

The New Covenant - God's New Heaven & New Earth

In this study, we will seek to understand what Jesus meant when he said that heaven and earth would pass away within the lifetime of his own generation. Below is that passage:

Mathew 24:34-35

Truly I say to you, *this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away.* (also see Mark 13:31 and Luke 21:33)

Did Jesus mean that the physical cosmos was going to vanish away within a generation from the time he spoke these words? If he did, then he was sorely mistaken. Furthermore, if the destruction of the literal heaven and the earth was what Jesus actually taught, then scripture clearly contradicts itself, for scripture plainly and consistently teaches that the earth remains forever. Notice the following passages.

Psalm 78:69

And He built His sanctuary like the heights, *like the earth which He has founded forever.*

Psalm 104:5

He established the earth upon its foundations, *so that it will not totter forever and ever.*

Ecclesiastics 1:4

A generation goes and a generation comes, *but the earth remains forever.*

Not only this, but according to both the prophets and the psalms, the New Covenant in fulfillment of the promises made to David is as eternal as the sun, moon, and the stars; the God-fixed order of the heavens. In other words, if the light of the sun by day and the light of the moon by night could ever fail, then the promises of God could also fail, and the validity and power of the New Covenant would cease to exist. Consider the following passages.

Jeremiah 31:31,35-36

Behold, days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.... Thus says the Lord, who gives *the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night*, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar; The Lord of hosts is His name: *If this fixed order departs from before Me," declares the Lord, "then the offspring of Israel also will cease from being a nation before Me forever."*

Jeremiah 33:14-17,20-21

Behold, days are coming,' declares the Lord, when I will fulfill the good word which I have spoken concerning the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch of David to spring forth; and He shall execute justice and righteousness on the earth. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will dwell in safety; and this is the name by which she will be called: the Lord is our righteousness. For thus says the Lord, David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel.... Thus says the Lord, *If you can break My covenant for the day and My covenant for the night,*

so that day and night will not be at their appointed time, then My covenant may also be broken with David My servant so that he will not have a son to reign on his throne..."

Psalm 89:26-29,34-37

He will cry to Me, 'You are my Father, My God, and the rock of my salvation.' I also shall make him My firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth. My lovingkindness I will keep for him forever, and My covenant shall be confirmed to him. So, I will establish his descendants forever and his throne as the days of heaven.... My covenant I will not violate, nor will I alter the utterance of My lips. Once I have sworn by My holiness; I will not lie to David. *His descendants shall endure forever and his throne as the sun before me. It shall be established forever like the moon, and the witness in the sky is faithful.* Selah.

So, if the literal/physical cosmos (heaven and earth) will never pass away, then what did Jesus mean when he said that heaven and earth would pass away within his own generation? If Jesus' prophecy was true, which of course it was, what "heaven and earth" passed away within the lifetime of his contemporary generation? To answer these questions, we must understand how ancient Hebrews understood the "heavens and earth" beyond the material creation. The following quote is from the first century Jewish historian, Josephus:

*"...When Moses distinguished the tabernacle into **three parts**, and allowed **two of them** to the priests, as a place accessible and common, he denoted **the land and the seas**, these being of general access to all; but he set apart **the third** division for God, because **heaven** is inaccessible to men..."*

What we have here is Josephus, a first century Jew of priestly lineage, describing the tabernacle as "heaven and earth". Notice that he says, "Moses distinguished the tabernacle into *three parts*". These three parts were the outer court, the holy place, and the most holy place. The "two of them" (the outer court and the holy place), were denoted as "the land and the seas". This corresponds to *the earth*. The "third" (the most holy place) was set apart as God's division and was called "*heaven*". Thus, the tabernacle of Moses' day and by extension the temple of Jesus' day was understood to be God's "heaven and earth", spiritually and covenantally speaking. We suggest that this was the "heaven and earth" which Jesus said would pass away within the lifetime of his contemporary generation (Matthew 24:34-35). Given the fact that these words of Jesus were spoken within the context of the destruction of the temple (Matthew 23:29-38, 24:2-3,24-35), this interpretation of "heaven and earth" seems highly probable.

But to build upon these ideas we must turn back to the song of Moses, where Moses describes the nation of Israel as God's "heaven and earth", his "covenant-creation". As a matter of fact, Moses borrows creation language and imagery from Genesis 1 when describing the forming and nurturing of the nation of Israel? As God formed the literal heavens and earth "in the beginning", so God formed a covenant-heaven-and-earth in the beginning of the age of Torah.

(For further study, compare this imagery of a mother bird nurturing it's young in Deuteronomy 32 with the same imagery found in Mathew 23:27, specifically in the "last-days-judgment" contexts of both passages. This powerfully suggests that what Jesus predicted in Matthew 24:34-35 was the passing away of the ethnic nation of Israel, the heaven and earth of Deuteronomy 32, within the lifetime of his generation.)

Deuteronomy 31:30, 32:1,9-11

Then Moses spoke *in the hearing of all the assembly of Israel* the words of this song, until they were complete.... *Give ear, O heavens*, and let me speak; and *let the earth hear the words of my mouth*.... For the Lord's portion is His people; Jacob is the allotment of His inheritance. He found him in a desert land, and in the howling waste (*"formless"* - Genesis 1:2) of a wilderness; He encircled him, He cared for him, He guarded him as the pupil of His eye. Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that *hovers* (*"hovered"* - Genesis 1:2) over its young, He spread His wings and caught them, He carried them on His pinions.

The prophet Isaiah likewise understood that the redemption and covenant-establishing of the Old Covenant people of God was the establishing of the "heavens" and the founding of the "earth". In other words, the forming of the covenant nation of Israel was the forming of God's covenant-world, his light and revelation to the nations.

(For further study, compare this passage in Isaiah with Hebrews 12:18-28. At the time that the epistle to the Hebrews was written, the Lord was creating a new heaven and a new earth through a "second-exodus" and the removal of the covenant-world created at Sinai.)

Isaiah 51:9-11,16

Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord; awake as in the days of old, the generations of long ago. Was it not You who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon? Was it not You who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep; who made the depths of the sea a pathway for the redeemed to cross over? *So the ransomed of the Lord will return and come with joyful shouting to Zion, and everlasting joy will be on their heads.* They will obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.... *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.'*

In anticipation of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by the Babylonians in B.C. 586, Jeremiah the prophet described the land and the cities of Judah and Jerusalem as *the heavens and the earth*. Jeremiah likened this destruction of the covenant nation of Israel as a return to the earth as it was in the beginning, formless and void. This judgment of Israel was thus the dissolution of God's good creation, covenantally speaking.

Jeremiah 4:3,20,23-27

For thus says the Lord *to the men of Judah and to Jerusalem*.... Disaster on disaster is proclaimed, for the whole land is devastated; suddenly my tents are devastated, My curtains in an instant.... *I looked on the earth, and behold, it was formless and void; ("formless and void" - Genesis 1:2) and to the heavens, and they had no light.* I looked on the mountains, and behold, they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro. I looked, and behold, there was no man, and all the birds of the heavens had fled. *I looked, and behold, the fruitful land was a wilderness, and all its cities were pulled down before the Lord, before His fierce anger.* For thus says the Lord, *"The whole land shall be a desolation, yet I will not execute a complete destruction.*

In Isaiah 49, a prophecy of the restoration of Israel, the prophet likens the covenant people of God to the "heavens" and the "earth" who shout and rejoice for joy in the day of their salvation.

Isaiah 49:1,8,10,13

Listen to Me, O islands, and pay attention, you peoples from afar.... Thus says the Lord, “In a favorable time I have answered You, and in a day of salvation I have helped You; and I will keep You and give You for a covenant of the people, to restore the land, to make them inherit the desolate heritages.... *They will not hunger or thirst, nor will the scorching heat or sun strike them down; for He who has compassion on them will lead them and will guide them to springs of water.... Shout for joy, O heavens! And rejoice, O earth! Break forth into joyful shouting, O mountains! For the Lord has comforted His people and will have compassion on His afflicted.*

In 2 Corinthians 6:2 Paul quotes Isaiah 49:1, and in Revelation 7 John quotes Isaiah 49:10. Thus, Paul understood that the salvation of the remnant of Israel as prophesied in Isaiah 49 was being accomplished through the redemption of the body of Christ, while John understood the “heavens and earth” who “break forth into joyful shouting” in Isaiah 49 *to be* the 144,000 (the remnant of Israel) who “cry out with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God...”.

2 Corinthians 6:1-2

And working together with Him, we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain - for He says, “*At the acceptable time I listened to you, and on the day of salvation I helped you.*” Behold, now is “*the acceptable time,*” behold, now is “*the day of salvation*”.

Revelation 7:2-4,9-10,15-17

And I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God; and he cried out with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted to harm the earth and the sea, saying, “Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees until we have sealed the bond-servants of our God on their foreheads.” *And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred and forty-four thousand sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel....* After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; *and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, “Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb....* For this reason, they are before the throne of God; and they serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will spread His tabernacle over them. *They will hunger no longer, nor thirst anymore; nor will the sun beat down on them, nor any heat; for the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and will guide them to springs of the water of life; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes.*

This powerfully suggest that the 144,000 represent the righteous remnant and first fruits of Israel who were being saved as the body of Christ, the Church, in fulfillment of Isaiah 49. Let’s look at one more. In chapter 65, Isaiah the prophet contrasts the judgment and destruction of the scorners with the reward and restoration of the righteous. In this passage, the consummative salvation of the true servants of God is likened to *the creation of a “new heavens and a new earth”*, a new Jerusalem inhabited by a new people.

Isaiah 65:7-8,13-15,17-18

Both their own iniquities and the iniquities of their fathers together, says the Lord. Because they have burned incense on the mountains and scorned Me on the hills, Therefore I will measure their former work into their bosom. Thus says the Lord, as the new wine is found

in the cluster, and one says, ‘Do not destroy it, for there is benefit in it,’ so I will act on behalf of My servants in order not to destroy all of them.... Therefore, thus says the Lord God, “Behold, *my servants will eat, but you will be hungry. Behold, my servants will drink, but you will be thirsty. Behold, my servants will rejoice, but you will be put to shame. Behold, my servants will shout joyfully with a glad heart, but you will cry out with a heavy heart, and you will wail with a broken spirit.* You will leave your name for a curse to My chosen ones, and the Lord God will slay you. But My servants will be called by another name.... *For 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; for behold, I create Jerusalem for rejoicing and her people for gladness.*

(For a powerful fulfillment of this prophecy when the Lord would “slay” Old Covenant Israel and call his servants by “another name”, see Mathew 21:33-45 - the parable of the Lord’s vineyard, and Matthew 22:1-10 - the parable of the King’s wedding feast for the Son).

The Old Covenant “heaven and earth” passed away when the “world” (kosmos) of Judaism and its citizens arrived at their prophetic destiny through the fulfillment of all prophecy at the end of the age of Torah in AD70. At that time, the “new heavens and new earth” - the New Covenant world and its citizens - were fully revealed in Christ. The apostle John describes it as the “holy city”, the “new Jerusalem”; having the glory of God.

Revelation 21:1-2,9-11

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; *for the first heaven and first earth passed away, and there was no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband....* Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and spoke with me, saying, “*Come here, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.*” *And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God....”*

In view of the above evidence, the destruction of *heaven and earth* in 2 Peter 3 should be understood in the same sense; the dissolution of the entire Jewish-world.

2 Peter 3:7,10,13

But by His word *the present heavens and earth* are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.... But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which *the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up.... But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells.*

In support of our position, the theologian John Lightfoot (1602-1675) had this to say:

“The “passing away of heaven and earth” is the “destruction of Jerusalem and the whole Jewish state...as if the whole frame of this world were to be dissolved.”

In conclusion; “according to His (God’s) promise” (Isaiah 65:17-18) Peter looked for “new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells”. Thus, the “heaven and earth” that Jesus said would pass away within the lifetime of his own generation was the “world of Torah” (the entire Jewish economy), while the *new heaven and new earth* is the New Covenant world of Christ, the New Covenant order, wherein man is clothed with the righteousness of Christ through faith. Those who stand righteous in Christ today through the New Covenant, are those who live and abide in God’s new covenant-creation, His new heaven and new earth.

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