

BE ENCOURAGED

2 Peter 3:8-18

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.

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.”

Peter pointed out that those who think that God will not intervene in the affairs of man and bring judgement 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.

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. In fact, after the flood recorded in Genesis, God specifically stated in a promise to Himself recorded in Gen 8:21, “The Lord smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: ‘Never again will I curse the ground because of humans, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done.’” What God promised Noah and his descendants was that never again would a flood destroy all life on earth.

Christ’s Certain Return – 3:8-10

⁸ But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. ⁹ The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. ¹⁰ But the day of the Lord will come like a thief,

and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. 2 Peter 3:8–10 (ESV)

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.

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?

Holy Living – 3:11-14

¹¹ Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, ¹² waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! ¹³ But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. ¹⁴ Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. 2 Peter 3:11–14 (ESV)

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." We could also add Ecclesiastes 1:4 that states "One generation passes away, and another generation comes: but the earth abides for ever." From the Genesis flood account (8:21) we see the following promise that God said in His heart: "Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done." 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 imagine, 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.

Diligence is needed if we know and believe that trouble is on the way and there is going

to be great testing and trials at anytime. 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. The day-to-day problems will tend to show our true character.

Stand Firm – 3:15-18

¹⁵ And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, ¹⁶ as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures. ¹⁷ You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability. 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 3:15–18 (ESV)

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 Christians had these same thoughts cross their minds. A good perspective on this is that we need to see any delay in Christ judging the wicked as had happened in A.D. 70 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.