

The Teaching of Second Peter Chapter Three

According to the entirety of **2 Peter 3**, especially **verses 1-4**, both this letter and Peter's first letter were written in order to remind his Jewish-Christian readers (cf. 1 Pet. 1:1) of the last-days' (2 Pet. 3:3ff) prophecies of the prophets and of the instruction of the apostles and Christ concerning diligent faithfulness (2 Pet. 3:14) throughout those days, the days in which they were living.

If this subject is something about which Peter (one of the apostles of v. 2) spoke and wrote, then surely we can consult his first letter as a commentary on his second letter and vice versa, at least wherein he recorded information concerning the last days, for if ever "using the Bible to explain the Bible" applies, it applies under these circumstances. Now...

I would venture to say that anyone who even scans Peter's letters will perceive that he wrote them with the purpose of bolstering the faith and faithfulness of his audience; so without spending seemingly unnecessary time proving that, I'll simply begin by saying that in his initial letter the reader comes across the last-days idea almost immediately.

In First Peter 1:3-12 he wrote of...

- ~ the inheritance (v. 4),
- ~ accomplished salvation (vv. 5, 9, & 10),
- ~ the revelation (revealing/appearing) of Jesus (v. 7 [finished salvation is consistently associated with the Lord's coming, Rom. 13:11, Heb. 9:28, et.al.]),
- ~ the end (the goal reached for and obtained) of their faith (v. 9 [there are various Greek terms for "end," but this one specifically refers to the consummation of a purpose]), and...
- ~ glories (v. 11) in respect to that which was ready to be revealed in the last time (v. 5, cf. "these last days," Heb. 1:2)—their time/days (as is made clear when he wrote that to the prophets "it was revealed that, not to themselves, but to us [1st generation Christians] they were ministering the things which now have been reported to you" [1st century men, not to 21st century men] v. 12). (Vv. 10-12 also emph. the import of the OC for those of Peter's time and thereafter—**us**; so we should study/use it to better understand the NC → 2 Pet. 1:19!) Then later...

In First Peter 4:5 he wrote that Jesus was "ready to judge the living and the dead," which would sound dreadfully deceptive to poor suffering Christians if He weren't going to carry out this judgment for another 2,000 or more years. (This is reminiscent of 2 The. 1:3-10 wherein hope was given to them for relief of their trials, not through death, but through the coming of their Savior!)

As everyone knows, the word "ready" can refer to being prepared &/or on the verge of doing something, the latter usually inherent in the first anyway. Regardless, however, in the context (vv. 7 & 17 which will get to momentarily), Peter defined what he meant by "ready": "The end ... is at hand," and "the time has come."

Peter penned these letters within a very short time before Jerusalem and its temple were seized in AD 67 (not that such was all there was to this "end," but that was the primary sign of Christ's judgment according to Mat. 24:15). So, speaking of verse 7...

In First Peter 4:7 he stated very clearly and concisely to them that "The end of all things is at hand" ("end" being the same Greek term discussed in 1 Pet. 1:9 above); since we apply "at hand" as meaning "within their generation" when we preach about the coming of the kingdom from Matthew 4:17, we should feel very inconsistent with ourselves if we didn't also apply the "at hand" phrase here to the same time-frame. Right? Then...

In First Peter 4:17 he, clearly and concisely again, stated that "The time has come for the judgment to begin..." (Yes, he really told his AD 60s' audience that the time had come for the judgment to begin. And isn't it interesting that translators decided to ignore the definite article "the" before "judgment" here, while adding it in to Hebrews 9:27? Sure makes one wonder about translator-bias.) Besides his first letter (our semi-immediate context)...

We can consult the more remote context of Peter's words by means of Luke's record of them in the book of Acts chapters 2 & 3 to discover his understanding of the fulfillment of biblical last days. Besides the fact that Peter (as an apostle and prophet himself) was of course inspired of God, in 2 Pet. 3:2 he referred to other sources for support—the prophets and the Lord; and this wasn't the first time Peter alluded to the prophets in support of his take on the timing of biblical last days.

By comparing Acts 2:15 with Acts 3:1, we can conclude that the events of chapter 3 occurred the very same day as the events of chapter 2; furthermore, these events triggered Peter (in 3:13-19a) to teach a condensed form of the sermon in 2:14-39 about how they, the Jews, had crucified their Messiah. However...

This time he enlarged upon that by also speaking of Christ's return (two events which are inextricably linked in the Bible [cf. e.g. John's application of Zec. 12:10-12 in John 19:34 & 37 as well as Rev. 1:7]); he specifically stated concerning all of this that "All the prophets, from Samuel and those who follow, as many as have spoken, have also foretold these days" (Acts 3:24). What days? "These days." What days? The "last days" he had spoken of in his previous sermon in Acts 2; in 2:16-17a he clearly and concisely stated of the events on that Pentecost day, "This is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel: 'And it shall come to pass in the last days.'"

What were some of the events to transpire in those biblical last days? In Acts 3:19b-21 Peter told his audience to get themselves right with God "so that times of refreshment may come from the presence [lit. 'face'] of the Lord and that He may send Jesus Christ ... whom heaven must receive [or retain] until the times of restoration of all things which God has spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets...." (By the way, only Peter ever used the phrase *hagion propheton* for "holy prophets" which supports that the Peter of Acts 2–3 is the same Peter of the letters by that name.)

It seems evident to me that the times of refreshment and restoration in Peter's Acts 3 talk is parallel to his quote of Joel 2 in his Acts 2 talk, specifically verses 20b-21 about the coming of the Lord which would accomplish the fullness of salvation (and which corresponds nicely with the thoughts we expressed previously concerning 1 Pet. 1:7). Now...

Not only did Peter (one of the apostles of 2 Pet. 3:2) speak about things relative to the biblical "last days," and not only did the prophets prophesy about those days, but (according to 2 Pet. 3:2 at least) Jesus also spoke about things relative to biblical last days; and I'm sure Peter was usually in the audience on those occasions. However...

Since we don't have a record of Jesus ever using the exact phrase "last days," we must discover what He taught about those days by comparison (i.e. more of that principle of allowing the Bible to explain the Bible): by searching for ideas in Jesus' teachings which correspond to ideas that Peter wrote about in our text, we can thereby uncover what we're looking for. So...

In what discourse of Jesus can we find the following thoughts from Second Peter 3:

- ~ *folks walking according to their own lusts* (v. 3),
- ~ *comments about deceivers* (vv. 3-4),
- ~ *comments about the flood of Noah's day* (vv. 5-6),
- ~ *comments about destruction relative to the heavens & earth* (vv. 5, 7, 10, & 13), and...
- ~ *comments about the Lord's coming as a thief and being prepared for that event* (v. 10)?

Matthew chapters 23–25 come to my mind, especially chapter 24 (aka Jesus' *Olivet Discourse*): in chapter 24 Jesus made comments about...

- ~ *lawlessness abounding* (v. 12),
- ~ *deceivers* (vv. 5, 11, & 23-26, verses before v. 34 concerning things that would occur within that generation),
- ~ *the flood of Noah's day* (vv. 37-39),
- ~ *destruction in relation to heavens and earth* (the entirety of Mat. 23–25, but especially 24:29-35), and...
- ~ *His coming as a thief and being prepared for all of this* (vv. 42-51). Interestingly...

Not only does everything in this chapter(s) revolve around the hub 24:34, which teaches that all these things would be fulfilled in that generation, but also the events described in Second Peter 3 are in essentially the exact *same order* as those described in Matthew 24, and no surprise since Peter was in the audience that day. Right? So it just seems to me that it would take deliberate effort to *fail* to see the parallelism between these two chapters. One other point...

The brethren to whom Peter wrote were in the midst of what the prophets, Jesus, and the apostles predicted, for First Peter 4:12 is actually in the present tense: "Don't think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is trying you as tho some strange thing were happening..." (cf. 1:7). Well...

Moving on in **Second Peter 3 to verses 5-6**, we discover something else of great interest:

The questions that arise for me as I read about the heavens and earth of Noah's day are these: (1) Were the literal-physical heavens as well as the literal-physical earth of that day totally annihilated? And if so, (2) where are we now, in/under different "heavens" and on a different planet? And...

The obvious answers in my mind are as follows: (1) No, the literal-physical heavens and earth of Noah's day were not totally annihilated. And (2) I believe that I live under the same skies and on the same planet that Noah did. So such leads me to believe that...

In verses 5-6 Peter didn't mean for his readers to understand him as referring to the literal-physical heavens and earth, but to something more along the lines of which they, as Jews, would understand by such language. More about that momentarily. For now...

This should be enough to inform us today that, when Peter used this obvious "heavens and earth" idiom in this chapter, he wasn't referring to what non-Jews, on the other side of the planet, and 2,000 years later would immediately think of when they read such language; this, of course, has to do with the logical principle of placing ourselves in the shoes of the original recipients of this letter, otherwise known as "audience relevance." Moving on...

In **Second Peter 3:7** he contrasted the non-literal/physical heavens and earth of Noah's day with the heavens and earth of the time in which he (Peter) lived in the AD 60s, which leads to more questions:

If the idiomatic heavens and earth of Noah's day was destroyed and Peter was living under another heavens and earth, where can I go to discover more information about this heavens and earth of Peter's time and to whom or what the Bible relates it? Two passages come to mind:

Near the beginning of Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount* in which he contrasted Old Covenant teachings with His teachings, Matthew 5:17b-18 have Him saying, "I didn't come to destroy [the law], but to fulfill [it]. For assuredly I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled." Wow! What a passage!

To get the impact of what we usually miss here, consider part of verse 18 in the New Century Version: "Nothing will disappear from the law until heaven and earth are gone." So...

What was Jesus doing here? He was linking the passing of the law to the passing of heaven and earth, saying that the law could not be considered fulfilled and thereby pass away until heaven and earth passed away. In other words, the idiomatic "heavens and earth" that they were under was inseparably linked to the law; in fact, as we'll soon discover, this phrase could be used as a reference to the Law of Moses (there's the "who") or the old covenant (there's the "what") between God in heaven and man on earth. So...

This means that if we interpret heaven and earth literally here, then we must admit that the law will continue to be in effect until the literal heavens and earth are destroyed. But I know of no one in the church who would admit to that. Now here's another similar & related passage:

In the midst of Jesus' *Olivet Discourse* in which he talked about the end of Judaism by means of the destruction of the temple and city of God, Jesus made this very surprising statement of contrast: "Heaven & earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away" (Mat. 24:35).

If we allow that the phrase "heaven and earth" here is Jewish for the Law of Moses (as would seem to correspond to the context of the dissolution of the Old Covenant temple and city of God), then Jesus was saying that while *Moses'* words would be fulfilled and pass away (cf. Luke 21:22), *His* words would never pass away. And...

This would also be perfectly consistent with what the apostle Paul taught in the entire third chapter of Second Corinthians—that the old covenant would be supplanted by the new. So...

Since Peter indicated that the heavens and earth of his second letter wasn't literal, and since Jesus used the phrase "heaven and earth" in contexts of old covenant versus new covenant or Moses' words versus His words, and since Peter said that Jesus spoke of these matters, and since Peter lived during the still extant law of Moses (cf. Heb. 8:13), then surely Peter was talking about the law of Moses or the old covenant when he wrote of the then present heavens and earth (v. 7). And...

For when/what did Peter say this covenant-world was being reserved? The judgment day (v. 7).

And, especially since Jerusalem was on a hill (actually called "Zion," by the way), what visible result occurred that could be seen from miles away as a sign that God had fulfilled His promise through His prophets and Christ to destroy the very city and temple which represented that old covenant heaven and earth? "Fire" of course (v. 7). By the way...

According to the Jewish historian Josephus (who lived around AD 70), the temple in Jerusalem was thought of by the Jews as a picture of heaven and earth (cf. *Jewish Antiquities*, 3:6:4:123 w/ 3:7:7:181 & 183 as well as perhaps Isa. 66:1); in other words, they thought of the holy place as earth and the most holy place as heaven. Now...

In **Second Peter 3:8**, referring back to the scoffers of **verse 4**, Peter simply said that time isn't a problem with/for God; i.e., even though the time of a generation was about over when Peter wrote and Jesus still hadn't returned as He said He would, that generation (that 40-yr period [cf. Heb. 3:9-10 & 16-17]) wasn't over yet. [Besides, note how this verse contradicts itself if taken as a literal formula; and (if taken as most are wont) Peter contradicted himself (cf. v. 1 w/ 1 Pet. 4:5, 7, & 17).] So...

They were being encouraged to at least wait until those 40 years were over before either accusing Jesus &/or His apostles of being false prophets or listening to those who would have them believe such nonsense. Furthermore... [Cf. context of Psalms 90:4 about God's faithfulness for what Peter actually meant.]

This contextual interpretation of verse 8 indicates that Peter never intended for verse 8 to be used as a formula to apply all across the Bible as so many tend to misapply it. Anyway, moving on...

In **Second Peter 3:9** he defended the Lord by saying that He wasn't being slack concerning the promise He made in Matthew 24:34, but that He was showing mercy and grace by allowing as much time as possible for everyone to accept His Messiahship as would accept it before judgment came upon that old world order and its adherents (cf. v. 15).

In **Second Peter 3:10** he wrote of "the day of the Lord," while in **verse 12** he wrote of "the day of God."

I believe these two phrases refer to the same thing, of course—either because Jesus is God (i.e. deity) or because God took vengeance via the agency of Jesus, His chosen judge (John 5:22). Since the phrase "the day of the Lord" is used numerous times in the Bible to allude to various days of the Lord, the context must establish what day of the Lord is under consideration. However, the day of the Lord is always a negative thing—judgment against a particular people (cf. Rev. 1:10). Anyway...

Let's consider the coming as a thief in the night of verse 10.

We've already pointed out that Jesus also spoke of this "thief motif" in Matthew 24:43. But what's interesting about this theme is that the thief's victim is the one who did not believe in Jesus' teachings and therefore in His signs in order to be prepared (Mat. 24:43-44), for Paul taught that first century Christians, those who did believe in Jesus' teachings and signs of the end, would be prepared and not be overtaken (1 The. 5:1-10). By the way...

Eusebius (a Christian writer who lived in the AD 200's) said that no Christians were killed in Jerusalem's demise, for most of them had fled to Pella due to their realization of the fulfillment of Jesus' signs (*Ecclesiastical History*, p. 70).

The next thing of interest in verse 10 is that Peter mentioned how the heavens and earth of verse 7 would, as Jesus said in Matthew 24:35, pass away; and they would do so with lots of noise and fire.

Remember how I pointed out earlier that the Jew Josephus indicated that the temple represented the heavens and earth (the hub of everything related to the old covenant)? Well, what happened to the temple? The raucous Roman army (which caused all sorts of wailing-noises among the Jews as well) destroyed it, fire being part of that destruction as history tells us. So, as Peter said here...

All the "elements/works" in which old covenant people trusted to essentially merit salvation by law were demolished, God telling them that such was just not the way to reconciliation with Him (i.e. those works would be "found" [*eurethesetai*] or seen as useless for that). Speaking of "elements"...

The original term for "elements" in verses 10 & 12 is *stoicheion*, and it's only used five other times in the New Testament and all by Paul (Gal. 4:3 & 9, Col. 2:8 & 20, & Heb. 5:12). What's interesting (and I believe significant in relation to Peter's usage of this word) is that this term is used in reference to things related to the old covenant. (And after what Peter said about Paul's words in verse 16, one would expect him to be careful with Pauline language.) So...

Unless we're going to say that Peter's use of *stoicheion* here is different than Paul's use of it in Galatians, Colossians, & Hebrews, then ... allowing the Bible to explain the Bible ... it seems to me we should assume that Peter was using it the same way Paul did—as another Jewish idiom that brought things of the old covenant to mind. And why would this be anyway? Well, you'll just have to take the time to consult Josephus' *Antiquities* referred to earlier. Now...

Moving on in verse 10, there's one more term to take into consideration: "earth."

This word is translated from the Greek term *ges* which has "land" as its primary usage in the New Testament; comparing Jesus' *Olivet Discourse* again with Second Peter 3, listen to how Luke 21: 23 reads: "Woe to those who are pregnant [or] nursing babies in those days! For there will be great distress in the land (*ges*) and wrath upon this people"; then verse 24 has Jesus going to specify "Jerusalem" as (part of) that "land." But, what's more interesting and relevant...

Jesus went on in verse 26 to speak more about "this people," saying that "men's hearts [would fail] them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth, for the powers of heaven will be shaken." Well, moving on again...

In **Second Peter 3:11-12** Peter just went on to use that of which he had been reminding them to fulfill his main purpose for this letter and encourage them to do their best to "hang in there" since that generation—that 40-year period—was just about over, meaning that *Jesus was on His way* (cf. 1 Pet. 4:7 & 17), or, as James put it, He was "at hand" in that He was "standing at the door" (5:8-9). Lastly...

In **Second Peter 3:13** he brought up the heavens and earth concept for a third time, but this time he was obviously referring ... not to the heavens and earth of Noah's time that was gone (vv. 5-6) or the heavens and earth of Peter's time that was near its end (v. 7), but ... to the "new heavens and new earth" in which dwells genuine righteousness—that righteousness of Jesus which is imputed to us by the grace of God in the new covenant times.

In reference to this righteousness, I find Romans 4:24 interesting: speaking of this perfect righteousness, Paul wrote, "It *is about to be* imputed to us who believe in God who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead [lit. out from among the dead ones]." (Cf. Isa. 60:21 and context.)

In this verse, as in at least 108 other times in the New Testament, the Greek term *mello* was used, a term which means "about to," and is so translated in every case in the Word Study Greek-English New Testament (aka McReynold's Interlinear). So...

True righteousness could or can only be possessed if/when man is in fellowship (in a face-to-face relationship) with God, something only God could work out and supply for us through His Son, the Christ. And once a person recalls that idea at this point in Second Peter 3 (v. 13), he should quickly remember what John prophetically witnessed in his Revelation 21–22 vision, viz. heaven and earth coming down out of heaven to men (not the other way around).

Why is this significant? Because one of things this *heavens and earth* is called is the tabernacle (Rev. 21:2, that in which God spiritually dwells with us [(cf. John 14:23, then John 14:1-3)]).

In Second Peter 3:13 and in Revelation 21:1-5, the original term for "new" isn't the one which means new in the sense of newly created in time (*neos*), but new in the sense of quality (*kainos*). There's one more very important thing concerning verse 13:

Relative to how that heavens and earth must be in reference to covenant-theology in this context, *the only place* in which a promise of a new heavens and a new earth can be found specifically is in Isaiah 65:17 & 66:22, both of which are in the context of God's prophecy and promise to establish a new (spiritual) covenant-world with a new (spiritual) people, something that we all agree was fulfilled in the first century.

Paul wrote in the AD 60s about how God was gathering together in one all things in heaven and earth in Christ (Eph. 1:10).

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Notes Thought of After I Finished the Above Study:

The mere fact that 2 Pet. 3 doesn't specify a particular location on the planet does NOT necessitate that Peter was referring to the entire planet any more than baptism in Acts 2:38 (et. al.) necessitates something besides water because water isn't specified. Besides...

Since Peter did specify that he had reference to something the prophets and Jesus spoke about, and since he did specify that this was in reference to a promise, then Isa. 65 & 66 (the only place where this promise can be found, and that in the prophets), then whatever Isaiah had reference to, Peter had reference to. Now...

To say that 2 Pet. 3 is not a reiteration or a building upon 1 Pet. 4 is to deny what Peter himself said in 2 Pet. 3:1-2. He said that BOTH epistles were reminders to them of what the prophets, the Lord, and the apostles had taught them. And it's interesting that he said that toward the end of 2 Pet. instead of toward the beginning; i.e., he said it as an intro. to the subject matter of chapter 3! So where in 1 Pet. did Peter touch on this unless it was at least in 1 Pet. 4???

Peter wrote of a new creation. The prophets spoke of a new creation. Both of Peter's letters are reminders of what the prophets prophesied. So what's the problem?

Double-fulfillment? Regardless, Isa. 65 & 66 are (primarily, if not completely) about what Peter applied Isaiah to--the new creation of his day. When else did God's people get a new name (Isa. 65:15)? Not after the Babylonian captivity or any other captivity. (By the way, "new name" idea fits Rev. 3 as well as Isa. 56 & 62.) Paul quoted from Isa. 65:1-2 in Rom. 10 to explain Israel's unbelief and his mission to the Gentiles. So how does this fit into the double-fulfillment scenario? Was there a Gentile mission after any OT captivity? Speaking of the Gentile mission in context, Isa. 65:25 repeats the promise of Isa. 11:6-10, and I know of no one who would say that Isa. 11 is somehow connected to an Assyrian or Babylonian captivity. Even if there's some double-fulfillment ideology in Isa. 65, how does that mitigate Peter's use of it?

[A note to add, esp. in relation to 2 Pet. 3:1-2, is how that 1 Pet. 1:1-21 essentially teach the same thing as 2 Pet. 3, esp. how in vv. 11-14 he encouraged holy living, etc. due to the Lord's coming, just as he did in 1 Pet. 1:13-21; i.e., the coming of 2 Pet. 3 is the same as the coming of 1 Pet. 1, which is the same coming as 1 Pet. 4 which nearly all agree is NOT an end-of-time coming.]