

## IS IT FOR REAL?

By

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When Peter, in his second letter, wrote about the heavens passing away and the earth being burned up, did he mean it will happen literally, or was he using figures of speech, as is done in most prophetic statements in scripture? (2 Pet. 3:10-12) How can we tell whether the terms are to be taken figuratively or literally?

In the Old Testament there are several prophecies concerning God's judgment on various nations in which the prophets employed symbols of cosmic disturbance, such as stars falling and the sun being darkened. These prophecies were fulfilled, but the stars remained in the heavens and the sun still shines. We know by this that it was the powers of the nations that were represented by the sun, moon and stars. When the same expression is used in the New Testament, it undoubtedly means the same thing, not that the heavenly bodies, millions of which are larger than the earth, are to "fall," but that rulers and governments are to be displaced.

Many now interpret Peter's description of the destruction of the earth in the same way, that it is not to be taken literally, but that it was fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. I believe that a careful reading will show that Peter was not writing figuratively or symbolically, but was writing of a literal destruction in the Day of Judgment.

As in any textual study, we must examine the context, which begins with verse 1 and continues through verse 13: Peter began by acknowledging that there are those who do not believe that Christ will come in final judgment, who says, "Where is the promise of his coming? For, from the day that the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation" (V.4). The same thing is said today by the evolutionists, who insist that the record can be traced uniformly to the beginning of the human race, thus denying the flood.

Then Peter stated the facts concerning a literal destruction which took place in the flood:

"For this they willfully forget that there were heavens from of old, and an earth compacted out of water and amidst water, by the word of God; by which means the world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished" (Vss. 5, 6).

Without question this refers to the destruction wrought by the flood in the time of Noah, and the result, according to Peter, was that the "world that then was...perished." Peter continued:

"But the heavens that now are, and the earth, by the same word (God's word by which destruction came about) have been stored up for fire, being reserved against the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men." (V.7)

All would agree that Peter is saying that the earth that was once destroyed by a flood is the present earth which is “stored with fire” (Greek) for the Day of Judgment. The flood itself is a type of judgment. (1 Pet. 2:5) Before giving a fuller explanation of this Day of Judgment and destruction, Peter explained why the delay:

“But forget not this one thing, beloved, that one day is with the Lord 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 you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance”(Vs. 9).

Then the destruction mentioned in verse 7 is given in more detail in verses 10 through 12:

“But the day of the Lord will come as a thief: in which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall be dissolved with fervent heat, and the earth and the works that are therein shall be burned up” (V.10).

Note that in verse 7 the earth is “stored with fire” (Greek) for the purpose of this final destruction. It is well known that beneath the earth’s crust there is, indeed, a vast store of fire which in many places breaks forth in volcanoes. Fire is not a figure of speech, but literal fire that is able to destroy all in its path.

Verses 10 and 12 cannot be figurative unless verses 5 through 7 are also figurative, for Peter is writing about the same heavens, the same earth, and the same kind of fire. But we know that there was a literal flood in the days of Noah, and we know that today the earth is stored with literal fire. Therefore the destruction of the earth described in verses 10 -12 must also be understood in a literal sense. As water once brought judgment, finally fire shall do so in a sudden conflagration of the universe. The totality of the destruction is emphasized in verses 11 and 12:

“Seeing that these things are thus all to be dissolved, what manner of person ought you to be in all holy living and godliness, looking for and earnestly desiring the coming of the day of God, by reason of which the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat?”

Peter “wrote in plain literal terms. What he describes is yet to come. When Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 A.D. the elements were not dissolved and the earth and the works therein were not burned up. What Peter warned of here is the Lord’s coming in final judgment.

In this letter from Peter there is another fact of great significance: the fact that literal fire, fire that consumes the material which it burns, is involved in the judgment of the ungodly. Theories of the final punishment of the lost come in various forms, designed to evade the plain statements of scripture that they are to be destroyed. One notion is that the fire of Gehenna (usually rendered as hell) will cause terrible pain and agony but will not burn up anyone. The condemned sinner will go right on living forever in the midst of

this fire. But this is not the kind of fire Peter wrote about, nor is it the kind of fire used in the Old Testament sacrifices for atonement, nor the kind of fire that burned up the trash in the city dump just outside the walls of Jerusalem, from which Jesus got his illustration of Gehenna. All these were literal fires that consumed whatever was cast into them.

Another evasive theory is the notion that fire is used only as a symbol to indicate that the unredeemed will live in agonizing and insufferable pain, for eternity. Real fire would very shortly dissolve the person, as Peter indicated, so a symbolic fire is substituted. That way God is able to make a person suffer pain as if on fire, and to keep this torture going perpetually, forever. What a horrible concept of God this is! What an insult to His character, as well as denial of His plain teaching that the punishment for sin is death, not unending torture.

But Peter's simple description eliminates any such notion. The fire that is stored in the earth is the kind that consumes, and it is there for the purpose of the ungodly. It is the kind of fire that can dissolve the elements. In fact, this is what happens in nuclear fission, as seen in the detonation of an atom bomb. Surely, "The soul that sins, it shall die" (Ezek. 18:4)

Peter's emphasis is not on the terror and pathos of the lost in the day of judgment, but on the spiritual and moral effects the expectation of that day should have on the lives of all who "look for and earnestly desire" this Day of God. With the elimination of all sin there will be a new order of the world, embodying righteousness. Since the day of Adam the universe has been spoiled by the effects of sin, yet "in hope that the creation itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and travails in pain together until now. And not only so, but ourselves also, who have the first fruits of the spirit, groan within ourselves waiting for our adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body" (Rom. 8:21, 23).

This new and righteous creation calls for a holy people living in godliness. The apostle John put it this way: "Everyone who has this hope on him (Christ) purifies himself as he is pure" (1 John 3:3). There is no suggestion here that one may "earn" a place in the new creation by his own good works, for, like Paul, we hope to be found in him with "the righteousness which is from God by faith" (Phil. 3:9). Still, if a creation void of sin and filled with righteousness is what we truly desire and hope for, then that's the kind of life we will seek to live now.

Fire is the purifier, the cleansing agent, to be used in the day that the heavens and the earth will be purified, renewed and made perfect as a dwelling place for the people that God has cleansed through the blood of Jesus His Son. Prophets used many figures of speech to describe future events, but the fire that Peter wrote about is the real stuff, as real as rain from heaven and as literal as the water that floated the Ark.

**"Therefore, beloved, seeing that you look for these things, be eager that you may be found in peace, without spot, and blameless in his sight" (Vs. 14).**

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