then man can't really be answerable or accountable for refusing to repent and believe.” The Apostle Paul believes that when we rightly understand the Bible's teaching on God's sovereign election, we *will*, in our flesh, be tempted to reason in just this way – as though we would have to be puppets on strings or as though God is somehow forcing us or twisting our arms.

- Romans 9:19 — You will say to me then, “Why does [God] still find fault? For who can resist his will?”

If God is the one who *chooses* us, then how can sinners be held accountable for their rejection of God? But the Bible clearly teaches both things – that God chooses based solely on the good pleasure of His own will *and* that men and women are wholly accountable and answerable for their own unbelief.

Someone else might reason like this: “If God has elected some and not others to salvation, then offering Christ in the Gospel to those who are not elect must be hypocritical and insincere because the non-elect can’t be saved anyway.” But the Bible clearly teaches both unconditional election *and* the indiscriminate, universal, sincere and well-meant offer of the Gospel (cf. Isa. 45:22). We see both of these put together in Jesus’ words in Matthew eleven:

- Matthew 11:25–30 — At that time Jesus declared, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have **hidden** these things from the wise and understanding and **revealed** them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your **gracious will**. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and **anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him**. **Come to me, all** who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Another person could possibly reason like this: “If God has chosen to pass over some, not electing them to salvation, then this would mean that He must actually delight in their suffering and punishment.” But the Bible clearly teaches that what God delights in is *not* their suffering and punishment, but rather the revelation of His own power and glory.

- Romans 9:22–23 — What if God, *desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power*, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, **in order to make known the riches of his glory** for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory.

God also says very clearly in Ezekiel thirty-three:

- Ezekiel 33:11 (cf. 18:23, 32) — As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?

If God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live, then why did He not elect everyone to salvation? The answer, we know, is in some way bound up with the infinite worth of God’s glory and His delight in the demonstration of His own justice and power (cf. Deut. 28:63). Even if we can’t fully comprehend how these realities fit together, at the same time we can’t deny either truth and still remain faithful to the Scriptures.

If we were to study all of these questions (and many others like them) thoroughly and biblically, we would see that there are never any real logical contradictions; and yet at the same time these things do remain mysteries that can’t be comprehended by us. And so we are called to submit our minds, our reasoning, and our hearts to those things that God has revealed. The Apostle Paul says it like this:

- Romans 9:20 — But who are you, O man, to answer back to God?

We're called not only to submit ourselves, but ultimately to delight ourselves in the whole of God's revealed truth. Christianity is a *revealed* religion. There are combinations of teachings in Scripture that to our finite human minds will feel irreconcilable and that no human being would have ever thought to hold together, and yet as Christians this is exactly what we are called to do — because these are truths not invented by man but *revealed to us* by our infinite and almighty God. Instead of answering back to God, therefore, we ought to respond with humility and with worship:

- Romans 11:33–36 — Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?” “Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

So let's come back now to where we left off. Peter says in chapter three:

- 2 Peter 3:9 — 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.

We said that this is a verse that's often quoted by those who deny the doctrine of God's election. If God does not wish that any should perish, but wishes instead that all should reach repentance, then it logically follows that it's impossible for God's election to be unconditional — His choice of us *must* only be based on knowing that we would choose Him. What we learn from this reasoning is that the rejection of God's unconditional election is never ultimately based in Scripture, but always and only in human “reason” and “logic.” The rejection of God's unconditional election is ultimately a failure to remember that Christianity is a *revealed* religion — it's a revealed body of truth to which we are bound as God's creatures to submit ourselves *and* that we are also called to wholeheartedly embrace.

There are some who accept the Bible's clear teaching about unconditional election who read 2 Peter 3:9 and see here an example of the Bible's equally clear teaching that God never takes delight in the death of the wicked, but only and always in their repentance. Listen to what Calvin writes on this verse:

- “So wonderful is [God's] love towards mankind, that he would have them all to be saved, and is of his own self prepared to bestow salvation on the lost... But it may be asked, If God wishes none to perish, why is it that so many do perish? To this my answer is, that no mention is here made of the hidden purpose of God, according to which the reprobate are doomed to their own ruin, but only of his will as made known to us in the gospel. For God there stretches forth his hand without a difference to all, but lays hold only of those, to lead them to himself, whom he has chosen before the foundation of the world.”

Was Calvin aware of the tension and the mystery in his own words? He certainly was. Did he claim to be able to understand or explain this mystery? Not at all! His words here are just the result of a man desiring to let the word of God shape all that he thinks and knows rather than

letting his own thinking should shape the word of God. Having said this, I—along with many others—don't agree with Calvin here on his understanding of this particular passage.

II. “Toward you”

Let's look at what Peter says more closely. “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.” One commentator writes: “Somewhat *surprisingly*, Peter notes that God is patient ‘toward you’” (Green). In other words, “toward you” is really very conspicuous – it really “sticks out” as a main point that Peter wants to make. He could easily have left these words out: “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is *patient*... not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.” Instead, Peter purposefully and carefully adds those words, “toward you.”

Now, in the context of 2 Peter, who is “you”?

- 2 Peter 1:1–2 — Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, **To those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ:** May grace and peace be multiplied to **YOU** in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

Every single occasion of the plural personal pronoun “you” in 2 Peter is a personal address to a particular group of people – to those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with the Apostles by the righteousness, Peter says, of “*our*” God and of Jesus “*our*” Lord. In verse ten of chapter one, “you” refers to the “brothers and sisters” who have been called and elected by God.

- 2 Peter 1:10 (cf. 2 Pet. 3:1; 1 Pet. 1:1) — Therefore, *brothers*, be all the more diligent to confirm your *calling* and *election*, for if **you** practice these qualities you will never fall.

In 2 Peter “you” is very starkly contrasted with “they.” Do we remember who “they” are? Chapter two is all about the false teachers who are full of sensuality and greed and arrogance. Chapter two is all about the false teachers who are destined for eternal destruction. Peter says that “*their* condemnation from long ago is not idle, and *their* destruction is not asleep” (2:3a); he says that the Lord “knows how... to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment (2:9). In chapter two, we hear “you” and it's very much meant to be heard in *contrast* with “they” and with “them.”

- 2 Peter 2:1 — But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among **you**...
- 2 Peter 2:3 — In **their** greed they will exploit **you** with false words.
- 2 Peter 2:13 — **They** count it pleasure to revel in the daytime. **They** are blots and blemishes, reveling in **their** deceptions, while **they** feast with **you**.

Peter's definitely not writing this letter to the false teachers. When Peter speaks of “you” he has in mind a particular and limited group of people which excludes the false teachers who have

fallen away from the faith. “You,” here in 2 Peter, is always the very personal address of a shepherd to *sheep*, of the Apostle to *those who’ve been called and chosen by God*. After all the “they’s”/“them’s”/“their’s” referring to the false teachers in chapter two, remember how Peter suddenly begins chapter three with these words:

□ 2 Peter 3:1 — This is now, **beloved**, the second letter that I am writing to **you**.

But then in verses 3-7, Peter reverts again to “they’s” and “their’s” as he goes back to the false teachers.

□ 2 Peter 3:3-5 — ...**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.” For **they** deliberately overlook this fact...

It’s against this backdrop of “you” and “they” and the contrast between the two and the separate destiny of each, and even more specifically it’s against the backdrop of these most recent “they’s” and “their’s” in verses 3-7 that we’re meant to read verses 8-9:

□ 2 Peter 3:8-9 — But it must not be overlooked by **you, 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.

Do you see how particular and who exclusive and how *personal* those words are?—“toward **you**”? Do you see how those words “toward *you*” do not include but rather exclude the apostate false teachers? And so we see that the natural meaning of this verse is that the “toward you” governs the “any” and the “all” that comes next.

III. **“ANY” and “ALL”**

Why is the Lord patient **TOWARD HIS PEOPLE**? Peter answers: “because He is not wishing that *any* should perish, but that *all* should reach repentance.” God is not wishing that any of whom should perish?—Any of His people! God is wishing that all of whom should reach repentance?—All of His people! Peter’s clear and obvious meaning could be expressed like this: “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient **toward you**; and He is patient toward you **because** He is not wishing that any [of you] should perish, but that all [of you] should reach repentance.”

Now we know that if God is patient because he wishes that all should reach repentance, this means that at the very least it must be possible for all to reach repentance. And yet in the case of the apostate false teachers, it’s impossible for them to be restored again to repentance. This is part of Peter’s meaning when he says that their “last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them.” (2:20-21; cf. Heb.

6:4-6) It's impossible for the apostate false teachers in Peter to reach repentance again, and yet God “delay’s” His coming specifically so that “all” may reach repentance – not “all” universally including even the false teachers, but “all” particularly, including *all* of God’s chosen people.

Some people ask, “But isn’t Peter writing to *believers* who’ve *already* reached repentance? How can Peter say that God delays His coming so that these believers will not perish, but have time to come to repentance?” In the first place, even if “any” and “all” was a reference to everyone in the world, it would still have to at least include the believers that Peter’s writing to because Peter clearly says that the Lord is “patient toward *you*, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.” So if the “you” to whom Peter writes is the “beloved” who have already obtained a faith of equal standing with the Apostle Peter, then how can Peter say that God delays His coming because He is patient toward these beloved, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance? The answer is in the text. Peter is thinking now of “you”—his beloved brothers and sisters—as representative of all God’s elect. In other words: “God is patient toward you [His elect], not wishing that *any* [of you (of His elect)] should perish, but that all [of His elect *in every generation*] should reach repentance.” We know that Peter has in mind God’s elect throughout all the generations because he says that this is what explains why God delays His coming in judgment even potentially for thousands of years. Peter’s point here is not just his readers who were alive in his day, but his readers as representing all of God’s elect throughout all of the coming generations. God has now delayed His coming for 2000 years because of His patience “toward you” – or toward “us” – His elect, not wishing that any of His elect in any generation should perish, but that all of *us* should come to repentance.

There’s a sense in which the longer God delays His judgment, the more there are who perish. If God delays His judgment because He’s not wishing that anyone in the whole world should perish but that everyone in the whole world should come to repentance, then the delay would seem to be having the opposite effect, because in every generation there are more who perish than reach repentance (cf. Mat. 7:13-14). On the other hand, if God delays His coming specifically because He is not wishing that any of His elect should perish, then we know that this delay is most certainly having the effect He intends as all those who have been appointed to eternal life in the eternal decree of God eventually come in time to a saving repentance and faith in Christ (cf. Acts 13:48).

Finally, we know that Peter has in mind, here, not “all” in terms of the whole world, but all of God’s elect because of what he goes on to say in verses 11-12:

□ 2 Peter 3:11–12 — 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...

Peter says that when we pursue repentance and holy living we’re actually “hastening” the coming of the day of God. We’ll talk more about this when we come to these verses, but the idea here is that the day of God will *not* come—it will continue to be delayed—until *all* have reached repentance – not “all” in terms of the whole world, but “all” in terms of God’s elect (cf. Acts 3:19-21; Rom. 11:25-26). Therefore, the reason God delays His coming in judgment is because

He is slow to anger toward His elect in every generation, not wishing that any of His elect should perish, but that all of His elect should reach repentance. Only God knows when the last generation will be, when there will be no more of His elect to be gathered in and therefore when there will be no more reason for patience or delay (cf. Jn. 10:16; 2 Tim. 2:10).

IV. “Not wishing”?

In light of all this, we need to rethink the word that the ESV translates “wishing” (“not *wishing* that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance”). The basic idea of the Greek word *boulomai* is that of a desire or a wish. But when we speak of God’s “desire” there can be two different meanings based on the context. On the one hand, God’s desire may simply reflect that which He delights in, in terms of His moral or revealed will.

- Isaiah 65:12 (cf. Isa. 1:11; 66:4) — When I called, you did not answer; when I spoke, you did not listen, but you did what was evil in my eyes and chose what I did not **delight** in” [LXX: *boulomai*].”
- Ezekiel 33:11 — As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure [LXX: *boulomai*] in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?

On the other hand, God’s desire may be a reference to that which He has planned and determined to do in terms of His eternal decree (His “secret” and hidden will; cf. Deut. 29:29).

- Isaiah 53:10 — It was the will [LXX: *boulomai*] of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief.
- 1 Samuel 2:25 — [Eli said to his sons,] “If someone sins against a man, God will mediate for him, but if someone sins against the LORD, who can intercede for him?” But they would not listen to the voice of their father, for it was the **will** [LXX: *boulomai...boulomai*] of the LORD to put them to death [LXX: “because **wishing** the Lord **wished** to destroy them; because **being willing**, the Lord **willed/determined** to destroy them”].
- 2 Chronicles 25:16 — But as he was speaking, the king said to him, “Have we made you a royal counselor? Stop! Why should you be struck down?” So the prophet stopped, but said, “I know that God has **wished/determined** [LXX: *boulomai*] to destroy you, because you have done this and have not listened to my counsel.”
- (Cf. Judg. 13:23; 2 Chron. 21:7; Job 13:3; 34:14; 35:13; 37:10; Isa. 42:21; 53:10; Jonah. 1:14; Judith 8:15–16)

God doesn’t purpose and decree two opposite things (God doesn’t decree that Eli’s sons should not listen to their father so they might be destroyed *and also* decree that all of the wicked should repent and be saved). This would be a contradiction in God. Neither does God morally delight in two opposite things (God doesn’t delight in the repentance and salvation of the wicked *and also* in the stubbornness and death of the wicked). This also would be a contradiction in God. So we conclude that in terms of God’s eternal and “secret” decree, God does will (purpose/determine) that many of the wicked be hardened in their sins and go to eternal destruction.

- John 12:36–40 — Though [Jesus] had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him... Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said, “He [the Lord] has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them.”
- Romans 11:7–8 — Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, as it is written, “God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day.”
- Romans 9:14–18 — What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God’s part? By no means! For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

In terms of God’s eternal and “secret” decree, God wills that many of the wicked be hardened in their sins and go to eternal destruction. But in terms of God’s moral and revealed will, God truly and sincerely wills (desires/wishes) only that the wicked should repent and inherit eternal life and He earnestly invites and commands all of the wicked to repent and believe in the Savior. Once again, we’re reminded that Christianity is a revealed religion and that we’re called first of all to submit our thinking in humility to God’s revealed truth, but then also to embrace with joy the whole of God’s truth and delight ourselves in it.

In the New Testament, apart from 2 Peter every time this verb (*boulomai*) is used with God as its subject it always refers not just to what God delights in, but also to that which He is sure to carry out and accomplish because it’s according to His eternal decree.

- Matthew 11:27 (cf. Lk. 10:22) — No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son **chooses** [*boulomai*] to reveal him.
- Luke 22:42 (cf. Heb. 6:17) — Father, if you are **willing** [*boulomai*], remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.
- 1 Corinthians 12:11 (James 1:18) — All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he **wills** [*boulomai*].

So the question is, in light of these two meanings of the Greek word *boulomai*—to wish or to determine—which one does Peter have in mind here in 2 Peter 3:9? In light of all of the above—in light of the immediate context of verse 9, in light of the larger context of 2 Peter, and in light of the even larger context of the New Testament and the entire Bible—what Peter has in mind here in chapter three is what the Lord has sovereignly willed and purposed and determined. We could translate, then:

“The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient [slow to anger] toward you [toward His elect in Peter’s generation and in every generation], not willing that any [of you] should perish, but that all [of His elect in Peter’s generation and in every generation] should reach repentance.”

Or more simply, in Peter's words: "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient **TOWARD YOU**, not willing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, the amazing lesson we learn here is that God has "delayed" the coming of the day of the Lord these two thousand years *for our sake* – so that *we* might be born, and live, and hear the Gospel, and come to repentance, and be redeemed and adopted into God's family as His very own sons and daughters. Do you see in this the infinite and fathomless love of God for you?

In the end, all of God's elect will be saved. They will never fall away but persevere in saving faith until the end. How can this be? It's *because* "the Lord is not *willing* that *any* [not even a single one] should perish, but that all [every single one] should come to repentance."

Far from being a reason to scoff, therefore, the delay of the Lord's coming should cause us to bow down in amazement and awe at the fathomless love of God *toward us* and toward *all* of those rebellious sinners that He has chosen and elected in Christ before the foundation of the world. Rather than a reason to scoff, the delay of the Lord's coming should only be a reason for us to live all the more earnestly each day in true repentance and faith, looking for and *hastening* the coming of the day of the Lord. Rather than a reason to scoff, every moment of delay is a reminder to us that the day of the Lord *is* coming and *will* come as soon as the last of His elect sheep has been gathered into the fold (cf. Jn. 10:16).

Let us then work, and pray, and give for the sake of the elect that still remain to be gathered in (cf. 2 Tim. 2:10); and let us praise God that we have *already* been gathered in by His infinite grace.