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JOHN BRAY

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*“Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.”*

(Matthew 24:35)

It has been generally believed that Jesus here meant that even though these physical heavens and earth will pass away some day, that is not true about His word which will never pass away. Whether this physical earth and solar system ever passes away is not the point in this chapter. There is more to this statement of Jesus than meets the eye. Jesus has been talking in apocalyptic language, and heaven and earth passing away could mean here just what He has been talking about—that the heaven and earth of the old Jewish order will pass away, and that His word concerning all this is sure to come to pass.

At first glance, it looks as though Jesus was simply saying in this verse, “My words will be here when the world has passed away” But is the physical world or universe what Jesus had in mind? Was a literal heaven and earth in His thoughts? Remember now, what Jesus had been talking about—what He had already said in this chapter would pass away. We have been discussing the passing away of the Jewish nation, and the old religious order of things.

Go back to Matthew 5:18 and see where Jesus said, “Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled” Here He said that the law would not pass away until what? Until two other things passed away. What were they? First, “Till heaven and earth pass;” and, secondly, “till all (the law) be fulfilled.” We know the law was fulfilled in Christ, and all prophecies relating to Israel fulfilled by 70 A.D. We all realize that because of this all the law was now over. But how could this be, when “heaven and earth” had not passed away, for Jesus said “Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law”? Maybe we can understand this better if we realize He was not talking about the literal heaven and earth, but something else. Something else would have to pass away before it could be said that the law was not still in effect.

In the New Testament especially, the destruction of heaven and earth refers not to the physical universe, but rather it relates to the final passing of the disobedient nation of Israel. All would be fulfilled, every jot and tittle, when heaven and earth passed away. (Matt. 5:18).

**We have to go to the Old Testament to see what “heaven and earth” means in prophetic language.**

In Deuteronomy 32:1, in the song of Moses, God is talking to Israel when He says: “Give ear, O ye heavens, and I will speak; and hear, O earth, the words of my mouth” In the song of Moses, God is depicting the fate of Israel when He says: “For a fire is kindled in mine anger, and shall burn unto the lowest hell, and shall consume the earth with her increase, and set on fire the foundations of the mountains” (vs. 22).

Is God here talking about burning up the earth? No, he is talking about bringing judgment upon Israel. He had already told them the type of judgment they could expect. “The LORD shall bring a nation against thee from far, from the end of the earth, as swift as the eagle flieth; a nation whose tongue thou shalt not understand” (Deut. 28:49).

In the song of Moses, God is telling His people that He had delivered them from the oppressor, but that if they became disobedient He would bring all sorts of trouble upon them. It was a song of deliverance, but also a song of warning. In Revelation 15:2-3 we see the saints singing the song of Moses, and also the song of the Lamb, after they had gotten their victory over the Beast.

But apocalyptic and symbolical language is used in the song of Moses in describing the judgment of God. When Israel is finally destroyed, it is as though heaven and earth are burned up.

In Isaiah 51:13 God said that He had “stretched forth the heavens, and laid the foundations of the earth” Once again, is God speaking here of the literal heavens and earth?

Read on in this same passage to verse 16: “And I have put my words in thy mouth, and I have covered thee in the shadow of mine hand, that I may plant the heavens, and lay the foundations of the earth, and say unto Zion, Thou art my people.”

Read that verse again. It could not be talking of the formation of the literal heavens and earth, for that had taken place more than 3,000 years before! So, then, what is He talking about? The verse explains itself. He is talking about “Zion.” He is talking about “my people” In other words, He is talking about Israel. He is talking in this verse about the formation of Israel.

And in Matthew 24:35 Jesus is talking about the passing away of Israel when He speaks of heaven and earth passing away. This is what the entire 24th chapter of Matthew is about—the passing away of old Israel.

Now there will be a new Israel—a new heavens and earth; but more about that later. In Bible figurative language, “heavens” refers to governments and rulers, and “earth” refers to the nation or people.

With this in mind, we can look at the very first chapter of Isaiah, in which God begins to give predictions of coming invasions and captivities of His people; and in Isaiah 1:2 He said:

“Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the LORD hath spoken, and I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me.”

To whom is He speaking when He addresses, “O heavens” and “O earth”? He is talking to Israel. This shows very clearly that “heavens and earth” are symbolical language for Israel. In this passage He went on to say:

“Hear the word of the LORD, ye rulers of Sodom; give ear unto the law of our God, ye people of Gomorrah.” Now God was not speaking to Sodom and Gomorrah, for they had been destroyed many years previously. But the rulers and people of Israel were likened to the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, and it was to the “heavens and earth” also that He was speaking. The “heavens and earth” and also “the rulers of Sodom and Gomorrah” referred to Israel as a nation.

In Isaiah 24 we have a picture of God’s promise of judgment on Israel through the Assyrians. But Israel is spoken of as the “earth” Read in particular verses 1 and 19-20:

“Behold, the LORD maketh the earth empty, and maketh it waste, and turneth it upside down, and scattereth abroad the inhabitants thereof.”

“The earth is utterly broken down, the earth is clean dissolved, the earth is moved exceedingly.

“The earth shall reel to and fro like a drunkard, and shall be removed like a cottage; and the transgression thereof shall be heavy upon it; and it shall fall, and not rise again.”

And in Isaiah 34:4-5 God said that “all the host of heaven shall be dissolved, and the heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll: and all their host shall fall down, as the leaf falleth off from the vine, and as a falling fig from the fig tree.”

“For my sword shall be bathed in heaven: behold, it shall come down upon Idumea, and upon the people of my curse, to judgment.”

We know this is not to be taken literally—that the literal heavens would be dissolved and rolled together as a scroll, for He said that His “sword shall be bathed in heaven” and then follows that by explaining what He meant—the sword would “come down on Idumea.”

The rulers and their people would face judgment from the Lord. And God said, “my sword;” and He used the armies of heathen people to accomplish His purpose.

In Jeremiah 22:29 God says, “O earth, earth, earth, hear the word of the Lord.” And in verse 1 (along with verses 11, 18 and 24) we had read that the words were for the people of Judah, concerning the time when they would be taken “into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and into the hand of the Chaldeans” (vs. 25). It was not the whole physical earth God was talking to, but the people.

If the dissolving of heaven and earth were to be taken literally in all the passages of the Old Testament where such language is used, it would necessarily mean that the heavens and earth were to be destroyed numerous times! The language has to be figurative.

This brings us back to our comments on the cosmic disturbances mentioned in Matthew 24:29, when “the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken” There Jesus was not talking about the literal heavens coming apart. He was talking about the rulers and the dignitaries of the nation of Israel falling. This happened in A.D. 70 and there was no more a nation of Israel.

Isaiah 13:13 said, “Therefore I will shake the heavens, and the earth shall remove out of her place, in the wrath of the LORD of hosts, and in the day of his fierce anger” Some, who take the literalistic interpretation approach to all prophecy, might apply this to the end of the world’s history. But prophecies like this actually applied to spiritual things—the passing away of the old, and the transformation of things into newness of life.

Haggai 2:6 (a Messianic prophecy) said, “Yet once, it is a little while, and I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land; and I will shake all nations ...” This passage applies to the change of things which were brought about by the passing away of the old and the introduction of the new. The coming of Christ made possible this great change. This change would involve the passing away of the old Judaistic system with all its ceremonies, rites, rituals, sacrifices, etc. As the writer of Hebrews said, as he “borrowed” words from Haggai 2:6, “Whose voice then shook

the earth; but now he hath promised, saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven.”

“And this word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain.

“Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved ...” (Hebrews 12:26-28).

In Haggai 2:21-22 God said, “I will shake the heavens and the earth; And I will overthrow the throne of kingdoms, and I will destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the heathen.” Here we see the connection between shaking the heavens and the earth, and the overthrow of kingdoms and powers.

While the coming of Jesus Christ made possible the passing away of the old and the introduction of the new through the institution of the new covenant (so vividly discussed by the writer of Hebrews), yet much of all this was not eliminated completely until A.D.70 when Jerusalem and the Temple were completely destroyed and the old actually ceased to be. As the writer said in Hebrews 8:13, “In that he saith, A new covenant, he hath made the first old. Now that which decayeth and waxeth old is READY to vanish away.”

While the coming of Christ, and especially His death, made possible this new area of things, yet the manifestation of all this was not possible until the Temple itself and all its rituals were completely abolished. As the writer of Hebrews said, “The Holy Ghost this signifying, that the way into the holiest of all was not yet made manifest, while as the first tabernacle was yet standing.” (Hebrews 9:8). In the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70, after it was no longer standing, it was manifested that the old covenant had vanished away, and the new heaven and new earth of this gospel dispensation was now in effect.

In all of this we see that from Christ until A.D. 70 there was a gradual transition from the old age to the new. He came in the end of the age (Hebrews 9:26). The old was ready to vanish away (Hebrews 8:13). The new was manifested after the Temple was destroyed (Hebrews 9:8).

Concerning the expression, “ready to vanish away;” found in Hebrews 8:13, George Eldon Ladd said, “Whether or not these words refer to the historical destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D., they at least affirm the dissolution of the old Mosaic order, because the new order of redemption reality has come” (George Eldon Ladd, p. 27, *The Last Things*).

Milton Terry interprets II Peter 3 as referring to a change to the gospel age rather than to a literal destruction of the earth. Referring to the interpretation given them by the literalists to such passages as Isaiah 51:16, 65:17, 56:22, II Peter 3:10-13, Rev. 20:11, 21:1 as relating to “a literal prophecy of the destruction of the world by fire, and the creation of a new world in its place,” Dr. Terry said:

“That these texts may intimate or dimly foreshadow some such ultimate reconstruction of the physical creation, need not be denied, for we know not the possibilities of the future, nor the purposes of God respecting all things which he has created. But the contexts of these several passages do not authorize such a doctrine. Isaiah li. 16, refers to the resuscitation of Zion and Jerusalem, and is clearly, metaphorical. The same is true of Isa. lxv. 17, and lxvi. 22, for the context in all these places confines the reference to Jerusalem and the people of God, and sets forth the same great prophetic conception of the Messianic future as the closing chapters of Ezekiel. The language of 2 Pet. iii, 10, 12, is taken mainly from Isa. xxxiv. 4, and is limited to the parousia, like the language of Matt. xxiv, 29. Then the Lord made ‘not only the land but also the heaven’ to tremble (Heb. xii, 26), and removed the things that were shaken in order to establish a kingdom which cannot be moved (Heb. xii, 27, 28).” (Milton S. Terry, footnote in *Biblical Hermeneutics*, p. 489).

In Isaiah 65:1 God is quoted as saying, “I am sought of them that asked not for me; I am found of them that sought me not: I said, Behold me, behold me, unto a nation that was not called by my name’ Reference is made here to the Gentiles who would behold the Lord—those who had not been called by His name. Paul brings this out in Romans 10:20 as he refers to this prophecy.

The passage goes on to say in Isaiah 65:9, “And I will bring forth a seed out of Jacob, and out of Judah an inheritor of my mountains: and mine elect shall inherit it, and my servants shall dwell there.” Here is mentioned a “seed” coming out of Judah who will be his elect.

In verses 13-14 fleshly Israel is contrasted to this spiritual Israel—the elect. Then in verse 15 He said concerning fleshly Israel, “And ye shall leave your name for a curse unto my chosen: for the Lord GOD shall slay thee, and call his servants by another name.” These servants would bless the Lord “because the former troubles are forgotten, and behold they are hid from mine eyes.” (vs. 16). And it was in this context that God said, “For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind . . . for behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy. (vss. 17-18). This is the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21:10—that holy city, the bride, the Lamb’s wife, the church, God’s people in this new dispensation.



And it was in this same context that God said, “For, behold, the LORD will come with fire, and with his chariots like a whirlwind, to render his anger with fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire.” (Isaiah 66:15). The Lord comes! And He did come, with the fires of His fury upon the land of Israel. And as a result, it could be said, “For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me, saith the LORD, so shall YOUR SEED and YOUR NAME remain.” (Isaiah 66:22) Out of the ruins of the old heavens and the old earth, and the old Jerusalem, there comes a new earth and a new Jerusalem. This was the “seed out of Jacob” (Isaiah 65:9) and the “nation that was not called by my name” (Isaiah 65:1). The whole situation has changed, and all things are new (Rev. 21:5).

Jesus said, “TILL heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.” (Matt. 5:17).

I used to see just “till all be fulfilled.” The law would remain until it was all fulfilled, and then it would pass away.

But I had not noticed the other “till”— “TILL heaven and earth pass...” Not one jot or tittle of the law would pass until heaven and earth passed.

Now is He talking about the literal heaven and earth? If so, then the law has not yet passed, and is not yet fulfilled—for certainly the literal heaven and earth have not passed away.

But this language speaks of Israel (the heavens and earth of Isaiah 51:16) passing away. With the passing away of Israel, all the old covenant became a thing of the past. All was fulfilled. See Luke 21:22 where it says of Israel’s destruction, “For these be the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled.” And Jesus said, “This generation (the generation during which He lived) shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled” (Matt. 24:34).

Some of the old Reformation preachers understood the meaning of those words, “heaven and earth” as meaning the political or government areas of life. For example, most respected John Owen, writing of the demise of the Roman empire, said that it “was shivered to pieces by many barbarous nations; who, settling themselves in the fruitful soils of Europe, began to plant their heavens, and lay the foundations of the earth, growing up into civil state” etc. (John Owen, vol. 8, p. 265). Here John Owen had reference to the shaking of the Roman Empire, but later in this book I give a lengthy quotation of his where he had the reference to the Jewish religious structure which was removed before the full realization of the new covenant in the kingdom of Christ.

Speaking of the “restoration of God’s people into a glorious condition after all their sufferings” John Owen said that this was “held out under the same term, and you have a plentiful demonstration of this point.” He then quoted from Isa. 65:17, 18, II Peter 3:13, and Rev. 21:1 (vol. 8, p. 255). These passages, of course, refer to the new heavens and new earth. Once again, however, John Owen had in mind the condition of God’s people following the passing away of the old heavens and old earth of the Papacy government and rule, whereas it seems the writers from which he quoted were referring to the church following the destruction of Babylon which was old Jerusalem and represented all the Jewish religious structure. Nevertheless, later in this book I give you a lengthy summary of Dr. Owen’s interpretation of II Peter 3 where he applies the destruction of the old heavens and earth to the destruction of the Jewish system and the new heavens and new earth to the new order under Christ.

But his understanding of the meaning of the heavens and the earth is well taken, and it would profit us to understand this also in our studies on Matthew 24 and related passages. John Owen said;

“Not to hold you too long upon what is so plain and evident, you may take it for a rule, that, in the denunciations of the judgments of God, through all the prophets, heaven, sun, moon, stars, and the like appearing beauties and glories of the aspectable heavens, are taken for governments, governors, dominions in political states, as Isa. xiv, 12-15; Jer. xv. 9, li. 25” His footnote then gives Isa. 13:13, Ps. 68:8, Joel 2:10, Rev. 8:12, Matt. 24:29; Luke 21:25, Isa. 60:20; Obad. 4; Rev. 8:13; 11:12, 20:11. (John Owen, p. 255, vol. 8, p. 255, in a sermon entitled “Shaking and Translating of Heaven and Earth” preached on April 19, 1649).

## **The “Heavens and the Earth” Represent Israel**

In Isaiah 51:15-16, God said, “But I am the LORD thy God, that divided the sea, whose waves roared: The LORD of hosts is his name. And I have put my words in thy mouth, and I have covered thee in the shadow of mine hand, that I may plant the heavens, and lay the foundation of the earth, and say unto Zion, Thou art my people.”

God is not here talking about something that happened at creation’s date 3,000 years before! He is talking about His people Israel. The “heavens and the earth” represent Israel in this language.

And the downfall of governments are represented by heavenly disturbances. For example, Isaiah 34:4 (nations); Jeremiah 4:23-25 (Jews by Babylon); Ezekiel 32:7 (destruction of Egypt).

The shaking of heaven and earth, and planting the heavens and foundation of the earth, are Bible language referring to change, transformation, and making into a new thing, of God’s people.

Some of us may have to re-orient our thinking to understand the meaning of these passages. The Hebrew people understood this kind of language. It was their style. We need to see things in context, and the context of these New Testament passages had reference to the first century—not the end of the Roman Empire, not the Reformation period, and not a future state of the world at the end of time—but of what was to take place in the generation of those living in the time of Christ.

This same kind of language was used over and over again in the Old Testament as has been previously pointed out as we dealt with Matthew 24:29 in this series. Jesus used this kind of language in the above-mentioned verse (Matthew 24:29), and He used this same kind of language in verse 35 when He said, “Heaven and earth shall pass away” Why should Jesus use a different kind of prophetic language than was used in the Old Testament and that was understood by the Hebrew mind?

One thing I have learned about literalism and symbolism in the Bible, is this: History and events are generally given in literal language, and prophecies are generally given in symbolical language. When God created the heavens and the earth, that was a historical event; the language describing that event is literal. When God is describing the downfall of Israel in prophetic terms, He uses symbolical language, like the destruction of the heavens and the earth. He does not mean that He will actually destroy the heavens and the earth; that is prophetic and symbolical language.

In Hebrews 1:10-12 we have the same kind of language: “Thou, Lord in the beginning hast laid the foundations of the earth; and the heavens are the works of thine hands: They shall perish; but thou remainest; and they all shall wax old as doth a garment; And as a vesture shalt thou fold them up, and they shall be changed.”

Matthew 24:35 could be the same as a condensed paraphrase of these verses in Hebrews, for they are talking about the same thing. In fact, just about all the book of Hebrews is about the passing away of the old heavens and earth of the old covenant and nation of Israel, as is so plainly brought out in Hebrews 12:26-28 where it speaks of the shaking of heaven and earth, and the removing of those things that can be shaken, and our receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken or moved. Read it!

J. Stuart Russell said, “What, then, is the great catastrophe symbolically represented as the shaking of the earth and heavens? No doubt it is the overthrow and abolition of the Mosaic dispensation, or old covenant; the destruction of the Jewish church and state, together with all the institutions and ordinances connected therewith. There were ‘heavenly things’ belonging to the dispensation: the laws, and statutes, and ordinances, which were divine in their origin, and might be properly called the ‘spiritualia’ of Judaism—these were the heavens, which were to be shaken and removed. There were also ‘earthly things:’ the literal Jerusalem, the material temple, the land of Canaan—these were the earth, which was in like manner to be shaken and removed. The symbols are, in fact equivalent to those employed by our Lord when predicting the doom of Israel. ‘Immediately after the tribulation of those days (the horrors of the siege of Jerusalem) shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken’ (Matt. xxiv. 29). Both passages refer to the same catastrophe and employ very similar figures; besides which we have the authority of our Lord for fixing the event and the period of which He speaks within the limits of the generation then in existence: that is to say, the reference can only be to the judgment of the Jewish nation and the abrogation of the Mosaic economy at the Parousia” (J. Stuart Russell, pp. 289-290).

The literal earth is not predicted to pass away. In fact, in Psalm 104:5 David said that God “laid the foundation of the earth, that it shall not be removed forever.” And in Ecclesiastes 1:4, Solomon said, “One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth forever.”

In Matthew 24:35 Jesus is not anywhere speaking of the passing away of the literal heavens and earth, but of the coming destruction of Israel and Jerusalem and the Temple and all the rituals and ceremonies involved in their existence and practices. There was to be a new heavens and a new earth as a result, of which we speak shortly.

## II Peter 3:1-14

The question then arises, “What about II Peter 3 where it tells of ‘the day of the Lord’ and the heavens passing away, and the earth being burned up (vs. 10)?”

This chapter has to be understood in the context of all these other passages which have been given. In writing prophetically, it is natural that Peter would also use the same kind of language and expressions as used in prophecy in the Old Testament. Why not? The people to whom he wrote would understand him on that basis.

Let us analyze what Peter said in II Peter 3:

“This second epistle, beloved, I now write unto you; in both which I stir up your pure minds by way of remembrance: That ye may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us the apostles of the Lord and Saviour; Knowing this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, And saying, Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation. For this they willingly are ignorant of, that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of the water and in the water: Whereby the world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished: But the heavens and the earth, which are now, by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men. But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up. Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness. Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.”

Let me suggest to start with that this passage is not to be taken literally (naturally) any more than Luke 3:5 was taken literally. “Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth.”

Peter tells his readers that he wants them to remember and be mindful of the words of the prophets. Do you know of any words of the prophets in the Old Testament

regarding the passing away of heavens and earth IN A LITERAL SENSE? We have noted some instances in the Old Testament about the dissolving of the heavens (same word as used here in verse 13), and as we discuss this passage we shall notice some other places as well. But none of the places refer to a literal passing away of heaven and earth. And yet Peter is wanting to remind his readers of the words of the holy prophets. Keep this in mind.

Keep in mind also that Peter had previously written (I Peter 4:7), “But the end of all things is at hand.” Naturally he was not talking about the end of our present heavens and earth, for if he were, he was mistaken, for that has not happened and nineteen hundred years have gone by. He meant an end was at hand to the old heavens and earth of Judaism under the judgment of God—the end of the world (Jewish age) which Jesus has predicted would happen in that generation (Matt. 24:34). This occurred just a few years later after Peter had written it. So here he now reminds his readers not only of the words of the holy prophets, but also of “the commandment of us the apostles of the Lord and Saviour” (vs. 2). The apostles had referred to the same things as spoken by the holy prophets in the Old Testament.

### **The Last Days**

Then in II Peter 3:3 Peter said that scoffers would come in “the last days,” saying, “Where is the promise of his coming?” (vss. 3-4). We have gone to great length in this series to show how “the last days” were those of their age, the Jewish age, and not our age. Nearly 40 years went by after Jesus said He was going to come in judgment on Israel, and people would be asking in those last days, “When is He coming? He said He was going to come in ‘this generation’ and these things would all take place which He promised, but He has not come yet. When will the promise be fulfilled?” This is what Peter said they would be asking in the closing days of that age—in “the last days.” Not our last days, but their last days.

### **The “Parousia” Like in Noah’s Day**

The coming of Christ which is in question here is that of His parousia/coming in A.D. 70, the same as we have been discussing throughout this series.

Peter said, “for since the fathers fell asleep” etc. (vs. 4). This had to be Jews asking the question, “Where is the promise of his coming?”, and not Gentile unbelievers of today. It was their fathers who had fallen asleep.

The same could be said of the expression, “from the beginning of the creation” (same verse). Modern Gentile unbelievers do not refer to the “creation”. They believe the

earth is either of everlasting origin or else came into being through some other means than by God's divine creation. They would not be speaking in terms of a beginning of creation. These were the Jews in Peter's time who would be making this statement.

Peter says next (vss. 5-7) that those who would ask that question were ignorant of a former example of a prophesied judgment which came to pass—the flood. He said that “the world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished” (vs. 6). The word “world” is from the Greek word “kosmos” which means the world in its orderly arrangement, including the inhabitants. Scofield's note on this word in Matthew 4:8 also says, “When used in the NT of humanity, the ‘world’ of men, it is organized humanity—humanity in families, tribes, nations—which is meant.” It was this “world” which perished—not the earth itself. In Matthew 24:37 Jesus likewise compares His coming in judgment on Israel “as the days of Noah were.”

In II Peter 2:15 it says that God “spared not the old world ... bringing in the flood upon the world of the ungodly.” In II Peter 3:6 it says, “Whereby the world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished” But afterwards, the earth was still here; it was not destroyed. The end of the world was not the destruction of the earth, but the destruction of ungodly sinners. This is what Peter meant in II Peter 3:7 when he says that “the heavens and the earth, which are now, by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men.” It was to be the world of ungodly men which was to perish—not the literal earth itself.

As Don Preston put it, “We understand from Peter that in Noah's day the world, the moral world, or society, perished. We understand that Peter foresaw the coming dissolution of another society, the Jewish world. This is exactly what happened in 70 A.D” (Don K. Preston, p. 38, II Peter 3—The Late Great Kingdom).

In Noah's day, the literal heavens were not destroyed by the flood. The literal earth was not destroyed by the flood. It was the PEOPLE who were destroyed.

“But,” Peter said, “the heavens and the earth which are now, by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment of ungodly men” (vs. 7).

Why would Peter not be talking about the same heavens and earth which were talked about in the Old Testament in prophetic passages? Indeed, as the “world” of mankind with its system and arrangement passed away (not the earth) so Peter was predicting a coming judgment and destruction of Israel—the prophetic heavens and earth of prophecy. “The perdition of ungodly men” (vs. 7) is not talking about the literal heavens and earth vanishing, but of this nation of ungodly men passing away. This would happen shortly.

In a rather new book on prophecy, a recent writer, David P. Crews, said in regards to verse 7, “The ‘heavens and earth’ are simply the Jewish religious/political authorities and the land of Palestine and the people who lived there. They were the ‘ungodly men’—ungodly because they had rejected and killed the Christ, and still rejected him—who were being ‘kept’ (by the gracious mercy of God who wanted all to repent and come to him) unto the day of judgment and destruction. This phrasing tells us that this is another ‘day of the Lord’ just like the ones we see exemplified in the Old Testament.” (David P. Crews, p. 96).

### **God Gave Them 40 Years to Repent**

But Peter indicates that God is concerned that men not perish, but they should come to repentance; and the reason God had waited this long was the unwillingness to see people perish. He gave them 40 years to repent and they did not. God cannot wait forever. The 40 years were extra—thrown in for good measure to faithless Israel whose end should have come when they nailed Jesus to the cross!

But the promise of God is certain, and He will keep His word. “Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away” (Matthew 24:35). The end of the Jewish age would come in that generation. “Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled.” (Matthew 24:34). The fact that God was waiting this long meant nothing to the mind of God, for with Him “one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day” (vs. 8). He never gave a precise number of days, for that would be man’s numbering system for man’s mind. In God’s mind it is different, and in His mind it could not matter how short or how long because He is timeless.



## The Day of the Lord

Then Peter connects “his coming” (vs. 4) with “the day of the Lord” (vs. 10), and it would come as “a thief in the night,” He said. The idea of a thief coming was also used in Matthew 24 (verses 43-44) in connection with the Son of man coming, as well as in I Thessalonians 5:2 where it stated “that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night.”

Someone may say this expression, “day of the Lord” certainly puts this into our future, as a future coming of Christ, rather than in A.D. 70 when Christ came at the time of judgment on Israel. Those who are more futuristic in their interpretation of prophecy might say that. But the fact is that “the day of the Lord” is an expression also taken from the Old Testament and was used many times in regards to the judgments and destruction of various nations. That is the way it is used here. It does not have to have a meaning with reference to some future time to us of drastic judgments of God upon our world. But it always meant a time when God Himself would punish or judge people by the means of armies of other people. The invading armies of other nations brought judgment and destruction upon various nations, and these times were each called “the day of the Lord” when they were proclaimed of the Lord. (In the New Testament such a day would be called “the day of Christ” as well if it had to do with the Messianic kingdom).

“It is commonplace in prophecies of judgment for the destruction to be at the immediate hand of an invading nation and the destruction nonetheless to be declared a direct act of God.” (Randall Otto, p. 92).

In Ezekiel 30:3 a prophecy is given concerning a coming “day of the Lord” But in verse 10 it is clearly pointed out that what is involved would be the destruction wrought by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. This is the way “the day of the Lord” was to come at so many times in the Bible, including that one predicted in II Peter 3.

Whenever the expression, “day of the Lord” is used in the Bible with reference to the people under discussion, it seems that the term referred to the next great epochal judgment of God. When one considers the passages in I Peter regarding the soon-approaching event which was to take place, it lends support to the idea that this passage in II Peter 3 goes right along with these other passages in depicting a “near” event. In II Peter 3:1 Peter wrote to stir up their memory of what he had written before, as well as what had been spoken by the holy prophets.

In his previous epistle, Peter had written that God was ready to judge the quick and the dead (I Peter 4:5). He wrote them that “the end of all things is at hand” (I Peter

4:7). He wrote them that “the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God.” Other references in I Peter give the same emphasis. In this epistle Peter was talking about the “day of the Lord” that was to occur in their generation. It was a “near” event.

Let us see how this expression was used in the Old Testament. How it was used there would certainly be the way any writers of the New Testament would use it—else there would be a change of definition necessary for New Testament Hebrews to understand what was meant. The expression was primarily used in connection with judgment against Israel, both in the Old Testament and the New Testament.

In Isaiah 13:6 the Bible said that “the day of the Lord is near”, and we know from verse 1 that this was speaking of Babylon when God would “lay the land desolate: and he shall destroy the sinners out of it.” (vs. 6).

Notice, too, in this same passage (vs. 10) that it mentions the stars not giving their light, the sun being darkened, and the moon not causing her light to shine—in that day of the Lord when He punishes Babylon (“the world”) “for their evil, and the wicked for their iniquity” Here again we see cosmic disturbances representing the cessation of rulers in high places—in this case in Babylon itself.

In Ezekiel 13:5 is mentioned “the day of the Lord” as being the time when four years later Jerusalem was destroyed and the people carried away into captivity to Babylon.

In Ezekiel 30:3 it was prophesied, “the day of the Lord is near” and this was in reference to Egypt’s destruction by Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon (vs. 10).

In Joel 1:6 it was prophesied, “the day of the LORD is at hand” and in 2:1, “the day of the Lord cometh, for it is nigh at hand.” Notice in 2:10 the cosmic disturbances are mentioned—the earth quaking, the heavens trembling, the sun and moon darkening, the stars withdrawing their shining—all pointing to the downfall of rulers at the time of invading armies used by God in His day to bring judgment upon His people. In verse 11 God even calls the invading army, “his army.”

And when in Joel 2:28-31 God said the Spirit would be poured out before “the great and the terrible day of the Lord come” we are aware that Peter quoted from this passage on the day of Pentecost, saying it was fulfilled in their day. (Acts 2:16-20). We know the day of the Lord was to follow this, as the passage says, which it did just 37-40 years later in the siege and final destruction of Israel and Jerusalem. Note how the cosmic disturbances are mentioned in Joel 2:30-31 and quoted in Acts 2:19-20 in connection with “that day of the Lord”, the same as Jesus did in Matthew 24:29.

Still other Old Testament references to “the day of the Lord” can be located by the use of a concordance, but we shall not go further here.

While the various references to “the day of the Lord” in the Old Testament referred to various nations, etc., the reference in ALL such expressions in the New Testament are to that “day of the Lord” in 67-70 A.D. when the nation of Israel was involved—the only nation in the New Testament concerning which prophecy was made with reference to “the day of the Lord.” Israel was to be destroyed at the parousia/coming of Christ in A.D. 70.

So, as we come to II Peter 3:10, is there any reason we should think otherwise of “the day of the Lord” mentioned here? I think not. Peter is here speaking prophetically about the coming destruction of Israel through the armies of Rome and its subsidiaries in 67-70 A.D. And he uses the cosmic disturbance symbols exactly like they were used in the Old Testament when the different days of the Lord occurred—“in the which the heavens shall pass away with great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.” Both the heavens and the earth (symbolically) were to be destroyed. Both the rulers and the people were to be destroyed in this day of the Lord as prophesied to take place at “his coming.”

To throw light on II Peter 3:10, recent author Randall Otto, speaking of the cosmic disturbances as mentioned in Matthew 24:29, Mark 13:23, 25, Luke 21:25-26, said: “The prophet’s use of the language of cosmic catastrophe is not intended to be taken literally, for it is clear that it generally has to do with instances of judgment either upon apostate Israel or upon its pagan neighbors that issue from God by means of a national army!” (Randall Otto, p. 103).

On another page, Otto said:

“Once again, it is common for Bible readers unfamiliar with the apocalyptic imagery of the Old Testament to take these words as literal events associated with a final cosmic conflagration. Indeed, there are even some who are considered biblical scholars who willfully ignore this Old Testament imagery in their insistence on a literal destruction of the universe.” (Randall E. Otto, p. 226). Otto then goes on to say that the text of II Peter 3:10 is the same kind of apocalyptic text as found in the symbolic imagery of Isaiah 13:9-10, 23:21, Ezek. 32:7-8ff, Joel 2:30 ff, Amos 8:9, and Zeph. 1:14-18.

In like manner, David P. Crews said:

“Here again, we are tempted to think that the physical universe is the subject of this prophecy. It is from this verse and others like it that so many have obtained the idea that the universal creation, including this planet Earth, will be consumed and destroyed in some ‘end time’ event. Once again, however, we are hearing a prophecy, and again we are seeing the apostle use symbols” (David P. Crews, p. 98).

It is true that many of the commentaries generally have agreed and taught that this passage in II Peter 3 refers to the literal destruction of the world by fire at the final coming of Christ. Some of those who hold to this view include John Calvin, John Trapp, B.H. Carroll, Matthew Henry, Matthew Poole, Heinrich Meyer, Albert Barnes, Charles Ellicott, A.R. Fausset, Broadman Commentary, John A. Bengel, to name a few I have at hand at the moment in my library. John Bengel even goes so far as to say that even the stars would be dissolved.

“... and the stars ... also shall be dissolved with the earth.” They are mistaken, who restrict the history of the creation and the description of this destruction only to the earth and to the quarter of the heaven which is nearer to the earth, but feign that the stars are older than the earth, and will survive it. It is not to the heaven only which surrounds the earth, but to the heavens, that both dissolution and restoration are ascribed, ver. 10 and 13.” (John A. Bengel, 1687-1752, vol. 2, p. 779).

But even so, in spite of numerous commentaries which give the literal interpretation to this passage in II Peter 3, let us keep in mind that Peter had the SAME MEANING in this passage as was expressed in all the Old Testament passages mentioning “the new heavens and the new earth.” And the apocalyptic and symbolic kind of language used would have been the same as well. Why should it be any different in II Peter 3 than in all those Old Testament passages? I have found that the Bible itself interprets passages of Scripture better than many commentaries do. But of course, it took me a long time to discover some of this myself.

It hardly seems possible to me that “the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved” of H Peter 3:12 would have any different meaning than the “all the host of heaven shall be dissolved” of Isaiah 34:4. The latter refers to Bozrah and Idumea and their judgment (vs. 6) at the day of the Lord’s vengeance (vs. 8). Both are symbolic expressions, neither of which refer to the actual heavens being burned up.

And as we have seen earlier (in Psalm 104:5 and Ecclesiastes 1:4) this earth will stand forever. See also the following passages:

“And he built his sanctuary like high palaces, like the earth which he hath established forever” (Psalm 78:69).

“Praise him, ye heavens of heavens, and ye waters that be above the heavens...  
“He hath also stablished them for ever and ever: he hath made a decree which shall not pass” (Psalm 148:4,6).

“He hath also the world also is stablished, that it cannot be moved” (Psalm 93:1).

“... the world also shall be established that it shall not be moved...” (Psalm 96:10).

And God promised after the flood that He would nevermore destroy all of mankind again. “I will not again curse the ground any more for man’s sake; for the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth; neither will I again smite any more every thing living, as I have done.” (Genesis 8:21).

Some may say that God made a covenant with Noah, and that the rainbow would be a reminder of that covenant between Noah and the world, that “the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh” (Genesis 9:15). And this, some say, does not rule out God’s destruction of the entire world by fire some day—that He will not do it with a flood, but He will do it with fire. They feel that II Peter 3 teaches this. But no, Genesis 8:21 plainly declared that God would never “again smite any more every thing living, as I have done.”

God did destroy nations, but never again the whole world. And we do not know of any prediction anywhere in the Bible that says He will destroy this entire universe. The word “earth” (vs. 7) here means “land” and refers prophetically to the land of Israel. “Burned up” refers to the utter destruction that took place in those days throughout the entire land of Palestine. As the “world” of sinners were destroyed in the flood, so here the “earth/land” of Israel was completely destroyed.

The “heavens” would pass away in this day of the Lord, Peter said (vs. 10). Yes, they would pass away just like the heavens were predicted to be removed in the Old Testament when “the day of the Lord” came, at various times. This is prophetic language. When the rulers of the nation which God destroyed passed away, it was said the heavens passed away. The invading armies did this. But in the New Testament we are thinking of the nation of Israel—the only nation under consideration in the whole New Testament. When the heavens passed away, it was Israel which passed away.

It is interesting that the word “coming” here in verse 11 (“unto the coming of the day of God”) is the same identical word in the Greek (“parousia”) as used of the “coming” of Christ Himself in numerous places in the New Testament.

## The Elements Shall Melt

In II Peter 3:10, Peter said that when the day of the Lord came and the heavens passed away, “the elements shall melt with fervent heat.” We need to examine the meaning of this word “elements”, which is the same word as used several other times in the New Testament. The Greek word for “elements” is “stoicheion” and means “something orderly in arrangement—element, principle, rudiment” The word itself can refer to the parts of which our universe is made, and it can also refer to the rudimentary things of religion (as well as other things too, of course). At this point in our interpretation, given the symbolic fulfillment of the passing away of the heavens and the earth, we would connect this word to Israel. The elements that would be done away with would be those things related to Israel which would be abolished.

We find this word first in Galatians 4:3 where Paul said, “Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage, under the elements of the world.”

Here Paul was saying that the Jewish people before Christ and salvation were living under the worldly ceremonies and ordinances of the old covenant, though now they no longer needed the law as a schoolmaster as they had graduated to Christ by faith. The “elements” were no longer needed. Actually, it took the events of 67-70 A.D. for the complete elimination of these “elements” from the lives of the people. All was destroyed in the holocaust of those eventful days—the day of the Lord.

Then in Galatians 4:9 the word is used again. “But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage?” Paul follows this by saying that because “Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years;” that he was afraid he had bestowed his labor upon them in vain. Turning again to the legality of the old law and its system was the same as going back to an “elementary” religious system. The whole system would be “burned up” shortly.

In Colossians 2:8 Paul encourages the Colossian Christians not to go back into these elementary things of the old law. He uses the same word for “elements” (“stoicheion”) though here translated “rudiments:” “Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the traditions of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.” The spiritual lives of these Christians could be spoiled if they listened to those Judaizers who tried to get them to return to the old way. These things would soon go up in smoke. They were only elementary and not needed in mature Christian living.

Then in the same chapter, Colossians 2:20, Paul said, “Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances ...” These ordinances would soon “perish” (be destroyed) he said (vss. 22).

These “elements” of religion were destined to be “burned up”, because in a real sense the death of Christ had already brought them to naught. In Colossians 2:14-17 Paul said,

“Blotting out the handwriting or ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross; And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it. Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ.”

And in Ephesians 2:14-15 Paul said,

“For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace.”

If these other four places in the New Testament are the only places anywhere in the New Testament that the word for “elements” can be found, except in II Peter 3:10, would you not think that the meaning in II Peter 3:10 would be the same as in these other places? Other than those other four places, this is the only place the word is used.

Jesus had said, “I am come to send FIRE on the earth; and what will I, if it be already kindled?” (Luke 12:49). This was not to be literal fire, but the fire of His wrath and justice, and a change of religious systems.

In Lamentations 2:3 it says, “he burned against Jacob like a burning fire, which devoureth round about.” This did not mean that everything was burned up, but rather that judgment came upon all.

After the “heavens” of the rulership of the Jewish people had passed away, the “elements” themselves of the old ordinances, etc., would also pass away (“be burned up”). All of this came to pass by A.D. 70 when Jerusalem and the Temple were completely destroyed. This was all at “his coming” at that “day of the Lord” when the

Roman armies fulfilled the plan of God so that a new “heavens and earth” could be brought into existence.

When Peter said “the elements shall melt with fervent heat” in II Peter 3:12 the Greek word for “melt” there is “teko” which means “to liquefy” But interestingly, in verse 10 where those same identical words (in English in the King James version) are used: “the elements shall melt with fervent heat”, the Greek work for “melt” is different. It is “luo”, which means “break up, destroy, dissolve, loose, melt, put off.” In actuality, this is what happened to those “elements” of the old Jewish religion—they were broken up, destroyed, dissolved, loosened and put off. This is how the elements melted in that day of the Lord when the heavens and the earth felt the judgment of God.



## **The New Heavens and the New Earth**

Peter said, “Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness” (vs. 13).

The thing that struck me about this particular verse, is that the looking forward to a new heavens and a new earth was based upon “HIS PROMISE”. It is according to His promise, Peter said, that we look forward to a new heavens and a new earth. Where in the Bible can we find this promise of a new heavens and a new earth? If we locate it, it should reveal to us whether Peter is speaking of a literal heavens and earth passing away, or if he is using this terminology in a symbolic way.

The only prophecies (“promise” referred to in vs. 13) in the Old Testament specifically mentioning the new heavens and new earth are found in Isaiah 65:17 and Isaiah 66:22. These are the only two places in the Old Testament where this promise of new heavens and a new earth can be found, and neither of these speak of a literal heavens and earth passing away. Nor do they speak of a literal new heavens and new earth.

Commentaries generally apply the fulfilment of these prophecies to the gospel age (as opposed to dispensationalists and some premillennialists who apply them to a future millennium after a future second coming of Christ). The new heavens and new earth referred to the spiritual world order which was brought into being through Christ. But the old had to pass away before the new could come into being.

We shall discuss these two passages in Isaiah which speak of the new heavens and new earth:

“For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind” Isaiah 65:17.

The results of the creation of new heavens and a new earth are seen in the rest of the chapter—the creation of another Jerusalem (a new Jerusalem)—and the blessings which pre-millennialists say will take place literally during a millennium here on earth after Jesus comes in our future (see specifically verses-20 and 25). But this passage is a grand depiction of the gospel age after Christ came in judgment in 70 A.D. and took away the old heavens and the old earth. Now we have the new heavens and the new earth of the gospel age.

The famed Charles Spurgeon of the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London said (in a sermon on Isaiah 65:17-19), “Did you ever regret the absence of the burnt-offering, or

the red heifer, or any one of the sacrifices and rites of the Jews? Did you ever pine for the feast of tabernacle, or the dedication? No, because, though these were like the old heavens and earth to the Jewish believers, they have passed away, and we now live under new heavens and a new earth, so far as the dispensation of divine teaching is concerned. The substance is come, and the shadow has gone: and we do not remember it.” (Charles Spurgeon, Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, vol. xxxvii, p. 354).

In this gospel age we now have the New Jerusalem supplanting the old Jerusalem which was destroyed in A.D. 70. This new Jerusalem is more fittingly described in Revelation 21 and 22. John said:

“And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming, down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride for her husband.” (Rev. 21:1-2).

This new Jerusalem in the new heavens and new earth is not a materialistic city. IT IS THE BRIDE, THE LAMB’S WIFE, as it says. The angel told John, “Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb’s wife.” (Rev. 21:9). And what is it that symbolizes the bride of Christ? It says, “And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God.” (Rev. 21:10). This is the bride of Christ, the new Jerusalem, which is the new people of God since Christ came in the day of the Lord in A.D. 70 and destroyed the old Jerusalem—the faithless wife of Jehovah. The description of this new city, which city we are, is shown in Revelation 21 and 22 and is our heritage for this life and the life to come, both for time and eternity.

Max King said, “Peter said, in anticipating the imminent end of all things (the coming of Christ and the end of the then existing heaven and earth) (I Pet. 4:7), ‘nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth.’ This promise of a new heaven and earth is taken from Isa. 65:17-19 and 66:22-24, and had a limited fulfillment in Israel’s return from Babylonian captivity. But beyond the limited restoration, this prophecy (as many other prophecies) was understood as having an ultimate, final meaning and fulfillment through Christ in ‘the age to come’ The city of Jerusalem was the focus of this new heaven and earth, not only in its limited fulfillment in Israel’s return from Babylon (Isa. 65:18, 19), but also in its ultimate fulfillment in Christ in the New Covenant aeon, as seen in chapters 21 and 22 of Revelation” (Max King, p. 256).

Isaiah 66:22 “For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me, saith the LORD, so shall your seed and your name remain.

We are the seed of Christ and Abraham. “And if ye be Christ’s, then ye are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:29).

The Old Testament had said, “the Lord God shall slay thee, and call his servants by another name.” (Isaiah 65:15). It was just two verses later that God said, “For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth.” (vs. 17).

“But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, AN HOLY NATION, a peculiar people ... which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God” (I Peter 2:9-10).

All this had been prophesied in the Old Testament. “And they shall call them, The holy people, The Redeemed of the LORD: and thou shalt be called, Sought out, A city not forsaken.” (Isaiah 62:12).

These were the PROMISES of God concerning a new heavens and a new earth and a new city (the new Jerusalem). There was no literalistic interpretation to be given those passages in Isaiah. No literal heaven and earth would be destroyed, and no literal heavens and earth would be created. And Peter said, “Nevertheless we, ACCORDING TO HIS PROMISE, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness” (II Peter 3:13). This was the kind of new heavens and new earth Peter was looking for.

Interestingly, just seven verses before the promise of the new heavens and new earth in Isaiah 66:22, the Lord said,

“For, behold, the LORD will come with fire, and with his chariots like a whirlwind, to render his anger with fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. For by fire and by his sword will the Lord plead with all flesh: and the slain of the LORD shall be many.” (Isaiah 66:15-17).

Those two verses indicate in figurative language God’s part in causing the old heavens and earth to disappear. The fire and sword represented invading armies.

Commenting on Isaiah 66:22, Edward J. Young said:

“With this verse the prophet makes known the foundation for the entire preceding line of thought. By your seed and your name he has in mind the spiritual Israel of which he has been speaking. Seed refers to the descendants of the people of God, who form the subject of this address. Their perpetuity is to be assured. Name indicates reputation;

forever the Church will be recognized by the people whom God has chosen to be His own.

To assure God's people of this perpetuity and constant recognition God institutes a comparison with the new heavens and the new earth. As God originally created the heavens and the earth, so now He is going to make (the participle suggests near futurity) new heavens and a new earth, which will stand before Him (i.e. under His constant care and protection; cf. 48:19; 53:2). The old Israel will pass away; but from it there will spring the remnant that has survived the judgment, and together with it will be a great influx of Gentiles, all of which will form the true Israel of God under the new dispensation. In the old dispensation this Israel of God (the Church) had been practically identical with the literal nation, but in the new the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel.... to the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God..." (Eph. 3:6, 10) The promise is strengthened by saith the Lord. (Edward J. Young, vol. 3, pp. 535-536, Commentary on the Book of Isaiah.)

David Chilton says, "Because of the 'collapsing-universe' technology, used in this passage, many have mistakenly assumed that St. Peter is speaking of the physical heaven and earth, rather than the dissolution of the Old Covenant world order." (David Chilton, p. 540, The Days of Vengeance).

The new heavens and new earth of II Peter 3:13 are not a picture of that which is to be in the eternal state following the great white judgment. The promise is taken from those two passages we have previously mentioned in Israel. They refer to this present dispensation, the gospel age. Spiritual blessings are pictured by earthly blessings. Many passages in the Old Testament, thought to refer to the eternal blessings Christians will have in glory or at least out in eternity, actually refer to this present age. Kenneth Gentry spoke well on this when he said:

"First, numerous prophetic references speak of factors inappropriate to the eternal state, such as the overcoming of active opposition to the kingdom (e.g., Psa. 72:4,9; Isa. 11:4, 13-15; Mic. 4:3), birth and aging (e.g., Psa. 22:30-31; Isa. 65:20; Zech. 8:3-5), the conversion of people (Psa. 72:27), death (e.g., Psa. 22:29; 72:14; Isa. 65:20), sin (e.g., Isa. 65:20, Zech. 14:14-17), suffering (e.g., Psa. 22:29; 72:2,13, 17), and national distinctions and interaction (e.g., Psa. 72:10-11, 17; Isa. 2:2-4; Zech. 14:16-17)." (Kenneth Gentry, p. 208, He Shall Have Dominion).

Douglas Wilson said, "Some of the terms of the promise in Isaiah are these: we know that death will remain in the new heaven and new earth (65:20), home construction

will continue (65:21), agriculture will continue (65:21), as will worship (66:23). The new heavens and new earth is therefore not a phrase which describes the eternal resurrection state.” (Douglas Wilson, p. 30).

Neither is Isaiah 65:17-25 a picture of a 1,000 years millennium after a future second coming of Christ, as believed by premillennialists. But it is a picture of God’s new spiritual world order to the extent that the gospel permeates the lives and hearts of men and women in this present age. It is a picture of Christ’s present kingdom on earth. It is a picture of the new covenant operating in the lives of God’s people. So much a transformation is this from the old order, that it is said, “the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind” (Isaiah 65:17).

John Calvin said: “For, lo, I will create new heavens and a new earth. By these metaphors he promises a remarkable change of affairs; as if God had said that he has both the inclination and the power not only to restore his Church, but to restore it in such a manner that it shall appear to gain new life and to dwell in a new world. These are exaggerated modes of expression; but the greatness of such a blessing, which was to be manifested at the coming of Christ, could not be described in any other way. Nor does he mean only the first coming, but the whole reign, which must be extended as far as to the last coming, as we have already said in expounding other passages.” (John Calvin, pp. 397-398, John Calvin’s Commentaries, vol. 8).

Writing on Matt. 24:27 but conveying the same thoughts we are trying to suggest here, Dr. John Lightfoot said this:

“That the destruction of Jerusalem is very frequently expressed in Scripture as if it were the destruction of the whole world, Deut. xxxii. 22; ‘A fire is kindled in mine anger, and shall burn unto the lowest hell’ (the discourse there is about the wrath of God consuming that people; see ver. 20, 21), ‘and shall consume the earth with her increase, and set on fire the foundations of the mountains’ Jer. iv. 23; ‘I beheld the earth, and lo, it was without form and void; and the heavens, and they had no light;’ The discourse there also is concerning the destruction of that nation, Isa. lxv. 17; ‘Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered,’ And more passages of this sort among the prophets. According to this sense, Christ speaks in this place; and Peter speaks in his Second Epistle, third chapter; and John, in the sixth of the Revelation; and Paul, 2 Cor. v. 17” (John Lightfoot, pp. 318-319, vol. 2).

In his volume 3, Dr. Lightfoot speaks further his views on this subject. He said:

“With the same reference it is, that the times and state of things immediately following the destruction of Jerusalem are called ‘a new creation,’ ‘new heavens,’ and ‘a new earth,’ Isa. lxxv. 17; ‘Behold, I create a new heaven and a new earth’ When should that be? Read the whole chapter; and you will find the Jews rejected and cut off; and from that time is that new creation of the evangelical world among the Gentiles.

“Compare 2 Cor. v. 17 and Rev. xxi. 1, 2; where, the old Jerusalem being cut off and destroyed, a new one succeeds; and new heavens and a new earth are created.

“2 Pet. iii. 13: ‘We, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth’ The heavens and the earth of the Jewish church and commonwealth must be all on fire, and the Mosaic elements burnt up; but we, according to the promise made to us by Isaiah the prophet, when all these are consumed, look for the new creation of the evangelical state.”

“That the destruction of Jerusalem and the whole Jewish state is described as if the whole frame of this world were to be dissolved. Nor is it strange, when God destroyed his habitation and city, places once so dear to him, with so direful and sad an overthrow; his own people, whom he accounted of as much or more than the whole world beside, by so dreadful and amazing plagues. Matt. xxiv. 29, 30, ‘The sun shall be darkened,’ Then shall appear the ‘sign of the Son of man,’; which yet are said to fall out within that generation, ver. 34. 2 Pet. iii. 10, ‘The heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat.’ Compare with this Deut. xxxii. 22, Heb. xii. 26: and observe that by elements are understood the Mosaic elements, Gal. iv. 9, Coloss. ii. 20: and you will not doubt that St. Peter speaks only of the conflagration of Jerusalem, the destruction of the nation, and the abolishing the dispensation of Moses.” (John Lightfoot, vol. 3, pp. 452-453).

John Brown, in his commentary on Matthew 5:18 says: “‘Heaven and earth passing’ understood literally, is the dissolution of the present system of the universe, and the period when that is to take place, is called the ‘end of the world’ But a person at all familiar with the phraseology of the Old Testament Scriptures, knows that the dissolution of the Mosaic economy, and the establishment of the Christian, is often spoken of as the removing of the old earth and heavens, and the creation of a new earth and new heavens.” (John Brown, vol. 1, p. 170. Quoted by Gary DeMar in Biblical Worldview).

**Dr. John Owen**

We were driving back from a Bible conference on Long Island, and we stopped by the Great Christian Books store at Elkton, Maryland. We spent the night in the Walt Hibbards' home. He was showing us around the store, and I saw a brand new set of Dr. John Owen's books on a shelf (reprinted in 1990). I commented, "I need something from volume 9 in that set of books" Mr. Hibbard instantly said, "It's on page 131." Sure enough, there it was. He knew exactly what I was looking for. I bought the new volume and brought it home with me.

Dr. John Owen was a Puritan preacher in the 17th century. I had heard that Dr. J.I. Packer said that John Owen was the greatest theologian of all time. My interest in his works was because I had read somewhere that John Owen had dealt with II Peter 3 from a preterist standpoint. I want to quote a section from his book. It is a little lengthy, but because of who this man was please read it carefully and consider all that he says in relation to the things I have been writing in this book:

"It is evident, from sundry places in the New Testament, what extreme oppositions the believing Jews met withal, all the world over, from their own countrymen, with and among whom they lived. They in the meantime, no doubt, warned them of the wrath of Christ against them for their cursed unbelief and persecutions; particularly letting them know, that Christ would come in vengeance ere long, according as he had threatened, to the ruin of his enemies. And because the persecuting Jews, all the world over, upbraided the believers with the temple and the holy city, Jerusalem, their worship and service instituted of God, which they had defiled; they were given to know, that even all these things also should be destroyed, for their rejection of the Son of God. After some continuance of time, the threatening denounced being not yet accomplished—as is the manner of profane persons and hardened sinners, Eccles. viii. 11—they began to mock and scoff, as if they were all but the vain pretences, or loose, causeless fears of the Christians. That this was the state with them, or shortly would be, the apostle declares in this chapter, verses 3, 4. Because things continued in the old state, without alteration, and judgment was not speedily executed, they scoffed at all the threats about the coming of the Lord that had been denounced against them."

Another quote from John Owen:

"I shall only observe, by the way, not to look into the difficulties of these verses, that I not be too long detained from my principal intendment—that the apostle makes a distribution of the word into heaven and earth, and saith, they 'were destroyed with water, and perished: We know that neither the fabric or substance of the one or other was destroyed, but only men that lived on the earth; and the apostle tells us, verse 5, of the heavens and earth that were then, and were destroyed by water, distinct from the heavens and the earth that were now, and were to be consumed by fire; and yet, as

to the visible fabric of heaven and earth, they were the same both before the flood and in the apostle's time, and continue so to this day; when yet it is certain that the heavens and earth whereof he speaks were to be destroyed and consumed by fire in that generation. We must, then, for the clearing our foundation, a little consider what the apostle intends by 'the heavens and the earth' in these two places: -

"1. It is certain, that what the apostle intends by the 'world,' with its heavens and earth, verses 5, 6, which was destroyed by water; the same or somewhat of that kind, he intends by 'the heavens and the earth' that were to be consumed and destroyed by fire, verse 7. Otherwise there would be no coherence in the apostle's discourse, nor any kind of argument, but a mere fallacy of words.

"2. It is certain, that by the flood, the world, or the fabric of heaven and earth, was not destroyed, but only the inhabitants of the world; and therefore the destruction intimated to succeed by fire, is not of the substance of the heavens and the earth, which shall not be consumed until the last day, but of persons or men living in the world.

"3. Then we must consider in what sense men living in the world are said to be the 'world,' and the 'heavens and earth' of it. I shall only insist on one instance to this purpose, among the many that may be produced, Isa. ii. 15, 16. The time when the work here mentioned, of planting the heavens, and laying the foundation of the earth, was performed by God, was when he 'divided the sea,' verse 15, and gave the law, verse 16, and said to Zion, 'Thou art my people,'—that is, when he took the children of Israel out of Egypt, and formed them in the wilderness into a church and state. Then he planted the heavens, and laid the foundation of the earth—made the new world; that is, brought forth order, and government, and beauty, from the confusion wherein before they were. This is the planting of the heavens, and laying the foundation of the earth in the world. And hence it is, that when mention is made of the destruction of a state and government, it is in that language that seems to set forth the end of the world. So Isa. xxxiv. 4; which is yet but the destruction of the state of Edom. The like also is affirmed of the Roman empire, Rev. vi. 14; which the Jews constantly affirm to be intended by Edom in the prophets. And in our Saviour Christ's prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem, Matt. xxiv., he sets it out by expressions of the same importance. It is evident, then, that in the prophetic idiom and manner of speech, by 'heavens' and 'earth,' the civil and religious state and combination of men in the world, and the men of them, are often understood. So were the heavens and earth that world which was then destroyed by the flood.

"4. On this foundation I affirm, that the heavens and earth here intended in this prophecy of Peter, the coming of the Lord, the day of judgment and perdition of



ungodly men, mentioned in the destruction of that heaven and earth, do all of them relate, not to the last and final judgment of the world, but to that utter desolation and destruction that was to be made of the Judaical church and state; for which I shall offer these two reasons, of many that might be insisted on from the text: -

“(1.) Because whatever is here mentioned was to have its peculiar influence on the men of that generation. He speaks of that wherein both the profane scoffer and the those scoffed at were concerned, and that as Jews—some of them believing, others opposing the faith. Now, there was no particular concernment of that generation in that sin, nor in that scoffing, as to the day of judgment in general; but there was a peculiar relief for the one and a peculiar dread for the other at hand, in the destruction of the Jewish nation; and besides, an ample testimony, both to the one and the other, of the power and dominion of the Lord Jesus Christ—which was the thing in question between them.

“(2.) Peter tells them, that, after the destruction and judgment that he speaks of, verse 13, ‘We, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth,’ etc. They had this expectation. But what is that promise? where may we find it? Why, we have it in the very words and letter, Isa. Ixv. 17. Now, when shall this be that God will create these ‘new heavens and new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness?’ Saith Peter, ‘It shall be after the coming of the Lord, after that judgment and destruction of ungodly men, who obey not the gospel, that I foretell.’ But now it is evident, from this place of Isaiah, with chap. lxvi., 21, 22, that this is a prophecy of gospel times only; and that the planting of these new heavens is nothing but the creation of gospel ordinances, to endure for ever. The same thing is so expressed, Heb. xii. 26-28.

“First, There is the foundation of the apostle’s inference and exhortation... ‘Seeing that I have evinced that all these things, however precious they seem, or what value soever any put upon them, shall be dissolved,—that is, destroyed; and that in that dreadful and fearful manner before mentioned,—in a way of judgment, wrath, and vengeance, by fire and sword—let others mock at the threats of Christ’s coming.—he will come, he will not tarry; and then the heavens and earth that God himself planted,—the sun, moon, and stars of the Judaical polity and church,—the whole old world of worship and worshippers, that stand out in their obstinacy against the Lord Christ,—shall be sensibly dissolved and destroyed. This, we know, shall be the end of these things, and that shortly.’”

Another quote from John Owen:

“1. Because in every such providential alteration or dissolution of things on the account of Christ and his church, there is a peculiar coming of Christ himself. He

cometh into the world for the work he hath to do; he cometh among his own to fulfil his pleasure among them. Hence such works are called ‘his coming;’ and ‘the coming of his day.’ Thus James exhorts these very Jews to whom Peter here writes, with reference to the same things, James v. 7-9, ‘Be patient unto the coming of the Lord.’ But how could that generation extend their patience to the day of judgment? ‘Nay,’ saith he, ‘that is not the work I design, but his coming to take vengeance on his stubborn adversaries;’ which he saith, verse 8, ‘draweth nigh,’ is even at hand; yea., Christ, ‘the judge, standeth before the door,’ verse 9, ‘ready to enter’—which also he did within a few years. So upon or in the destruction of Jerusalem (the same work), Luke xxi. 27, the Son of man is said to ‘come in a cloud, with power and great glory’—and they that escape in that desolation are said to ‘stand before the Son of man,’ verse 36. So, in the ruin and destruction of the Roman empire, on the account of their persecution, it is said that ‘the day of the wrath of the Lamb was come; Rev. vi. 16, 17.’” (John Owen, vol. 9, pp. 132-135, 138-139). Endquote of several quotes from John Owen.

### More on Symbolic Language of Prophecy

The type of language used in II Peter 3 can be observed in numerous places in the Old Testament. Take for example the third chapter of Jeremiah. Here God is talking to and concerning Judah and Jerusalem (vs. 5), and He is speaking of sending destruction upon them from the north (vs. 6). The language used to describe the results of this visitation is found in verses 23-28:

“I beheld the earth, and, lo, it was without form, and void; and the heavens, and they had no light.

“I beheld the mountains, and, lo, they trembled, and all the hills moved lightly.

“I beheld, and, lo, there was no man, and all the birds of the heavens were fled.

“I beheld, and, lo, the fruitful place was a wilderness, and all the cities thereof were broken down at the PRESENCE of the LORD, and by his fierce anger.

“For thus hath the LORD said, The whole land shall be desolate; yet will I not make a full end.”

This is apocalyptic figurative language describing the desolation of Judah by invading forces. The cosmic language simply means that the presence of Jehovah was revealed in judgment upon the people. The “presence” of the Lord (vs. 26) has the meaning of being in a fearful way, against someone or something. It would be like the word for “coming” in the New Testament (“parousia”) when it referred to judgment passages.

Similarly, in Micah is found this same kind of language, when God is talking about the destruction of Samaria and Jerusalem:

“For behold, the LORD COMETH forth out of his place, and WILL COME DOWN, and tread upon the high places of the earth. And the mountains shall be molten under him, and the valleys shall be cleft, as was before the fire, and as the waters that are poured down a steep place!’ (Micah 1:3-4).

Then after mentioning that all of this is because of the sins of Jacob, and Israel, and Samaria, and Jerusalem (vs. 5), He further declared,

“Therefore I will make Samaria as an heap of the field, and as plantings of a vineyard: and I will pour down the stones thereof into the valley, and I will discover the foundations thereof” (Micah 1:6).

This destruction of these places were spoken of as the Lord coming forth, and coming down (vs. 3) though we know the results were accomplished through human instrumentality. Likewise, in II Peter 3, the fall and destruction of the nation of Israel

and the city of Jerusalem and the Temple in New Testament times were said to occur at the coming of Christ and the event is couched in apocalyptic language of the heavens and the earth. We can understand New Testament prophecy a lot better if we understand how terminology was used in the Old Testament.

When the expression concerning the heavens and the earth waxing old like a garment, and being changed (see Psalm 102:16), it is like Isaiah said in Isaiah 50:9, “they all shall wax old as doth a garment” as he spoke of PEOPLE who would be destroyed.

In the very next chapter God spoke of the heavens and earth vanishing:

“Lift up your eyes to the heavens and look upon the earth beneath; for the heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall wax old like a garment, and they that dwell therein shall die in like manner...” (Isaiah 51:6)

Then in that same chapter God tells of forming Israel and describing this as planting the heavens and the foundations of the earth:

“...that I may plant the heavens, and lay the foundations of the earth, and say unto Zion, Thou art my people” (Isaiah 51:16).

ISRAEL was the heavens and the earth that God had formed, and some day that same heavens and earth would pass away as described in II Peter 3.

In Deuteronomy 32:1, after the formation of Israel, God said, “Give ear, O ye heavens, and I will speak; and hear, O earth, the words of my mouth” Who was God talking to—the literal heavens and earth? No, He was talking to Israel.

And when He said in that same chapter (vs. 22) “For a fire is kindled in mine anger, and shall burn unto the lowest hell, and shall consume the earth with her increase, and set on fire the foundations of the mountains;” He was not talking about the destruction of the earth. The verse before this tells what He was talking about, how that Israel had provoked Him to anger, and He would consume them with those who were not His people (vs. 21).

This is the way language is used in the Old Testament. It was adopted for like use in the New Testament.

This kind of language in relation to Israel began in the Bible in Genesis 37:9 when Joseph told his brothers his dream. He said, “Behold, I have dreamed a dream more; and, behold, the sun and the moon and the eleven stars made obeisance to me.” His

father understood the meaning of that dream and asked, “What is this dream that thou hast dreamed? Shall I and thy mother, and thy brethren indeed come to bow down ourselves to thee to the earth?”

Later, it was to be said that the nation of Israel which had been formed was the heavens and the earth (Isaiah 51:16).

So, this passage in II Peter 3 is not speaking of a transformation and renewal of the physical components of the material earth some day. As in the case of Noah’s day, a new earth came about through a change in the people themselves—not the physical components of the earth as a result of the flood. People were destroyed and a new era began. For all concerned, it was a new heavens and a new earth. So likewise, the new heavens and new earth of II Peter 3 (based on the promises of Isaiah) consist of a renewed people of God following the disintegration of the old system of Judaism and all that went along with it. A shaking of “heavens and earth” took place (Hebrews 12:26-29) which resulted in only the spiritual things that could not be removed being left.

Roderick Campbell, with reference to II Peter 3, says:

“Peter is preparing his hearers for the ‘fiery trial’ which he sees looming in the days ahead—a trial which is certain to test their faith. His hearers have not yet fully grasped the significance of the great change introduced by the advent of Christ. The external fabric of the Old Covenant still stands, in outward appearance seemingly as secure and glorious as it was before (except for the rending of the temple veil). Some of the Christians are still clinging tenaciously to the ancient symbolic rites and ceremonies. From our vantage point it is easy to accuse them of lack of vision. But we should bear in mind that Peter and his audience were living in the midst of a persecuting world. Moreover, the destruction of their sacred city and temple was then imminent. Peter had heard the doom of their magnificent temple pronounced by the lips of Jesus—a doom which, Jesus said, some of the generation then living would witness with their natural eyes. In the midst of that-crumbling world, Peter calls to mind Isaiah’s promise of ‘new heavens and a new earth.’ By the eye of faith, he sees this new creation emerging from the dust and debris of that once glorious order of things which was so dear to every loyal Hebrew heart (cf. 2 Cor. 3:7). He and his hearers are standing within the threshold of the new age, an age which, although potentially and actually present, has not yet been made fully manifest to his hearers, who are no doubt still, for the most part, babes in Christ” (Roderick Campbell, p. 115, *Israel and the New Covenant*).

“But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat...” (II Peter 3:10).

Some say that this will occur some day in our future through a nuclear explosion. This would have to be some mighty nuclear explosion to affect the heavenly bodies! We recall that elsewhere we have discussed the heavenly bodies (sun, moon, stars, etc.) as representing the leaders of Israel, and the earth as representing the nation or people. Here both are seen as being obliterated. This would include their entire system of the old Mosaic rituals, ceremonies and regulations under which they labored and carried on their religious practices.

John Allfree, in England, says, “...we may say that Peter, James, Paul and John, when speaking to or writing to Jewish brethren, speak of their days as the last days and warn of a terrible judgment that was about to happen, a judgment that would result in the heavens and the earth, or the world, passing away” (John Allfree, p. 7).

In Hebrews 1:10-12, the writer said, “And, Thou, Lord, in the beginning has laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the works of thine hands:

“They shall perish; but thou remainest; and they all shall wax old as doth a garment; “And as a vesture shalt thou fold them up, and they shall be changed...”

Here God is not talking a physical universe burning up some day, but of the heavens and earth of Israel which would soon pass away. There would be a folding up and a change made, even as an old garment is laid aside and a new one put on.

This thought is further carried out in Hebrews 8:13, “In that he saith, A new covenant, he hath made the first old. Now that which decayeth and waxeth old is ready to vanish away.”

Here the old is not only decayed and waxed old and laid aside, but is ready to vanish away. It was already in process, but by A.D. 70 it was a fully accomplished fact. The old was gone and the new had taken its place. There was now new heavens and a new earth, according to the promises found in Isaiah which we have discussed in these pages—the only pages I know of where those promises are found; and Peter mentioned this in II Peter 3:13. That promise of new heavens and a new earth was now fulfilled. There were now new heavens and a new earth, a new temple, a new priesthood, a new people of God, a new Jerusalem, a new city. In Revelation 21:10 God said, “Behold, I make all things new” This promise was fulfilled in the first century and is a reality for God’s people today.

“Heaven and earth shall pass away.” (Matt. 24:35). Herman Ridderbos of Holland said, “‘Pass away’ here means become part of the past so that its significance is gone and no longer need be taken into account.” (Herman Ridderbos, p. 502).

The heavens and earth of old Israel passed away in this sense, and their importance in the economy of God’s redemption for man is no longer of any present significance. There is now a new heavens and a new earth.

*“Heaven and earth shall pass away”* ...They did, by A.D. 70.

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Matthew Schoenherr  
Levaire