

The Day the World Ends

*“As he sat upon the
mount of Olives,
the disciples came
unto him privately,
saying, Tell us,
when shall these
things be? and
what shall be the
sign of thy coming,
and of the end of
the world?”
—Matthew 24:3*

THIS EXPRESSION, “THE end of the world,” is a familiar one to millions of people, and in the minds of most, it has frightening connotations. This is due to the customary concept of this important development of God’s great plan of the ages. Dark Age tradition teaches that the end of the world foretold in the Bible means the destruction of planet Earth, and that at the time of this destruction all faithful Christians then alive will be caught up bodily to heaven, and all non-Christians will be doomed.

Naturally, with this concept of the end of the world, most professed Christians do not care to think about it too much, and non-Christians even less. There is a general belief—and a Scriptural one also—that the end of the world and the Second Coming of Christ are in some way associated.

However, it is impossible to understand either subject clearly as taught in the Scriptures, while trying to hold to the usual concept of the end of the world. The sincere student of the Bible must put aside preconceived ideas in order to see the Scriptural viewpoint.

THE EARTH REMAINS

According to the Bible, planet Earth will never be destroyed. Solomon wrote, “One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever.” (Eccles. 1:4) The Prophet Isaiah explains that the reason the earth will abide forever is because God designed it to be inhabited by man, and that this design was “not in vain.” We quote: “Thus saith the LORD that created the heavens; God himself that formed the earth and made it; he hath established it, he created it not in vain, he formed it to be inhabited: I am the LORD; and there is none else.”—Isa. 45:18

This promise of the Lord reminds us of the Genesis record of creation where we are informed that God created man in his own image, commanding him to multiply and fill the earth, and to subdue it. In other words, planet Earth was to be man’s eternal home. (Gen. 1:27,28) The record tells us that “God planted a garden eastward in Eden” in which was provided “every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food.” In reality, these were all trees of life—trees, that is, which provided all the life-sustaining nutrients man would need in order to continue living forever.—chap. 2:8,9

However, as verse 17 explains, there was also the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” Adam was

forbidden to eat of this tree, and the penalty for disobedience was death. "In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die." We all know what happened. Our first parents did transgress the divine law, the penalty of death fell upon them, and they were driven out of their garden home into the unsubdued earth to live their remaining years and then die.

Our first parents' sin and resulting condemnation to death did not alter God's original design that the earth should be man's eternal home, wherein he might live in perfection throughout the endless ages of eternity. It only meant that in the divine arrangement it was not due to reach fruition in the days of Eden. In his plan, God, in fact, foresaw the fall of man into sin and death, and provided redemption from what otherwise would have been lasting tragedy. That redemption was through Jesus, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."—John 3:16

In this well-known and wonderful text, the word "perish" denotes eternal destruction. While our first parents, and all their progeny since, have fallen asleep in death, and the human race continues thus to die, this is not eternal death, but is described in the Bible as being like a sleep from which there will be an awakening. This awakening will come about because Jesus gave his humanity in death as a substitute for Adam and his race. Paul wrote, "The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."—Rom. 6:23

The opportunity to gain eternal life will come to mankind after they have been awakened from the sleep of death. Thus, if we can visualize what would have occurred in human experience had not our first parents transgressed God's law, we can realize what God's grand design has in store for humanity. Because of the death of Jesus as man's Redeemer, God's original intent and purpose for man is yet to be realized.

RESTORATION

Both the Old and New Testaments abound with promises and prophecies giving us the assurance that it is God's plan to restore mankind to health and life on the earth. One of the most comprehensive of these is found in the third chapter of the Book of Acts, including the first two verses of chapter 4. This is the record of a sermon preached by the Apostle Peter shortly after Peter and John had healed a man who had been lame from birth. After this miracle, Peter explained that following Jesus' return there would come "times of restitution of all things." (Acts 3:20,21) Peter adds that these times of restitution had been spoken by the mouth of all God's holy prophets since the world began.

This implies that if the earth is to be destroyed as a result of Jesus' return, God's prophets who foretold that there would be times of restitution were not holy prophets at all, but lying prophets. However, we are glad for the assurances of God's Word that restoration is indeed the Creator's ultimate design for the sin-sick and dying world of mankind.

WHAT COMES TO AN END?

One of the outstanding teachings of the Bible is that the present world, in God's due time, shall indeed come to an end. As we have seen, however, this does not mean the destruction of the literal earth. Rather, the present evil order of things is the "world" that is to be destroyed in what the Prophet Daniel described as "a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation."—Dan. 12:1

Sometimes the prophecies pertaining to the end of the world use fire as a symbol of the destructive powers of this prophetic Time of Trouble. Other symbols are also used, from one standpoint or another, to illustrate the manner in which the present evil order is to be destroyed. In the New Testament, the word "world" is frequently used to denote this. The word "earth" is also used, and it is this use that led many in the past to conclude that it was the planet Earth which was to be destroyed. However, the word "earth" is used many times in the Old Testament in contexts which clearly indicate that the literal planet is not meant. For example, Jeremiah 22:29 reads, "O earth, earth, earth, hear the word of the LORD." It is clear that it is not the planet that is being told to listen, but the people, and the associations of people on the earth.

In one of the prophecies concerning the end of the world, we read, "Wait ye upon me, saith the LORD, until the day that I rise up to the prey: for my determination is to gather the nations, that I may assemble the kingdoms, to pour upon them mine indignation, even all my fierce anger: for all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of my jealousy [Hebrew: zeal]." (Zeph. 3:8) This gathering of the

nations in connection with the prophetic Time of Trouble—which ultimately will destroy the present evil order—has been taking place for many years.

The prophet informs us here that it is God's determination to "devour" the whole earth with the fire of his zeal. We learn what is meant by the use of the word "devour" by examining the words of another of God's holy prophets. In Daniel 7:23, this word is also used to describe the aggressive propensities of a great "beast" which is said to represent a particular "kingdom." Most students of prophecy believe that this refers to the old Roman Empire, concerning which Daniel wrote, "The fourth beast shall be the fourth kingdom upon earth, which shall be diverse from all kingdoms, and shall devour the whole earth, and shall tread it down, and break it in pieces." It need not be argued that the reference here is not to the literal earth. This is a prophecy that was fulfilled many centuries ago, yet our planet still remains. However, a symbolic "earth" was "devoured" by the aggressions of the Roman Empire, and many nations were trodden down and broken to pieces as a result.

GOD EXALTED IN THE EARTH

Psalm 46 contains a very interesting prophecy concerning the end of the world. In the great time of destruction symbolically described, the earth is "removed," and also "melted." (vss. 2,6) Yet, after describing the time of war and chaos that brings about this result, the Lord says, "Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen [Hebrew: nations], I will be exalted in the earth." (vs. 10) This latter reference is to the literal earth

which abides forever to be man's eternal home, and it still exists in the prophecy even after the symbolic earth is "removed" and "melted."

The psalmist's prophecy continues: "Come, behold the works of the LORD, what desolations he hath made in the earth. He maketh wars to cease unto the end of the earth; he breaketh the bow, and cutteth the spear in sunder; he burneth the chariot in the fire." (Ps. 46:8,9) War is one of the terrible characteristics of this present evil world. Here God's prophet is assuring us that ultimately, when the Lord says "be still" to the chaotic and raging nations of the earth, war will be a thing of the past, for the destruction of this present evil order will lead to the beginning of a new order—God's new world of tomorrow.

JESUS' PROPHECY

As we have noted, the prophecies of the Bible associate the end of the world with the return of Christ. Indeed, he will be the great king in God's new world. Near the close of Jesus' earthly ministry the disciples questioned him concerning the sign of his promised return. They asked, as recorded in our opening text, "What shall be the sign of thy coming [Greek: presence], and of the end of the world?" (Matt. 24:3) Numerous other translations render the last part of this verse as "end of the age," and this is the thought of the original Greek text. We therefore understand that the disciples' question does not refer to the end of the physical planet, but rather the end of the present social order or "age," characterized by evil, which will give way to a new age characterized by righteousness.

In his reply to this question, Jesus mentioned many things which would take place in the earth during the period of his presence—the final one being that those who prove worthy of life during the future Judgment Day will “inherit the kingdom prepared for [them] from the foundation of the world.”—chap. 25:31-34

In his prophecy, Jesus mentioned many events which would precede this ultimate restoration of the obedient to life and to their lost paradise condition. He referred, for example, to Daniel’s great prophecy of a Time of Trouble such as never was since there was a nation, describing it as a great “tribulation” that would come upon the peoples of the earth. He said that this tribulation would be so severe and widespread that unless it was cut short no flesh would survive. It is evident, we believe, that we are even now living in the time thus described by Jesus. This means that we are watching a “world” come to an end. However, Jesus gave us assurance that the period of this tribulation, or destructive trouble, will be cut short before all flesh is destroyed.—Matt. 24:21,22

We can take comfort in this as we view what is taking place throughout the world today. We know that the destruction of the human race is still threatened by the misuse of nuclear power. Environmental pollution and changing climate continues to endanger the existence of the human race, as does the possible use of biological and chemical weapons by rogue nations. Worldwide disruption of communication systems, financial markets, or computer networks could also have devastating effects on man’s continued existence.

The Master assures us, however, that through God's elect—the Christ, head and body members—there will be divine intervention in the affairs of men in time to prevent all of the above listed climactic events from destroying mankind and the earth in which they dwell.

THREE WORLDS

The Bible speaks of three worlds, one following the other, with planet Earth being the location of all three. There was the world before the Flood, often spoken of as the antediluvian world. There is the “present evil world,” as described by the Apostle Paul. (Gal. 1:4) Lastly, there is “the world to come.”—Heb. 2:5

Peter described these symbolically in their spiritual and material aspects as “the heavens and the earth.” Concerning the antediluvian world, Peter observed, “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.” (II Pet. 3:5,6) He continues, “But the heavens and the earth, which are now [even today], by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition [destruction] of ungodly men.”—vs. 7

In verse 13, Peter states, “Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.” This new heaven and new earth will be the third world—the “world to come.” The first part of that world will be the thousand-year rulership of Christ and his glorified church over mankind. It will also

be the thousand-year day of man's judgment. For these reasons, Peter could refer to the new heavens and earth as representing righteous conditions, although the last vestiges of sin will not be completely destroyed until the close of the first thousand years of that new "world."—Rev. 20:4,6,11,12

THE "DAY"

The title of this article is "The Day the World Ends," pinpointing the time in the outworking of the Heavenly Father's plan when this present evil world will be destroyed so that God's new world of tomorrow might be established. The ending of the present world and establishment of the new one are accomplished over a period of time, the length of which is known by the Lord, but is not yet revealed to his people. The period in which the antediluvian world ended is referred to in the Scriptures as "the days of Noah." While it was God who caused the waters of the flood to destroy that world, Noah was closely associated with what took place, and was the builder of the ark in which he and his family were brought over into the new world.

Peter speaks of the period in which the present evil world ends as "the day of the Lord" and "the day of God." Other prophecies describe it as the day of God's wrath upon an evil order to bring about its destruction. In Peter's prophecy, the elements of destruction are symbolized by fire. He says, "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.” “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.”—II Pet. 3:10,12

In reading this description of the destruction of the present evil world, it is important to note that when the antediluvian world was destroyed, it simply meant the destruction of that world order, not the destruction of the earth. So also now, it is not the destruction of the earth that is involved in the destruction of the present evil world. It is the present evil world order—civil and religious systems, not people—which is destroyed. Long ago God promised never again to destroy all flesh from off the earth.—Gen. 8:21

Fire is but one of the symbols used by God in the Bible to denote the manner in which the evil world of today is destroyed, both the religious aspects—the “heavens”—and the civil and social aspects—the “earth.” The Scriptures also use storms, whirlwinds, earthquakes, and other symbols—even floods—to symbolize what we now see taking place as wars, revolutions, anarchy, economic breakdowns, social upheavals, and the like—all adding up to increasing chaos, which will finally result in the complete disintegration of the present “world.” Indeed, now is the “day” in which our present world is in the process of ending.

In his prophecy, Peter marked the full extent in time of “the heavens and the earth, which are now,” when he said that they are “reserved unto fire against the day of judgment.” The *Revised Standard Version* makes the thought clearer. This

translation reads, “By the word of God heavens existed long ago, and an earth formed out of water and by means of water, through which the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist have been stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.”—II Pet. 3:5-7

The first world existed until destroyed in the waters of the flood. The second world still exists, even though on “fire,” and will continue to be “kept until the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.” While there will be destruction of human life brought about by the symbolic fire of the Day of the Lord, this is not what Peter is speaking of here. The present destruction is upon institutions and wicked nations—an evil world order—and not designed specifically for individuals.

Peter’s statement concerning the “destruction of ungodly men” refers to the coming day of judgment. At that time, the Lord will be dealing with individuals, the whole world order being under the rulership of that “prophet” foretold by Moses. During this period it will be only those who will not hear that prophet who will be “destroyed from among the people.” These will be the truly “ungodly,” the willful sinners, who will be destroyed in the “second death.”—Acts 3:22,23; Rev. 20:12-14

How different it will be in the thousand-year judgment day, however, for the righteous—those who willingly and joyfully embrace the true knowledge of the Lord as it will then be revealed to them. The psalmist described what a happy time it will be for them in these words: “Let the heavens

rejoice, and let the earth be glad; let the sea roar, and the fulness thereof. Let the field be joyful, and all that is therein: then shall all the trees of the wood rejoice Before the Lord: for he cometh . . . to judge the earth: he shall judge the world with righteousness, and the people with his truth.”—Ps. 96:11-13

NEW HEAVENS AND EARTH PROMISED

After prophesying the destruction of the present heavens and earth in a great Time of Trouble which he symbolized by fire and noise, Peter adds, “Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.” (II Pet. 3:13) As Peter shows, the first and second symbolic heavens and earth existed according to the Word of God. Now he is explaining that this is true also of the new heavens and new earth—these are according to God’s word of promise.

Important among these promises is one set forth in Isaiah 65:17, which reads, “Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind.” Isaiah further explains that in this new heavens and new earth “they shall build houses, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and eat the fruit of them. They shall not build, and another inhabit; they shall not plant, and another eat: for as the days of a tree are the days of my people, and mine elect shall long enjoy the work of their hands.” (vss. 21,22) Notice that these activities take place on the earth, which is still here after the former symbolic heavens and earth are destroyed.

John the Revelator, in a vision given to him by the risen Lord Jesus while on the Isle of Patmos, saw the promised new heavens and earth, and described it in this way: "I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first [former] heaven and the first [former] earth were passed away . . . And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful."—Rev. 21:1-5

The "new Jerusalem" John speaks of is the Christ class, symbolized as a bridegroom and bride. These will constitute the "new heaven" and will rule righteously over the "new earth." How significant, too, is the promise of God that he will make all things new here on earth—the earth which abideth forever, and shall eventually see God's will done throughout its entire expanse, even as it is now being done in heaven. It is to this that the end of the present evil world will lead. Let us continue to pray for the kingdom which will bring about these blessings.

Important among the "all things" which will be changed, is the destruction of pain and death.

Think of what this will mean in human experience. There will be no more need for hospitals, doctors, nurses, assisted living facilities, or pharmacies—however much these are needed and appreciated now. We thank our Heavenly Father for these helpful services rendered, but we are more thankful for the prospect of those blessed conditions in the new heavens and new earth when disease, dying, and death itself—from whatever cause—will have “passed away.”

Isaiah wrote of the coming new world, saying, “The LORD is our judge, the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king; he will save us.” (Isa. 33:22) Verse 24 adds, “And the inhabitant shall not say, I am sick: the people that dwell therein shall be forgiven their iniquity.” How wonderful to realize that when the Lord is Judge, Lawgiver, and King, he will indeed save the people from pain, sickness, sin, and death.

It is the present sinful condition of mankind, beginning with original sin in the Garden of Eden, that continues to result in sickness and death. However, through the death of Jesus, God provided redemption from Adamic sin. Paul wrote, “As in Adam all die, even so [all] in Christ shall . . . be made alive.” (I Cor. 15:22) This means that in addition to the abolition of sickness, the billions of mankind who already have gone down into the grave will be awakened from their long sleep in the great prison-house of death. All who become obedient to the righteous laws of the kingdom will attain perfect, everlasting life on the earth. Then it will be a fact that there shall be no more death. Indeed, “The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.”—vs. 26

THE PROSPECT

Wonderful and exciting is the prospect of God's new world of tomorrow as held out to us by the precious promises of God. Those who are able by faith to lay hold upon these promises can rejoice to see evidences that the present evil world will soon come to an end. Knowing what the Biblical "end of the world" will ultimately mean for the people of all nations, we should desire that it come as soon as possible.

While there has been much in the world that "now is" that has been good, on the whole it has been an unrighteous world. It has been characterized by sin, selfishness, sickness, and death. Let us rejoice that it will not continue—that even now it is in the process of being removed. Soon it will be completely destroyed, in preparation for God's new world, the "new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness." ■