

WITH ANTICIPATION

2 Peter 3:3-18

Did you ever stop to think about how much of what we “know” just “ain't so?” We are living in a society that is experiencing an explosion of information. I think that we are in an information overload situation. We have more data than we can process and make sense of it. To make things worse, a lot of the information is in error or is incomplete. Beyond all that, different people can take the same information and come to completely different conclusions about it and all of them could be wrong.

As we watch such things as presidential politics, we can see the media distorting what people say and amplifying the insignificant and thus hiding the real issues about what the candidates believe. If you follow the conflicts that are tearing apart some of the large religious denominations, you can find various groups doing the same thing as majoring on the minors and glossing over the real issues. We are living in the time of the so-called “sound bites” in which people use brief and superficial messages to mold public opinion about issues. We recognize it for what it is in the political arena, but fail to see it in the realm of our “values” and how they are being changed. The anti-Christ crowd in the news media and in the entertainment field have carried out an effective campaign to distort the truth about spiritual things and have, by means of ridicule, caused many people to turn away from God and not believe His word.

How many times have you thought, “If I could just know how a certain event will turn out, then I would know what to do now.” For example, if you knew what certain stocks were going to do, then you could make the right investments and become very rich. If we just knew the future, then we could prepare for it. Actually, we do know the future; however, we tend to not believe it because of all the skepticism that is generated by the world system concerning the word of God. Take for example, the End Time prophecies: most people do not let the truth of what is going to happen influence what they do with their lives today. Why? Because they do not know nor do they believe the truth.

A Sure Return – 3:3-7

³ Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with *their* mocking, following after their own lusts, ⁴ and saying, “Where is the promise of His coming? For *ever* since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation.” ⁵ For when they maintain this, it escapes their notice that by the word of God *the* heavens existed long ago and *the* earth was formed out of water and by water, ⁶ through which the world at that time was destroyed, being flooded with water. ⁷ But by His word the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. 2 Peter 3:3-7 (NASB95)

The “last days” began with the introduction and implementation of the New Covenant that Christ initiated. We are still in the last days and, just as those early Christians experienced, we live in an age of scoffers or people who think themselves to be so sophisticated that spiritual truth is nothing more than fables. Peter probably had in mind the false teachers that had crept into various churches and were introducing doubts and skepticism. False teachings are going on today even in our churches, but the most prevalent evidence of such mocking is in the media by which our beliefs and values are constantly bombarded. Today, the false teachers don’t need to try to infiltrate our churches since we invite them into our homes via television programming and news commentators. They deny God in His existence or they deny Him His rightful place of rulership in their lives. The reason for such mockery and scorn is because of the moral poverty (or perhaps depravity) in which they live. They have a false sense of security in that they have sinned and continue to sin and yet they have not been punished for it in such a way that they can

see a correlation. Such people do not realize that what God's *judgment in time* overlooks in mercy, His *judgment in eternity* will recompense with certainty.

One skepticism being voiced during the time Peter wrote this letter had to do with the promised return of Christ coming in judgment that He had mentioned in Matthew 24:27 and 37 where He stated that the "coming of the Son of Man" would be sudden (like a flash of lightning) and it would be unexpected as when the physical world was destroyed in the time of Noah. Their skepticism was voiced via a false statement that "nothing has changed and, therefore, nothing will ever change."

Starting in verse five, we see that for people to believe as they do, they have to be very selective in the information that they accept as true. There are many Christians who treat the word of God as some sort of cafeteria in which they can pick and choose selected portions of the word to believe and just ignore the rest. Peter pointed out that those who think that God will not intervene in the affairs of man and bring judgment have decided to just ignore the truth of the Creation in which God created the water and the land and then used that same water to make the Flood by which He destroyed the world.

The controversy between those who believe in creation and those that ascribe to the Big Bang theory and evolution still goes on. The evolutionist would deny God and His rightful place as Creator. If they accepted Him as Creator, then they would have to face the question of accepting Him as Lord of their lives. If such people can be inventive enough to dismiss creation, then they would have no problem in denying the Flood. We can see that if God did not create the heavens and the earth and if He did not bring judgment on the ancient world because of their wickedness, then why should anyone believe that He will do anything in the situation that existed at the time Peter penned his letters to various church or in our present situation.

In verse six Peter mentioned that the physical world (kosmos) was destroyed by water and then, in verse seven, he switched his focus to the "present heavens and earth." The reason that the physical realm and all the living creatures (except those on board the ark with Noah and his family) were destroyed was because of rampant and unrepentant evil. Peter wrote that the "present heavens and earth" had not already been destroyed because it was being preserved by the power of God's word. The reason these were being preserved was for a "time of judgment" that they would be subjected to "fire." That judgment fire would be for the destruction of "ungodly people." There is no mention at this point of the entire physical world being destroyed by fire.

The Patient Father – 3:8-9

⁸ But do not let this one *fact* escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. ⁹ The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. 2 Peter 3:8-9 (NASB95)

God's time table is not so much in days and years as it is in events and occasions. We live in the realm of calendar and clock time and God lives in eternity. One day and one thousand years are alike to Him. This statement is likely to simply mean that clock and calendar time is of little or no consequences to God. Some people will take that statement literally and attempt to interpret prophecies by seeing some actual equivalency of a thousand year and a day. The point that Peter was making is that we should not interpret His delay in acting to be that He will not be true to His promises. Instead, we should see that the delay is further evidence of His mercy and grace in that it gives more time to for those who are lost to choose to receive God's gift of salvation. Jesus said that He would return and it would happen when people least expect it.

The Warning Issued – 3:10

¹⁰ But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. 2 Peter 3:10 (NASB95)

Some think that the universe began with a big bang. We don't know if that idea is true; however, many are certain that it will end with a big bang. This belief is based on this passage which says that “the heavens shall pass away with a great noise.” Peter described how it will be. It will be unexpected and there will be a sound and a lot of commotion associated with the event. If this is a physical realm occurrence, it will seem that the sky has disappeared and the earth will experience heat so intense that things (elements) will appear to just dissolve away and the earth will be “burned up” or (as some manuscripts read) will be “laid bare.”

An observation regarding the fires that Peter mentioned in his letter is that in addition to fires burning up “the heavens and the earth,” fires are also used in the refining process of God’s people as they become transformed into new creations in Christ Jesus (1 Pet 4:12). These fiery trials do not literally burn us up physically but they refine our thinking, our concepts, our world view and get rid of the impurities in our lives. Could it be that our ideas and concepts of “the heaven and the earth” also need to go through such refining fires to burn up the “dross” or erroneous ideas? While that idea is not nearly so exciting as the physical world literally burning up, it is certainly something to which we can relate in our faith walk today.

In Peter’s first letter he warned his reader that they (individually) would be subjected to fiery trails for the purpose of purifying them by getting rid of the dross or impurities in their lives. He is now using a similar description regarding what will occur on a broader scale when Christ returns in judgment. The question is what are Christians to do since the old “heaven and earth” are going away?

While Waiting – 3:11-13

¹¹ Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, ¹² looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! ¹³ But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. 2 Peter 3:11-13 (NASB95)

There are at least three references in the Old Testament (1 Chr 16:30, Ps 93:1 and 96:10) regarding the “firm establishment and immovability of the world” and another one (Ps 104:5) that says “the earth is firmly established and cannot be moved.” However, in Isaiah 65 and 66 we see promises of new heavens and new earth. We also see in 2 Peter 3:10-13 that in the “day of the Lord” the heavens and earth will be burned up and there will be new heavens and a new earth which will be the home of righteousness.

So, how do we make sense of what seems to be conflicting ideas? The first idea is that “the world is firmly established and cannot be moved” and the second idea is that “the heavens and the earth will pass away” (according to the passage in Second Peter) by being burned up. It would seem that the obvious answer is that some of the Old Testament references and the New Testament prophecies are not about the same things. How could that be? We know that the Old Testament is strongly tied to and related to physical world things and events. The New Testament and some of Isaiah’s prophecies redirect our attention to the reality of the spiritual world.

It should also be of interest to note that Jesus used a similar phrase when (in Matthew 5:18) he stated that “Til heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, until all be fulfilled.” In Matthew 24:35, He said “Heaven and earth will pass, but My words will not pass.” That followed His statement that all He had said about the destruction

of Jerusalem and the Temple would come to pass before that generation would pass away. Here we see a clear declaration that “heaven and earth will pass away.” In the earlier passage from chapter 5, Jesus stated that nothing in the “law” would change until heaven and earth passed away and that could only happen when “all has been fulfilled.” That statement should cause us to ask “What is it that needs to be fulfilled before any part of the law could change?” The obvious answer is that the Old Covenant which became obsolete with the coming of the New Covenant is what was to be fulfilled. When was it fulfilled? We read in Hebrews 8:13 “By using the words, a new Covenant, He has made the first one obsolete; but whatever is decaying and showing signs of old age is not far from disappearing altogether.”

Some commentators make the following argument: “The heavens and the earth, in their role as witnesses, are so intricately tied to the covenant to which they witness, that the passing away of the [old] heavens and the [old] earth is synonymous with the passing away of the [old] covenant.” In that line of argument, the first heaven and earth would be linked to the First Covenant. Likewise the new heaven and earth would be associated with the New Covenant. As you can image, many would disagree with this characterization.

Many commentators and most Christians think in terms of some future fiery conflagration in which there will be volcanoes erupting, meteors hitting the earth and everything being burned up. Others think that we will destroy the world with nuclear weapons or that the sun will erupt and burn up the earth. Are these things possibilities? Absolutely! So, what can we do about it? Not much!

What would we call those possible scenarios that were mentioned in the last paragraph? Speculations! I really doubt that it was God’s intent in providing us with this prophesy so that we would engage in wild speculations. What does He want us to do? The answer may be found in the verse immediately following the reference from 2 Pet 3:10-13. Verse fourteen states the following: “Therefore, dear friends, since you have these expectations, earnestly seek to be found in His presence, free from blemish or reproach, in peace.”

What would it mean to Christian (then and today) if the description of the new heaven and new earth is simply the dwelling place of righteousness? We admitted that we can’t do a lot about volcanoes and meteors; perhaps, we can be involved in preparing ourselves to live in the “dwelling place of righteousness.” We could summarize the advice that Peter gave us in verse fourteen as “live in holiness.” This is the essence of the admonitions that Christ gave to the churches in the seven letters that we found in the first three chapters of Revelation. That would be the outcome of being an “over comer” or being victorious.

Work and Watch Out – 3:14-18

¹⁴ Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless, ¹⁵ and regard the patience of our Lord *as* salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, ¹⁶ as also in all *his* letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as *they do* also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction. ¹⁷ You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, be on your guard so that you are not carried away by the error of unprincipled men and fall from your own steadfastness, ¹⁸ but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him *be* the glory, both now and to the day of eternity. Amen. 2 Peter 3:14-18 (NASB95)

Diligence is needed if we know and believe that trouble is on the way and there is going to be great testing and trials as the end time approaches. We should be prepared for whatever comes so that we can be at peace when all around us is in chaos. The ability to be at peace in the midst of turmoil is evidence of our faith in the Lord’s promises that He will be with us and protect us. Our faith in Christ will give us the peace we need and our faithfulness to Christ

(being led by the Spirit) will result in the spotless and blameless evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

In verse 10, most translations state that the earth and its works “will be burned up.” The NIV renders this as “will be laid bare.” If that is the meaning, then we could logically tie verses 10 and 14 together to see that we must be concerned less about outward appearances and more concerned about the inward reality that will be seen when the trials and testing of life expose what we are made of. Actually, we don’t have to wait until problems associated with the end times come to realize that many times the day-to-day problems we encounter will tend to show our true character.

There is a real tendency when we see how the world is becoming more chaotic and it seems that we might have a serious situation even in our own nation that we want the Lord to end it all right now. I would imagine that those early Christian had these same thoughts cross their minds. A good perspective on this is that we need to see any delay in Christ coming back to be an opportunity for those who are lost to be saved. Sharing the good news of God’s salvation in Christ is what we are called to do and it is possible that we may neglect this calling by getting caught up in controversies that develop because of false teachers. Peter knew that was a general problem that others such as Paul had addressed and his advice was to make sure that those reading his letter would not be deceived and be fooled by the false doctrines. Even today, we need to be on guard for errors and we need to be faithful to do the work of the kingdom for which we were saved.