

New Heavens and a New Earth

*“Nevertheless we,
according to his
promise, look for
new heavens and
a new earth,
wherein dwelleth
righteousness.”*

—II Peter 3:13

TO SINCERE STUDENTS OF the Bible, the promises of God are vitally important. This is especially so as we witness the turmoil, uncertainty, and evil which is present throughout the world in which we live.

One of the comforting promises of the Bible is found in our text—that God will establish a “new heavens” and a “new earth,” in which righteousness, instead of evil, will prevail. The Apostle Peter uses symbolic language to describe this promise, but in brief it means that by divine authority Christ will establish, on earth, a new and righteous government, through which the Bible’s promises of peace “on earth” and “good will toward men” will be gloriously fulfilled.—Luke 2:14

The opening word in our text—“nevertheless”—is very significant. It indicates that the new heavens and new earth which the Lord has promised are in contrast with what Peter had been discussing. Turning back to previous verses in the chapter, the

reason becomes very apparent. He had been portraying a time of destruction and trouble, saying that a “heavens” and “earth” would pass away, and that “the elements shall melt with fervent heat.”—vs. 10

Even this picture of destruction does not give us the full significance of Peter’s use of the word “nevertheless.” The full force of this word becomes apparent only when we read verses 3 and 4, which are the introduction to the general lesson of the chapter. These two verses read: “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 [Greek: *parousia*, meaning “presence”]? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation.”

In Acts 3:20-22, this same Apostle Peter is quoted as saying that following the second coming of Christ there would be “times of restitution of all things,” and that this glorious work of restoration had been foretold to the “fathers” by all of God’s holy prophets. Now, in his later epistle, Peter informs us that when the Lord would return and his second presence was a reality, some would scoff. They would see no visible evidence of Christ’s presence, and conclude that all things continue as they have since creation.

Through the testimony of the prophets, the fathers of Israel believed that the coming of the Messiah would result in rich and lasting blessings of peace, health and life. One of the proof texts of this, which Peter quoted in his sermon, was the promise made to Abraham that through his “seed . . . all the kindreds of the earth” would be blessed. (Acts 3:25; Gen. 12:3; 22:18) Those, therefore, who believe these promises made to the fathers, and repeated by Peter, have a

right to expect that the return of Christ will result in these promised blessings flowing out to the world.

It is with this viewpoint that Peter agrees when he uses the word “nevertheless,” for he continues, “We, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness.” Before he gets to this point in his lesson, however, Peter reminds us that there are cataclysmic developments in world affairs which precede and are in preparation for the blessings made available through the new heavens and new earth.

In presenting this information, Peter uses the illustration and language employed by Jesus in his great prophecy pertaining to the time of his return and the end of the present age. Jesus referred to the time of his second presence as the “days of the Son of man,” and said that in those days it would be “as it was in the days of Noah,” and in the “days of Lot.”—Luke 17:26-30

Referring to this, Peter says that those who scoff and question the promise of his presence are “willingly ignorant,” for they should take into account these examples of previous destruction which Jesus had used in his great prophecy. Thus, Peter reminds us of the days of Noah, saying, “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

Then the apostle follows up by giving us the meaning of this illustration which Jesus used, and informs us that in the “day of the Lord,” the present “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.” (vs. 10) Thus, the overall lesson which Peter presents is evident. Christ does return to establish his kingdom and to bless all the families of the earth. However, in order to accomplish this, the first work of his return must be the destruction of Satan’s world—“the heavens and earth, which are now.”—vs. 7

PICTORIAL LANGUAGE

In our study of Peter’s prophecy, it is important to realize that he uses the terms “heavens,” “earth,” and “elements” as symbols of the various aspects of a world order. For example, in verses 5 and 6 cited above, he speaks of the world order—heavens and earth—which passed away at the time of the flood. The physical heavens and the physical earth did not pass away. It was the world order that existed before the Flood which was destroyed. While it is true that nearly all the people also died, the point which Peter draws from that catastrophe is the important consideration that “the world [Greek: *kosmos*, meaning “orderly arrangement”] that then was, being overflowed with water, perished.”—vs. 6

Today, many students of prophecy are convinced that the present generation of the human race is witnessing the destruction of another world order, and that what has been occurring throughout the earth for many years past is in fulfillment of the Bible’s forecast pertaining to this time. They believe the Bible’s testimony that the earth itself “abideth forever,” but see in the crumbling systems of the world, and in the chaos and general upheaval of society everywhere, the collapsing of what the Apostle Paul spoke of as “this present evil world.”—Eccl. 1:4; Gal. 1:4

Jesus foretold that this would result in a time of “great tribulation,” so severe that unless terminated by divine intervention, “there should no flesh be saved.” (Matt. 24:21,22) The Apostle Paul, identifying the same general period as the “day of the Lord,” said that in this day “sudden destruction” would come upon the world “as travail upon a woman with child.”—I Thess. 5:1-3

These and other prophecies concerning the end of the present world order aptly describe what students of the Bible discern is taking place. The first significant spasm of destruction began in 1914, and resulted in the overthrow of nearly all of Europe’s hereditary rulers. The Second World War resulted in a further weakening of the fabric of civilization.

Since that time, countless wars, great and small, have erupted throughout the earth. Many of these are going on yet today. Add to that the world’s increasing moral decay, religious extremism, political chaos, economic uncertainties, and the ever-present threat of nuclear war. Mankind is at his wits end to resolve these problems. Indeed, the great tribulation which Jesus predicted is most assuredly upon us.

The destructive potential of the world’s present situation is very great. We may wonder if Peter’s reference to “fervent heat,” which causes the elements of the present world order to melt, might not be intended to convey the idea of literal devastation. In this time of great tribulation, “such as was not since the beginning of the world,” there is sure to be widespread destruction, regardless of how it might be brought about. However, we think that Peter is speaking largely in symbolic language.

SPIRITUAL AND EARTHLY SYMBOLS

The symbolisms of the Bible are employed because of their aptness in illustrating the subject matter discussed. In every civilization established by man there have been two important aspects, which in the Bible are symbolically described as the “heavens” and the “earth.” As we know, all life on the literal earth is subject in one way or another to the influences exerted by the heavens. Our seasons, our years, our days and our nights, are all controlled by the heavens.

Because man was created in the image of God, he is by nature a being who reaches out in worship and dependency to a higher power. Although the human race has been to a considerable extent alienated from the true God, the Creator, the people have had respect for religious influences in their affairs. In some cases, this has been exercised through various types of gods, and in others, civil governments have been set up as objects of veneration and worship.

It is this aspect of every civilization, or world order, that is symbolized in the Bible by the heavens, while the earth pictures organized society which is more or less subject to these symbolic heavens. It is this combination which Peter describes as a “world,” or *kosmos*, as it is stated in the Greek language. Thus, when Peter speaks of the heavens and the earth passing away, and the elements melting with fervent heat, he is not telling us that the actual sun, moon, and stars in the heavens, and the physical earth with all its elements, are to be destroyed.

The word “element,” as used by Peter, gives us a clue to what he means, and is translated from a Greek word denoting “an orderly arrangement.”

The Apostle Paul uses this same word when, in writing to the Christians in Galatia, he speaks of turning to the “weak and beggarly elements.” (Gal. 4:9) Here, he is referring to the ordinances of the old Mosaic Law, from which Christians are free. The point is that Paul used the word to describe arrangements and customs—elements—by which a people had once been governed, and Peter uses the term in the same manner.

Peter’s reference to the elements of the heavens and the earth, however, is much more comprehensive. This is because he is speaking of all the man-made laws, morals, customs, viewpoints, religious and civil, by which the present social order has been governed throughout the ages, and he tells us that in the “day of the Lord” these are to “melt with fervent heat.”

Without realizing it, people of the world during the past century who have insight into the significance of what has been occurring refer to these events as a “fire.” During the First World War, President Woodrow Wilson said, “The world is on fire.” When the second global struggle began, another statesman referred to it as a “four-alarm fire.” This symbolism is freely used in the prophecies which foretell the end of the present world order.

This symbolic melting of the elements does, of course, result in much physical destruction. Large portions of many countries have been reduced to rubble during the wars, revolutions, and terrorism which have plagued the world during this melting process. More significant than this, however, has been the melting of the social, political, religious and moral elements, which for centuries were

viewed as having a measure of stability. Cities and towns have been rebuilt, but efforts to restore other elements of this world order have failed.

Distress, fear, and general perplexity have resulted from all of these melting elements of the present world. Millions are angered and disillusioned by the inability of their leaders to provide the peace and security which they consider rightfully theirs to enjoy. Whatever levels of stability there have been in the past seem now to be viewed by many so-called heads of society as being based on outmoded laws, customs, and viewpoints. As a result, general law and order, respect for fellowman, and tolerance of differing opinions, is rapidly disappearing from the earth. All of these conditions are most assuredly signs that the melting of the elements of this world is progressing toward the conclusion spoken of by Peter—the passing away of this present order.

MANY ELEMENTS

As suggested in the foregoing paragraphs, this present world is made up of many elements, both religious and civil. They are not all evil in their entirety, despite present world conditions. To the extent that the ethical and moral standards of the Bible have been upheld among the people, they have benefited thereby, as have their leaders. Such positive examples, however, are becoming fewer compared to the increased degradation of society we see today. Thus, when Paul speaks of ours as an “evil world,” he means that in the overall picture, evil predominates.

In this world there are many religious elements: Christianity; Islam; Hinduism; Atheism—these being just a few of the most notable groups. There are

also many civil elements: labor; capital; social; moral; political; and business and economic. It requires no special discernment to realize that damaging friction, and even violence, exists today among these various elements, and that they have to a large extent lost any former cohesion and tolerance for one another which, in past centuries, held the fabric of this world together.

Noteworthy also is the ever-growing trend throughout the world toward looseness in abiding by former restraints, laws, and ethical practices in general. Local, national, and international law is flouted under the slightest pretext. Governments and their leaders forget their promises and responsibilities. These examples of infidelity reach into communities, and even households, causing the masses gradually to lose respect for the more honorable principles which they once held in esteem.

There are noble exceptions to this trend. We are merely describing the general developments, and these are following essentially the same pattern the world over. In this country and others, honorable men and women are making strenuous efforts to hold back the tide of social, political, moral, and economic decay, but overall, results are meager.

HEAVENS SHAKEN

Among the many signs which Jesus gave of the time of his second presence and the end of the age was that "the powers of heaven shall be shaken." (Luke 21:24-26) He foretold that as a result of this, fear would fill the hearts of the people. How true this has proven to be. If the people of all nations today believed that the religious elements of society

could, through wholesome guidance, assist in resolving the current problems of the world, how quickly their fears would be allayed.

However, they know that this is not possible. Some of the most extensively followed religious elements of the world support violence as part of their basis of belief. Other ever-increasing elements are atheistic in nature, having little or no respect for any religious concepts in the world around them. Even among some of the more traditional western religions, there is a growing lack of regard and respect for the principles of righteousness. We can surely see that the powers and influences of the religious world, the symbolic heavens, are being shaken to the core.

Groups of determined churchgoing men and women engage in hopeful discussions, and pass resolutions indicating what they think the leadership of their respective countries should do in various situations, but they are paid little heed. Even among those who profess religious affiliation, the vast majority do not choose to get involved. For example, in the United States, over 80% of the people claim to have religious affiliation of some kind, but only 20% say they attend religious services with any degree of regularity. In many other countries the situation is equally discouraging from the standpoint of religious involvement.

We are calling attention to this picture not to criticize, nor to condemn, the religious elements of the present world. We are merely calling attention to facts and conditions which are fulfilling the Bible's prophecies of events which are to occur in the end of the present age. Thankfully, these conditions will soon come to an end, giving way to the

establishment of the divinely promised new heavens and new earth.

NEW HEAVENS AND NEW EARTH

Concurrent with the melting of the various elements of the present world has been an unprecedented increase of knowledge in all areas of investigation. This, too, was prophesied in the Scriptures. Daniel, when speaking of the “time of trouble,” and “time of the end,” said that then “many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased.” (Dan. 12:1,4) Just one of many examples of this has been in the field of medical science. Phenomenal progress has been made, particularly in the western world, in eradicating diseases, treating illnesses, and preventive care. Average life expectancy in many countries has tripled since the end of the nineteenth century.

This does not mean that man will, by himself, find a way to live forever. The power of life is held under divine control, and the blessing of everlasting life will reach the people only through the new heavens and new earth which God has promised. How manifold will God’s promised blessings be! Peace—universal and everlasting—will be one of them. Together with his faithful associates, Christ Jesus will be the righteous ruler of that new world order. He died for his subjects in order that he might offer them health and life. (I Pet. 3:18; Isa. 53:4-6; John 6:51; Rom. 5:6-8) Thus, Christ will rule, not over a dying race, but over a race which will be given an opportunity of being restored to perfection, mentally, morally, and physically, and of living forever.—Luke 19:10; Acts 3:21; I Tim. 2:3-6

Why, someone may ask, is that new kingdom, that new world order, described in the Bible as a new heavens and a new earth? It is for the same reason that the world before the Flood and this “present evil world” are thus symbolically described. God’s new world will also have its spiritual and material aspects. Christ, together with his church, will be the spiritual rulers in the new heavens—the source of the righteous and holy elements in that new world. The “church” class is made up of those described by Paul who suffer with Christ, that they may also reign with him.—Rom. 8:17; II Tim. 2:12; Rev. 20:6

The Christ class, Jesus and the church, will exercise their ruling authority through human representatives. These, we believe, will be the resurrected ancient prophets, and other faithful ones of those past ages. To begin with, these will constitute the righteous representatives and teachers of the new earth. Gradually, however, all the willing and obedient of mankind will become associated with these “princes” in a world order based on the elements of peace and righteousness. Under the influence of these elements, God’s name will be “remembered in all generations: therefore shall the people praise [him] for ever and ever.”—Ps. 45:16,17

As the psalmist explains, these “princes” are to be those who formerly were considered the “fathers” in Israel. Concerning their position in God’s new world order, Jesus said that the people would come from the east, west, north, and south, and would “sit down” with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets. (Luke 13:28,29) This indicates that these faithful fathers will be recognized by all mankind as their teachers under Christ.

The spiritual and earthly phases of God's kingdom, the new heavens and new earth, are also symbolically described as "Zion" and "Jerusalem." The Prophet Isaiah uses this symbolism, saying, "Many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem."—Isa. 2:3

It will be because God's righteous laws will be made known to the people, and enforced, that righteousness will predominate and prevail in the promised new heavens and new earth. Throughout every corner of the earth, this will result in beating "swords into plowshares," and "spears into pruninghooks," for "nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."—vs. 4

Individually, it will mean that every man will sit "under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid: for the mouth of the LORD of hosts hath spoken it." (Mic. 4:4) Dwelling under one's own vine and fig tree suggests peace, economic security, and prosperity. Now the world is filled with fear of the future. However, then none will be afraid, for all will realize that a new world order has been set up in which the divine Christ is the center—the righteous ruler, "The everlasting Father," and "The Prince of Peace."—Isa. 9:6,7

The Apostle Peter's reference in our opening text to God's promise of a new heavens and a new earth, was first given by Isaiah. He prophesied: "Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; And the former things will not be remembered

or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I create; . . . No longer will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, Or an old man who does not live out his days; For the youth will die at the age of one hundred And the one who does not reach the age of one hundred will be thought accursed. They will build houses and inhabit them; They will also plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They will not build and another inhabit, They will not plant and another eat; For as the lifetime of a tree, so will be the days of My people.”—Isa. 65:17-22, *New American Standard Bible*

On the Isle of Patmos, the Apostle John, in vision, saw the fulfillment of this promise. While the prophecy given through Isaiah declares that in the new heavens and new earth there shall be no longer be “an infant who lives but a few days,” John was given a more comprehensive view of this by the assurance that “there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.”—Rev. 21:1-4

Let us then continue to look for the promised new heavens and new earth. It is this new kingdom and its government which alone will solve the present perplexing problems of a sin-cursed and dying race. With this hope before us, we will understand the meaning of events which are causing the elements of the present world order to melt, and we will not be alarmed over the outcome. Indeed, as Jesus admonished, we will lift up our heads, knowing that our “deliverance is drawing near.”—Luke 21:28, *Weymouth New Testament* ■