

When Will the Earth be Destroyed?

By Art Braidic and Terry Moore

© 2009, 2015 the Eternal Church of God

All Scriptures are from the New King James translation unless otherwise noted.

Peter's second book speaks of Christ's second coming as well as the destruction of the earth. Does this mean that the earth is destroyed at Christ's return, or at the end of the millennium? One thing that may make this particular set of verses confusing to some is that Peter spoke of both events. He began by reminding the Church what they should expect from unbelievers just prior to Christ's return:

Beloved, I now write to you this second epistle (in *both of* which I stir up your pure minds by way of reminder), that you 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 Savior, knowing this first: that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to 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." (2 Peter 3:1-4).

Peter directed his words toward those destined for the first resurrection. He warns them to beware of scoffers who will mock our belief in the return of Christ. He encourages believers to not become discouraged by such rhetoric.

Next, the apostle discussed those same skeptics, but speaks in terms of an era that these mockers are unaware of or refuse to believe. He compared their final end to that of the incorrigible who lived in Noah's day and perished in the flood:

For this they willfully forget: that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of water and in the water, by which the world *that* then existed perished, being flooded with water (2 Peter 3:5-6).

Peter revealed that a similar fate awaits ungodly scoffers. However, he made it clear that the unrepentant wicked will ultimately be destroyed in a lake of fire:

But the heavens and the earth *which* are now preserved by the same word, are reserved for fire until the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men (2 Peter 3:7).

In this verse Peter no longer addressed the return of Christ. He spoke of the "day of judgment" that will destroy all those who reject God. By stating that they are "reserved... until the day of judgment" Peter explained that the final end of the wicked will not happen immediately. Their complete destruction will occur at the end of Christ's millennial reign on earth—not at His second coming. In Peter 3 we see that the saints are raised in the first resurrection. The rest of the dead will wait in their graves and be resurrected in their physical body 1,000 years later. The Apostle John explained this when speaking of the resurrected saints:

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is *the* Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; and he cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished. But after these things he must be released for a little while. And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them. Then *I saw* the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God, who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received *his* mark on their foreheads or on their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished. This *is* the first resurrection (Revelation 20:1-5).

After 1,000 years, those who were not in the first resurrection will be brought back to life. They will have a chance to repent and their final judgment will take place after the reign of Christ and the saints. We can be certain that Peter is talking about this time period by his next statement in which he said:

But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day *is* as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning *His* promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance (2 Peter 3:8-9).

The point Peter was making is that the judgment of the unbelievers will not occur at Christ's second coming. This will take place at a specific time after a thousand years of Christ's reign on the earth. This final judgment occurs at the end of the world. It does not take place at the return of Christ or at the establishment of God's Kingdom on earth. It is the judgment that comes upon the rest of mankind just before the lake of fire is ignited. Therefore, Peter wrote:

But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up (2 Peter 3:10).

Because these verses speak of the "day of the Lord" and Christ coming as a "thief in the night," some have wrongly concluded that Peter is speaking of Christ's return at the first resurrection. However, these events are not one in the same. There are several reasons for this.

- I. The term "day of the Lord" is used to refer to those times that God intervenes in human affairs, not just to identify the trumpet and vial plagues prior to Christ's return. Notice that the Bible calls God's destruction of ancient Babylon a day of the Lord:

The burden against Babylon which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw... Wail, for the day of the LORD *is* at hand! It will come as destruction from the Almighty... Behold, the day of the LORD comes, cruel, with both wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate; and He will destroy its sinners from it (Isaiah 3:1-9).

God also used this expression when He intervened in the affairs of the nation of Egypt:

Egypt rises up like a flood, And *its* waters move like the rivers; And he says, ‘I will go up *and* cover the earth, I will destroy the city and its inhabitants.’ Come up, O horses, and rage, O chariots! And let the mighty men come forth: The Ethiopians and the Libyans who handle the shield, And the Lydians who handle *and* bend the bow. For this *is* the day of the Lord GOD of hosts, A day of vengeance, That He may avenge Himself on His adversaries. The sword shall devour; It shall be satiated and made drunk with their blood; For the Lord GOD of hosts has a sacrifice In the north country by the River Euphrates (Jeremiah 46:8-10).

God also spoke of the day of the LORD’s anger when He took action against the people of Judah (Lam. 2:22). Further, God condemns the prophets of Israel in a similar fashion by addressing the fact that they did not warn ancient Israel before she was taken captive:

O Israel, your prophets are like foxes in the deserts. You have not gone up into the gaps to build a wall for the house of Israel to stand in battle on the day of the LORD (Ezekiel 13:4-5).

II. When Christ intervenes in the affairs of nations, He always does so like a “thief in the night.” He never gives mankind the specific date of His intervention. He never told Israel when they would fall. He never told Judah, Babylon, Persia, Greece, or Rome the date they would collapse. He does not tell us when He will return. In fact, He states that no one knows the day or hour (Mat. 24:36). Neither will Christ give an exact time for the final judgment. It will come as a relative surprise to all humanity living at that time.

III. When the words that Peter uses are examined, it becomes clear that he spoke of the final judgment. For example, consider that Peter said that the heavens and earth will pass away. According to *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, the words “pass away” are to be understood in their figurative sense meaning they will perish. The statement that the elements will melt with a fervent heat means they will be dissolved with a consuming fire. These are the same words used in the following verses:

Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner *of persons* ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat? (2 Peter 3:11-12).

From these verses we see that earth and all the planets and galaxies of our universe will be burned up. The only time that the Bible states this will take place is during the lake of fire that occurs at the end of Christ’s 1000 year reign. The next verse assures us that this is Peter’s meaning:

Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Peter 3:13).

It is clear that Peter prophesied of the time when the heavens and earth will be dissolved with a “great noise”—a crash, not the blowing of a trumpet as before Christ’s return. It will be a massive explosion preceding the lake of fire. The final judgment will take place just before this fiery end and will be followed by the creation of a new heavens and earth. All of this occurs after the millennial rule of Christ.

IV. When parallel Scriptures are considered, it becomes even more obvious that Peter spoke of the final judgment. For example, in chapter two, he spoke of the flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, and the final judgment:

For if God did not spare the angels who sinned, but cast *them* down to hell and delivered *them* into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment; and did not spare the ancient world, but saved Noah, *one of eight people*, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood on the world of the ungodly; and turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes, condemned *them* to destruction, making *them* an example to those who afterward would live ungodly; and delivered righteous Lot, *who was* oppressed by the filthy conduct of the wicked (for that righteous man, dwelling among them, tormented *his* righteous soul from day to day by seeing and hearing *their* lawless deeds)—then the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgment (2 Peter 2:4-9).

From this we see that the context is the complete destruction of the physical earth after the final judgment. The meaning of these verses can be illuminated by viewing other translations or even paraphrased versions. Sometimes, these can capture the sense more clearly without translating each word literally. In a few examples, it is obvious that the translators understood the timing of the verse:

The Message Bible

But when the Day of God's Judgment does come, it will be unannounced, like a thief. The sky will collapse with a thunderous bang, everything disintegrating in a huge conflagration (2 Peter 3:10).

The Good News Bible

But the Day of the Lord will come like a thief. On that Day the heavens will disappear with a shrill noise, the heavenly bodies will burn up and be destroyed, and the earth with everything in it will vanish (2 Peter 3:10).

Next, Peter explained the entire point of the verse. Since all that is physical is going to be burned up, dissolved, vaporized, how then should we live in preparation for the final end and a new beginning?

You therefore, beloved, since you know *this* beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him *be* the glory both now and forever. Amen (2 Peter 3:17-18).