

What Does Peter Mean by the Passing Away of Heaven and Earth?

A Study of 2 Peter 3



By Gary DeMar and David Chilton

If there's one passage of Scripture that is repeatedly brought up as an indictment against anyone who objects to modern-day prophetic speculation, it is 2 Peter 3:3–18. If you dispute with those who argue that all the signs around us indicate that we are living in the "last days," then you are labeled a "scoffer" or a "mocker" ([2 Peter 3:3](#)). If this is true, then how should we describe those who argued that proposed signs during the two world wars were not signs of the end? They were right! Were they "scoffers"? The same could be asked about those who rejected the claim that events surrounding the French Revolution in the 18th century were sure signs of a prophetic end of all things. Every generation has had those who claimed the end was near and those who argued that the end was not near. Appealing to contemporary signs to make predictions of a near end has a long history as Francis Gumerlock demonstrates in his book *The Day and the Hour*. One would think that by now Christians would stop doing it. But they don't. They know revving people up over the "last days" sells books, lots of books.

The people Peter accuses of being "scoffers" were enemies of Jesus and the gospel. They scoffed at the claims made by Jesus that the temple would be destroyed and Jesus Himself would be the one to make it happen before their generation passed away. Since more than 30 years had passed since Jesus made this prediction, and the temple was still standing with no indication that it would be destroyed in less than a decade, they began to mock the words of Jesus. There's a big difference between a "scoffer" who rejects biblical revelation, in this case, Jesus' words, and someone who argues for an alternative position using sound biblical arguments. A person who disagrees with modern-day prophetic speculation is not a "scoffer," especially when there have been so many failed attempts at predicting the certainty of the end over the years. One could just as easily make the case that modern-day prophetic speculators (you know who they are) are "scoffers" and "mockers" because they twist and distort Jesus' clear words that He would return in judgment before that first-century generation passed away ([Matt. 24:34](#)). They try to argue that the Greek word *genea*, best translated as "generation," can be translated as "race" or "nation." When that doesn't work, some argue that "this generation" (what's present), should be translated "that generation" (what's future). When Jesus' clear words don't suit their prophetic paradigm, words are removed and new words added. "This generation" becomes, "the generation that sees these signs," as if Jesus was addressing a generation other than the one to whom He was speaking.

Jesus made it clear that His present audience (“you”) would “see all these things” ([Matt. 24:33](#)).

[Second Peter 3](#) links “scoffers” (v. 3 in KJV; “mockers” in NASV) with “the last days” (v. 3), “the promise of His coming” (v. 4), the “day of the Lord” (v. 10), and the passing away of the “heavens” and the “earth” (v. 10). The “last days,” in Peter’s use of the phrase, is not code for events leading up to either the “rapture” or the second coming. Gordon Clark comments:

“The last days,” which so many people think refers to what is still future at the end of this age, clearly means the time of Peter himself. [1 John 2:18](#) says it is, in his day, *the last hour*. [Acts 2:17](#) quoted Joel as predicting the last days as the lifetime of Peter. . . . Peter obviously means his own time.¹

There are other passages like [Hebrews 1:1–2](#) (notice the use of the plural near demonstrative “these”), [Hebrews 9:26](#) (notice the use of “now”), [1 Corinthians 10:11](#) (“upon whom the ends of the ages have come”), and [James 5:3](#) (the storing up of their treasure was in “the last days”). The question is: The last days of what? The last days of the old covenant with its stone temple, blood sacrifices, and earthly sinful priesthood.

Given that most Christians who make the “scoffer” charge are premillennial, that is, they believe that after a future seven-year period of great tribulation, a thousand year reign of Jesus on the earth will immediately follow. It’s only *after* this 1007-year period that the events described in [2 Peter 3](#) are said to be fulfilled. The “new heaven and a new earth” comes into existence after “the first heaven and the first earth passed away” ([Rev. 21:1](#)). These events follow the thousand year period of [Revelation 20](#). Given premillennial assumptions (which I believe are wrong), it is biblical to argue that the events described by Peter cannot be near. How can a person be a “scoffer” or a “mockers” of near events when the supposed dissolution of the cosmos is more than a millennium away? It doesn’t make any sense. The charge only makes sense if the described events are actually near, near to Peter’s generation. Those in Peter’s audience were looking “for these things” ([2 Peter 3:3](#)). How could they be looking for “these things” if they were at least 1007 years in their future? In fact, once Jesus sets foot on planet earth again, according to premillennialism, it will be quite easy to calculate when the events of [2 Peter 3](#) will take place—exactly a thousand years later. To silence a “scoffer,” all a person has to say is, “Look, God promised that these events won’t happen for a thousand years.” This means that for the premillennialist, the events revealed and described by Peter can’t have anything to do with our time. They are still far in the future. This means that this section of Scripture can’t be used to club those who reject the notion that we are living in the last days. Peter specifically says, once again following the premillennial paradigm, the last days are at this moment in time at least 1007 years in the future. So, if the “last days” refer to the period just before the dissolution of the cosmos that is at least 1007 years in our future, then we can’t be living in the “last days” and there are no signs that can be called in evidence to support the claim that a new physical heaven and earth are on the prophetic horizon.

The language of [2 Peter 3](#) is certainly apocalyptic and world ending, but is Peter describing the end of the space time universe as we generally conceive it or is he

describing the end of a different type of world? The only way to know is to study similar language found in the Old Testament. In [Micah 1:1](#), a prophetic word was revealed "to Micah of Moresheth in the days of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, which he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem." Micah's prophecy isn't about a time in the distant future. Rather, it's about "the rebellion of Jacob and for the sins of the house of Israel" because of "the high place of Judah" (1:5). The prophecy is about a time when idol worship dominated the nation (1:6-7). Notice how the imminent judgment is described:

Hear, O peoples, all of you; Listen, O earth and all it contains,

And let the Lord GOD be a witness against you,

The Lord from His holy temple.

For behold, the Lord is coming forth from His place.

He will come down and tread on the high places of the earth.

The mountains will melt under Him

And the valleys will be split,

Like wax before the fire,

Like water poured down a steep place.

God is calling the world as a witness against His covenant people who had the law against idols and graven images given to them in a personal way, in commandments written on stone ([Rev. 20](#)). God is described coming down that has the effect of melting the mountains, splitting the valleys, and flooding the land with the melted debris. This language is used elsewhere to describe similar local events ([Judges 5:4](#); [2 Sam. 22](#); [Ps. 18:7-10](#); [68:8](#); [Isa. 64:1-2](#)). It's the language of decreation. Did the mountains melt? No more than the "foundations of the world were laid bare" ([Psalm 18:15](#)) when David battled "all his enemies" (see the Prologue to the Psalm).

We find something similar in the book of Zephaniah. A local judgment that has national consequences for Judah and Jerusalem (1:4) is described in a way that depicts the end of the earth and every living thing on it:

"I will completely remove all things

From the face of the earth," declares the Lord.

"I will remove man and beast;

I will remove the birds of the sky

And the fish of the sea,

And the ruins along with the wicked;

And I will cut off man from the face of the earth," declares the Lord ([Zeph. 1:2-3](#)).

This local judgment is a reversal of creation. Later in the chapter we read, "Near is the great day of the Lord, near and coming very quickly. . . . And all the earth will

be devoured in the fire of His jealousy, for He will make a complete end, indeed a terrifying one, of all the inhabitants of the earth" (1:14, 18). Notice the use of "fire," "a complete end," including the end of the earth. Peter uses the same language. He writes from the vantage point of his day that "the end of all things is at hand" ([1 Peter. 4:7](#); cf. "in these last times": 1:20). Like in Zephaniah, this prophetic description can hardly be a declaration that the end of the physical universe was about to take place. The Bible's use of "at hand" (near) indicates that whatever this end is, it was near for Peter and his first-century audience. Jay E. Adams offers a helpful commentary on the passage, taking into account its historical and theological context:

[First] Peter was written before A.D. 70 (when the destruction of Jerusalem took place)... The persecution (and martyrdom) that these (largely) Jewish Christians had been experiencing up until now stemmed principally from unconverted Jews (indeed, his readers had found refuge among **Gentiles** as resident aliens)... [H]e refers to the severe trials that came upon Christians who had fled Palestine under attack from their unconverted fellow Jews. **The end of all things** (that had brought this exile about) was **near**.

In six or seven years from the time of writing, the overthrow of Jerusalem, with all its tragic stories, as foretold in the Book of Revelation and in the Olivet Discourse upon which that part is based, would take place. Titus and Vespasian would wipe out the old order once and for all. All those forces that led to the persecution and exile of these Christians in Asia Minor—the temple ceremonies (outdated by Christ's death), Pharisaism (with its distortion of O.T. law into a system of works-righteousness) and the political stance of Palestinian Jewry toward Rome—would be erased. The Roman armies would wipe Jewish opposition from the face of the land. Those who survived the holocaust of A.D. 70 would themselves be dispersed around the Mediterranean world. "So," says Peter, "hold on; the end is near." The full **end** of the O.T. order (already made defunct by the cross and the empty tomb) was about to occur.²

What "promise of His coming" ([2 Peter 3:4](#)) does Peter have in mind? Peter was present when Jesus told him and some of the other apostles, "there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom." ([Matt. 16:27-28](#)). This event had to be in the lifetime of Jesus' audience. In similar fashion, Jesus told His disciples that He would return in judgment before "this generation" passed away (24:34). Jesus always uses "this generation" to refer to His contemporaries ([Matt. 11:16](#); [12:41, 42](#); [23:36](#); [Mark 8:12](#); [13:30](#); [Luke 7:31](#); [11:29, 30, 31, 32, 50, 51](#); [17:25](#); [21:32](#)). He never uses "this generation" to refer to a future generation.

The *parousia* ("coming"/"presence") is a time of divine judgment ([Matt. 24:27](#)) upon the old covenant world. Peter was present when Jesus told him that He would return in judgment within a generation ([Mark 13:3, 30](#)). In the next verse, Jesus tells Peter and those who are with him that "heaven and earth will pass away" (13:31; [Matt. 24:35](#)). The burning up of "heaven and earth" is a reference to the end of the old covenant economy. As Jews who were familiar with the Old Testament, they would not have understood Jesus' words in any other way. Between [Matthew 16:27-28](#) and [24:34](#), Jesus tells His disciples that Jerusalem will be burned with fire (22:7). With that burning, everything associated with the old

economy went with it. Peter Leithart puts the chapter in context for us: “But wherever would the mockers have gotten the idea that Jesus was coming before the ‘fathers’ died? Why, lo and behold, Jesus said *exactly* that. The whole debate presupposes that Jesus promised to come soon. Without that premise, neither the mockers’ mockery nor Peter’s letter makes any sense. Peter and his opponents differ on the crucial question of the promise’s reliability, but they agree on its content.”³ The “fathers” ([2 Peter 3:4](#)) are the true early church fathers, those who died since Jesus promised that they would come before their generation passed away ([Matt. 24:34](#); see [24:9](#); [John 16:2](#); [Acts 7:54–60](#); [12:2](#)).

There’s much more that can be said about [2 Peter 3](#). The following section was written by the late David Chilton (1951–1997). David left behind a large body of work on eschatology: a verse-by-verse commentary on the book of Revelation ([The Days of Vengeance](#)), a work on prophetic interpretive principles ([Paradise Restored](#)), and an exposition of the Olivet Discourse ([The Great Tribulation](#)).

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According to St. Peter’s second epistle, Christ and the apostles had warned that apostasy would accelerate toward the end of the “last days” ([2 Pet. 3:2–4](#); cf. [Jude 17–19](#))—the forty-year period between Christ’s ascension and the destruction of the Old Covenant Temple in A.D. 70.⁴ He makes it clear that these latter-day “mockers” were *Covenant apostates*: familiar with Old Testament history and prophecy, they were Jews who had abandoned the Abrahamic Covenant by rejecting Christ. As Jesus had repeatedly warned (cf. [Matt. 12:38–45](#); [16:1–4](#); [23:29–39](#)), upon this evil and perverse generation would come the great “Day of Judgment” foretold in the prophets, a “destruction of ungodly men” like that suffered by the wicked of Noah’s day ([2 Pet. 3:5–7](#)). Throughout His ministry Jesus drew this analogy (see [Matt. 24:37–39](#) and [Luke 17:26–27](#)). Just as God destroyed the “world” of the antediluvian era by the Flood, so would the “world” of first-century Israel be destroyed by fire in the fall of Jerusalem.

St. Peter describes this judgment as the destruction of “the present heavens and earth” ([2 Pet. 3:7](#)), making way for “new heavens and a new earth” ([2 Pet. 3:10](#)). Because of what may be called the “collapsing-universe” terminology used in this passage, many have mistakenly assumed that St. Peter is speaking of the final end of the physical heaven and earth, rather than the dissolution of the Old Covenant world order. The great seventeenth-century Puritan theologian John Owen answered this view by referring to the Bible’s very characteristic metaphorical usage of the terms *heavens and earth*, as in Isaiah’s description of the Mosaic Covenant:

For I am the LORD your God, who stirs up the sea and its waves roar (the LORD of hosts is His name). I have put My words in your mouth and have covered you with the shadow of My hand, to establish the heavens, to found the earth, and to say to Zion, “You are My people” ([Isa. 51:15–16](#)).

Owen writes:

The time when the work here mentioned, of planting the heavens, and laying the foundation of the earth, was performed by God, was when he “divided the sea” ([\[Isa. 51\]](#) v.15), and gave the law (v. 16), and said to Zion, “Thou art my people”—

that is, when he took the children of Israel out of Egypt, and formed them in the wilderness into a congregation of believers and a civil state. Then he planted the heavens, and laid the foundation of the earth—made the new world; that is, brought forth order, and government, and beauty, from the confusion wherein before they were. This is the planting of the heavens, and laying the foundation of the earth in the world. And hence it is that when mention is made of the destruction of a state and its government, it is in that language that seems to set forth the end of the world. So [Isaiah 34](#) which is the destruction of the state of Edom. The like is also affirmed of the Roman Empire ([Rev. 6:14](#)) which the Jews constantly affirm to be intended by Edom in the prophets. And in our Saviour Christ's prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem, [Matthew 24](#), he sets it out by expressions of the same importance. It is evident then, that, in the prophetic idiom and manner of speech, by "heavens" and "earth," the civil and religious state and combination of men in the world, and the men of them, are often understood. So were the heavens and earth that world which was then destroyed by the flood.⁵

Another Old Testament text, among many that could be mentioned, is [Jeremiah 4:23-31](#), which speaks of the imminent fall of Jerusalem (587 B.C.) in similar language of *decreation*:

I looked on the earth, and behold, it was formless and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light. . . . For thus says the LORD, the whole land shall be a desolation [referring to the curse of [Lev. 26:31-33](#); see its fulfillment in [Matt. 24:15!](#)], yet I will not execute a complete destruction. For this the earth shall mourn, and the heavens above be dark. . . .

From the very beginning, God's covenant with Israel had been expressed in terms of a *new creation*: Moses described Israel's salvation in the wilderness in terms of the Spirit of God hovering over a waste, just as in the original creation of heaven and earth ([Deut. 32:10-11](#); cf. [Gen. 1:2](#)).⁶ In the Exodus, as at the original creation, God divided light and darkness ([Ex. 14:20](#)), divided the waters from the waters to bring forth the dry land (14:21-22), and planted His people in His holy mountain (15:17). God's miraculous formation of Israel was thus an image of Creation, a redemptive recapitulation of the making of heaven and earth. The Old Covenant order, in which the entire world was organized around the central sanctuary of the Jerusalem Temple, could quite appropriately be described, before its final dissolution, as "the present heavens and earth."

The 19th-century expositor John Brown wrote: "A person at all familiar with the phraseology of the Old Testament scriptures knows that the dissolution of the Mosaic economy, and the establishment of the Christian, is often spoken of as the removing of the old earth and heavens, and the creation of a new earth and heavens. . . . The period of the close of the one dispensation, and the commencement of the other, is spoken of as 'the last days' and 'the end of the world'; and is described as such a shaking of the earth and heavens, as should lead to the removal of the things which were shaken ([Hag. 2:6](#); [Heb. 12:26-27](#))."⁷

Therefore, says Owen, "On this foundation I affirm that the heavens and earth here intended in this prophecy of Peter, the coming of the Lord, the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men, mentioned in the destruction of that heaven and earth, do all of them relate, not to the last and final judgment of the world, but to that

utter desolation and destruction that was to be made of the Judaical church and state”—i.e., the Fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.⁸

This interpretation is confirmed by St. Peter’s further information: In this imminent “Day of the Lord” which was about to come upon the first-century world “like a thief” (cf. [Matt. 24:42–43](#); [1 Thess. 5:2](#); [Rev. 3:3](#)), “the elements will be destroyed with intense heat” ([2 Peter 3:10](#); cf. v. [12](#)). What are these *elements*? So-called “literalists” lightly and carelessly assume that the apostle is speaking about physics, using the term to mean atoms (or perhaps subatomic particles), the actual physical components of the universe. What these “literalists” fail to recognize is that although the word *elements* (*stoicheia*) is used several times in the New Testament, it is *never* used in connection with the physical universe! (In this respect, the very misleading comments of the *New Geneva Study Bible* on this passage violate its own interpretive dictum that “Scripture interprets Scripture.” For possible meanings of this term, it cites pagan Greek philosophers and astrologers—but never the Bible’s own use of the term!) Kittel’s *Theological Dictionary of New Testament Words* observes that while in pagan literature the word is used in a number of different ways (referring to the “four elements” of the physical world, or to the “notes” on a musical scale, or to the “principles” of geometry or logic), the New Testament writers use the term “in a new way, describing the *stoicheia* as weak and beggarly. In a transferred sense, the *stoicheia* are the things on which pre-Christian existence rests, especially in pre-Christian religion. These things are impotent; they bring bondage instead of freedom.”⁹ Throughout the New Testament, the word “elements” (*stoicheia*) is *always* used in connection with the Old Covenant order. St. Paul used the term in his stinging rebuke to the Galatian Christians who were tempted to forsake the freedom of the New Covenant for an Old Covenant-style legalism. Describing Old Covenant rituals and ceremonies, he says “we were in bondage under the *elements* (*stoicheia*) of this world. . . . How is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly *elements* (*stoicheia*), to which you desire again to be in bondage? You observe days and months and seasons and years. . . .” ([Gal. 4:3, 9–10](#)). He warns the Colossians: “Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the basic principles (*stoicheia*) of the world, and not according to Christ. . . . Therefore, if you died with Christ to the basic *principles* (*stoicheia*) of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations—‘Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle’” ([Col. 2:8, 20–21](#)). The writer to the Hebrews chided them: “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the *elements* (*stoicheia*) of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food” ([Heb. 5:12](#)). In context, the writer to the Hebrews is clearly speaking of Old Covenant [elements that the book of Hebrews argues have passed away]—particularly since he connects it with the term *oracles of God*, an expression used elsewhere in the New Testament for the provisional, Old Covenant revelation (see [Acts 7:38](#); [Rom. 3:2](#)). These citations from Galatians, Colossians, and Hebrews comprise *all* the other occurrences in the New Testament of that word “elements” (*stoicheia*). Not one refers to the “elements” of the physical world or universe; all are speaking of the “elements” of the Old Covenant system, which, as the apostles wrote just before the approaching destruction of the Old Covenant Temple in A. D. 70, was “becoming obsolete and growing old” and “ready to vanish away” ([Heb. 8:13](#)). And St. Peter uses the same term in exactly the same way. Throughout the

Greek New Testament, the word “elements” (*stoicheia*) always means [covenantal elements], not [physical elements]; the foundational “elements” of a religious system that was doomed to pass away in a fiery judgment [[Matt. 22:7](#)].

In fact, St. Peter was quite specific about the fact that he was not referring to an event thousands of years in their future, but to something that was *already* taking place:

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 (stoicheia) will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. Therefore, since all these things are being 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 (stoicheia) are being melted with fervent heat? ([2 Pet. 3:10-12](#))

Contrary to the misleading renderings of translators blinded by their presuppositions, St. Peter insists that the dissolution of “the present heaven and earth”—the Old Covenant system with its obligatory rituals and bloody sacrifices—was already beginning to occur: the “universe” of the Old Covenant was coming apart, never to be revived:

When did prophet and vision cease from Israel? Was it not when Christ came, the Holy one of holies? It is, in fact, a sign and notable proof of the coming of the Word that Jerusalem no longer stands, neither is prophet raised up, nor vision revealed among them. And it is natural that it should be so, for when He that was signified had come, what need was there any longer of any to signify Him? And when the Truth had come, what further need was there of the shadow? . . . And the kingdom of Jerusalem ceased at the same time, kings were to be anointed among them only until the Holy of holies had been anointed.¹⁰

St. Peter’s message, John Owen argues, is that “the heavens and earth that God himself planted—the sun, moon, and stars of the judaical polity and church—the whole old world of worship and worshippers, that stand out in their obstinacy against the Lord Christ—shall be sensibly dissolved and destroyed.”¹¹

As we have seen, Puritan theologian John Owen, the author of the seven-volume commentary on the book of Hebrews, argued that the teaching of [2 Peter 3](#) about the coming “Day of the Lord” was not about the end of the physical universe, but of the Old Covenant and the nation of Israel. He points out that the phrase “heavens and earth” is often used in the Old Testament as a symbolic expression for God’s covenantal creation, Israel (see [Isa. 51:15-20](#); [Jer. 4:23-31](#)). Owen writes: “the heavens and earth that God himself planted—the sun, moon, and stars of the judaical polity and church—the whole old world of worship and worshippers, that stand out in their obstinacy against the Lord Christ—shall be sensibly dissolved and destroyed.”¹²

Owen offers two further reasons (“of many that might be insisted on from the text,” he says) for adopting the A.D. 70 fulfillment of [2 Peter 3](#). First, he observes, “whatever is here mentioned was to have its particular influence on the men of that generation.”¹³ That is a crucial point, which must be clearly recognized in any honest assessment of the apostle’s meaning. St. Peter is especially concerned that

his first-century readers remember the apostolic warnings about “the last days” (vv. 2–3; cf. [1 Tim. 4:1–6](#); [2 Tim. 3:1–9](#)). During these times, the Jewish scoffers of his day, clearly familiar with the Biblical prophecies of judgment, were refusing to heed those warnings (vv. 3–5). He exhorts his readers to live holy lives in the light of this imminent judgment (vv. 11, 14); and it is *these* early Christians who are repeatedly mentioned as actively “looking for and hastening” the judgment (vv. 12, 13, 14). It is precisely the *nearness* of the approaching conflagration that St. Peter cites as a motive to diligence in godly living!

An obvious objection to such an exposition is to refer to what is probably the most well-known, most-misunderstood text in St. Peter’s brief epistle: “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” ([2 Pet. 3:8](#)). This means, it is said, that “God’s arithmetic is different from ours,” so that when Scripture uses terms like “near” and “shortly” (e.g., [Rev. 1:1, 3](#)) or “at hand” (e.g., [James 5:5–7](#)), it doesn’t intend to give the impression of soon-approaching events, but of events possibly thousands of years in the future! Milton Terry refuted this seemingly plausible but spurious theory:

The language is a poetical citation from [Psalm 90:4](#), and is adduced to show that the lapse of time does not invalidate the promises of God. . . . But this is very different from saying that when the everlasting God promises something *shortly*, and declares that it is *close at hand*, He may mean that it is a thousand years in the future. Whatever He has promised indefinitely He may take a thousand years or more to fulfill; but what He affirms to be at the door let no man declare to be far away.¹⁴

J. Stuart Russell wrote with biting disdain:

Few passages have suffered more from misconstruction than this, which has been made to speak a language inconsistent with its obvious intention, and even incompatible with a strict regard to veracity.

There is probably an allusion here to the words of the Psalmist, in which he contrasts the brevity of human life with the eternity of the divine existence. . . . But surely it would be the height of absurdity to regard this sublime poetic image as a calculus for the divine measurement of time, or as giving us a warrant for wholly disregarding definitions of time in the predictions and promises of God.

Yet it is not unusual to quote these words as an argument or excuse for the total disregard for the element of time in the prophetic writings. Even in cases where a certain time is specified in the prediction, or where such limitations as ‘*shortly*,’ or ‘*speedily*,’ or ‘*at hand*’ are expressed, the passage before us is appealed to in justification of an arbitrary treatment of such notes of time, so that *soon* may mean *late*, and *near* may mean *distant*, and *short* may mean *long*, and vice versa. . . .

It is surely unnecessary to repudiate in the strongest manner such a non-natural method of interpreting the language of Scripture. It is worse than ungrammatical and unreasonable, it is immoral. It is to suggest that God has two weights and measures in His dealings with men, and that in His mode of reckoning there is an

ambiguity and variableness which will make it impossible to tell 'What manner of time the Spirit of Christ in the prophets may signify'[cf. [1 Pet. 1:11](#)]...

The Scriptures themselves, however, give no countenance to such a method of interpretation. Faithfulness is one of the attributes most frequently ascribed to the 'covenant-keeping God,' and the divine *faithfulness* is that which the apostle in this very passage affirms. . . . The apostle does not say that when the Lord promises a thing for *today* He may not fulfill His promise for *a thousand years: that would be slackness; that would be a breach of promise*. He does not say that because God is infinite and everlasting, therefore He reckons with a different arithmetic from ours, or speaks to us in a double sense, or uses two different weights and measures in His dealings with mankind. The very reverse is the truth. . . .

It is evident that the object of the apostle in this passage is to give his readers the strongest assurance that the impending catastrophe of the last days were on the very eve of fulfillment. The veracity and faithfulness of God were the guarantees of the punctual performance of the promise. To have intimated that time was a variable quantity in the promise of God would have been to stultify and neutralize his own teaching, which was that 'the Lord is not slack concerning His promise.'¹⁵

Continuing his analysis, John Owen cites [2 Peter 3:13](#): "But *according to His promise* we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells." Owen asks: "What is that promise? Where may we find it?" Good question. Do you know the answer? Where in the Old Testament does God promise a New Heaven and Earth? Incidentally, this raises a wider, fascinating issue: When the New Testament quotes or cites an Old Testament text, it's often a good idea to hunt down the original citation, see what it meant in its original context, and then see the "spin" the New Testament writer places on it. (For example, Isaiah's prophecy of a gigantic highway-construction project [[Isa. 40:3-5](#)] is not interpreted literally in the New Testament, but metaphorically, of the preaching ministry of John the Baptist [[Luke 3:4-6](#)]. And Isaiah's prophecy of a "golden age" when the wolf dwells peaceably with the lamb [[Isa. 11:1-10](#)] is condensed and cited by St. Paul as a present fulfillment, in the New Covenant age [[Rom. 15:12](#)])! But John Owen, this Puritan scholar, knows his Bible better than most of the rest of us, and he tells us exactly where the Old Testament foretells a "new heaven and earth":

What is that promise? Where may we find it? Why, we have it in the very words and letter, [Isaiah 65:17](#). Now, when shall this be that God will create these "new heavens and new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness"? Saith Peter, It shall be after the coming of the Lord, after that judgment and destruction of ungodly men, who obey not the gospel, that I foretell. But now it is evident, from this place of Isaiah, with chapter 66:21-22, that this is a prophecy of gospel times only; and that the planting of these new heavens is nothing but the creation of gospel ordinances, to endure forever. The same thing is so expressed in [Hebrews 12:26-28](#).¹⁶

Owen is right on target, asking the question that so many expositors fail to ask: *Where* had God promised to bring "new heavens and a new earth"? The answer, as Owen correctly states, is only in [Isaiah 65](#) and [66](#)—passages which clearly prophesy the period of the Gospel, brought in by the work of Christ. According to Isaiah himself, this "New Creation" cannot possibly be the eternal

state, since it contains birth and death, building and planting (65:20–23). The “new heavens and earth” promised to the Church comprise the age of the New Covenant—the Gospel’s triumph, when all mankind will come to bow down before the Lord (66:22–23). John Bray writes: “This passage is a grand description of the gospel age after Christ came in judgment in 70 A.D. and took away the old heavens and the old earth. We now have the new heavens and the new earth of the gospel age.”¹⁷ St. Peter’s encouragement to the Church of his day was to be patient, to wait for God’s judgment to destroy those who were persecuting the faith and impeding its progress. “The end of all things is at hand,” he had written earlier ([1 Pet. 4:7](#)). John Brown commented:

“The end of all things” here is the entire end of the Jewish economy in the destruction of the temple and city of Jerusalem, and the dispersal of the holy people. That was at hand; for this epistle seems to have been written a very short while before these events took place. . . . It is quite plain that in our Lord’s predictions, the expressions “the end” and probably “the end of the world” are used in reference to the entire dissolution of the Jewish economy (cf. [Matt. 24:3, 6, 14, 34](#); [Rom. 13:11–12](#); [James 5:8–9](#)).¹⁸

Once the Lord came to destroy the scaffolding of the Old Covenant structure, the New Covenant Temple would be left in its place, and the victorious march of the Church would be unstoppable. According to God’s predestined design, the world will be converted; the earth’s treasures will be brought into the City of God, as the Paradise Mandate ([Gen. 1:27–28](#); [Matt. 28:18–20](#)) is consummated ([Rev. 21:1–27](#)).

This is why the apostles constantly affirmed that the age of consummation had already been implemented by the resurrection and ascension of Christ, who poured out the Holy Spirit. St. Paul, writing of the redeemed individual, says that “if any man is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” ([2 Cor. 5:17](#)). St. John, recording his vision of the redeemed culture, says the same thing: “And I saw a new heaven and a new earth. . . . The first things have passed away. . . . Behold, I am making all things new” ([Rev. 21:1–5](#)). The writer to the Hebrews comforts his first-century readers with the assurance that they have already arrived at “the City of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem” ([Heb. 12:22](#); cf. [Gal. 26–28](#); [Rev. 21](#)). Even as the old “heaven and earth” were being shaken to rubble, the early Christians were “receiving a Kingdom which cannot be shaken,” the eternal Kingdom of God brought in by His Son ([Heb. 12:26–28](#)). Milton Terry has written:

The language of [2 Pet. 3:10–12](#) is taken mainly from [Isa. 34:4](#), and is limited to the parousia, like the language of [Matt. 24:29](#). Then the Lord made “not only the land but also the heaven” to tremble ([Heb. 12:26](#)), and removed the things that were shaken in order to establish a kingdom which cannot be moved.¹⁹


It is crucial to note that the apostle continually points his readers’ attention, not to events that were to take place thousands of years in the future, but to events that were already beginning to take place. Otherwise, his closing words make no sense at all: “Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless. . . . You, therefore, beloved, since you know these things beforehand, beware lest you fall from your own

steadfastness. . ." ([2 Pet. 3:14-17](#)). If these things refer to a 21st-century thermonuclear holocaust, why would the inspired apostle direct such a serious exhortation against "falling from steadfastness" to thousands of readers who would never live to see the things he foretold? A cardinal rule of Biblical interpretation is that Scripture must interpret Scripture; and, particularly, that the New Testament is God's own inspired commentary on the meaning of the Old Testament.

Once the old had been swept away, St. Peter declared, the Age of Christ would be fully established, an era "in which righteousness dwells" ([2 Pet. 3:13](#)). The distinguishing characteristic of the new era, in stark contrast to what preceded it, would be righteousness—*increasing* righteousness, as the Gospel would be set free in its mission to the nations. There have been many battles throughout Church history, of course, and many battles lie ahead. But these must not blind us to the very real progress that the Gospel has made and continues to make in the world. The New World Order of the Lord Jesus Christ has arrived; and, according to God's promise, the saving knowledge of Him will fill the earth, as the waters cover the sea ([Isa. 11:9](#)).

1. Gordon H. Clark, *II Peter: A Short Commentary* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1975), 64.
2. Jay E. Adams, *Trust and Obey: A Practical Commentary on First Peter* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1978), 129–130. Adam Clarke (1762–1832) writes the following in his commentary on [1 Peter 4:7](#): "Peter says, *The end of all things is at hand*; and this he spoke when God had determined to destroy the Jewish people and their polity by one of the most signal judgments that ever fell upon any nation or people. In a very few years after St. Peter wrote this epistle, even taking it at the lowest computation, viz., A. D. 60 or 61, Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans. To this destruction, which was literally then at hand, the apostle alludes when he says, *The end of all things is at hand*; the end of the temple, the end of the Levitical priesthood, the end of the whole Jewish economy, was then at hand." (*Clarke's Commentary on The New Testament of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*, 2 vols. [New York: Carlton & Porter, 1810], 2:864).
3. Peter J. Leithart, [The Promise of His Appearing](#): *An Exposition of Second Peter* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2004), 83.
4. For a defense of this position, see David Chilton, [Paradise Restored: A Biblical Theology of Dominion](#), 2nd ed. (Horn Lake, MS: TX: Dominion Press, [1985] 2007), 112–122. The fact is that every time Scripture uses the term "last days" (and similar expressions) it means, not the end of the physical universe, but the period from A.D. 30 to A.D. 70—the period during which the Apostles were preaching and writing, the "last days" of Old Covenant Israel before it was forever destroyed in the destruction of the Temple (and consequently the annihilation of the Old Covenant sacrificial system) described by Jesus in the Olivet Discourse ([Matt. 24:1-34](#); [Acts 2:16-21](#); [1 Tim. 4:1-3](#); [2 Tim. 3:1-9](#); [Hebrews 1:1-2](#); [8:13](#); [9:26](#); [James 5:7-9](#); [1 Peter 1:20](#); [4:7](#); [1 John 2:18](#); [Jude 17-19](#)). See also John Bray's excellent booklet *Are We Living in the Last Days?* (Lakeland, FL: John L. Bray Ministry) and Gary DeMar, [Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church](#), 4th ed. (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision 1999).
5. John Owen, "Providential Changes: An Argument for Universal Holiness," in William H. Goold, ed., *The Works of John Owen*, 16 vols. (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965–68), 9:134.

6. See Chilton, *Paradise Restored*, 59.
7. John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, [1852] 1990), 1:171f.
8. Owen, "Providential Changes: An Argument for Universal Holiness," 9:134.
9. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, one-volume edition edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 1088.
10. St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word of God* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), [40] 61f.
11. Owen, "Providential Changes: An Argument for Universal Holiness," 9:135.
12. Owen, "Providential Changes: An Argument for Universal Holiness," 9:135.
13. Owen, "Providential Changes: An Argument for Universal Holiness," 9:134.
14. Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 406.
15. J. Stuart Russell, *The Parousia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, [1887] 1983), 321ff. Owen, "Providential Changes: An Argument for Universal Holiness," 134–35.
16. Owen, "Providential Changes: An Argument for Universal Holiness," 9:134f.
17. John L. Bray, *Heaven and Earth Shall Pass Away* (Lakeland, FL: John L. Bray Ministry), 26.
18. Quoted in Roderick Campbell, *Israel and the New Covenant* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed, [1954] 2010), 107.
19. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 489.

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