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RANDY
ALCORN

Chapter 15

Will the Old Earth Be Destroyed . . . or Renewed?

In his redemptive activity, God does not destroy the works of his hands, but cleanses them from sin and perfects them, so that they may finally reach the goal for which he created them. Applied to the problem at hand, this principle means that the new earth to which we look forward will not be totally different from the present one, but will be a renewal and glorification of the earth on which we now live.

Anthony Hoekema

Will the present Earth and the entire universe be utterly destroyed, and the New Earth and new universe made from scratch? Or will the original universe be renewed and transformed into the new one? At first glance, some Scriptures seem to answer “utterly destroyed”:

In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. Like clothing you will change them and they will be discarded. (Psalm 102:25-26)

[Jesus said,] “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.” (Luke 21:33)

The day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. (2 Peter 3:10)

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. (Revelation 21:1)

In contrast, there are passages that speak of the earth remaining forever (Ecclesiastes 1:4; Psalm 78:69). However, the same Hebrew word translated “forever” in these passages is used elsewhere in ways that don’t mean forever (e.g., Deuteronomy 15:17). It is clear that the earth *as it is now* will not remain forever—but what does that really mean?

Burned Up or Refined?

Scripture says that the fire of God’s judgment will destroy “wood, hay or straw,” yet it will purify “gold, silver, [and] costly stones,” which will all survive the fire and be carried over into the new universe (1 Corinthians 3:12-15). Similarly, the apostle John notes that when believers die, what they have done on Earth to Christ’s glory “will follow them” into Heaven (Revelation 14:13). These are earthly things that will outlast the present Earth. “Those purified works on the earth,” writes Albert Wolters, “must surely include the products of human culture. There is no reason to doubt that they will be

transfigured and transformed by their liberation from the curse, but they will be in essential continuity with our experience now—just as our resurrected bodies, though glorified, will still be bodies.”¹⁰⁸

As we have seen in a number of passages that use words such as *renewal* and *regeneration*, the same Earth destined for destruction is also destined for restoration. Many have grasped the first teaching but not the second. Therefore, they misinterpret words such as *destroy* to mean absolute or final destruction, rather than what Scripture actually teaches: a temporary destruction that is reversed through resurrection and restoration.

A variety of theologians take this view of temporary, not final, destruction. Wayne Grudem, in his discussion of 2 Peter 3:10, which speaks of “everything” in the earth being “laid bare,” suggests that Peter “may not be speaking of the earth as a planet but rather the surface things on the earth (that is, much of the ground and the things on the ground).”¹⁰⁹

Anthony Hoekema said, “If God would have to annihilate the present cosmos, Satan would have won a great victory. . . . Satan would have succeeded in so devastatingly corrupting the present cosmos and the present earth that God could do nothing with it but to blot it totally out of existence. But Satan did not win such victory. On the contrary, Satan has been decisively defeated. God will reveal the full dimensions of that defeat when he shall renew this very earth on which Satan deceived mankind and finally banish from it all the results of Satan’s evil machinations.”¹¹⁰

John Piper argues that God did not create matter to throw it away. He writes, “When Revelation 21:1 and 2 Peter 3:10 say that the present earth and heavens will ‘pass away,’ it does not have to mean that they go out of existence, but may mean that there will be such a change in them that their present condition passes away. We might say, ‘The caterpillar passes away, and the butterfly emerges.’ There is a real passing away, and there is a real continuity, a real connection.”¹¹¹

My wife, Nanci, and I will never forget driving home from church on May 18, 1980, and seeing a cloud of volcanic ash billowing overhead. It was the eruption of Mount Saint Helens, seventy miles from our home. For weeks, ash fell so thick every day that we repeatedly had to hose off windshields and driveways. Many people in the Portland area wore surgical masks to keep from choking. The destruction of the once-beautiful mountain and its surrounding area was catastrophic. Great trees were charred and fallen like giant matchsticks. The devastation appeared comprehensive. Experts predicted that it would certainly be decades, possibly centuries, before the area came back to life. Yet within only a few years it had begun to be restored, demonstrating healing properties that God has built into his creation, evident even under the Curse.

After seeing such utter devastation replaced by new beauty—even apart from God’s supernatural intervention—I have no trouble envisioning God remaking a charred Earth into a new one, fresh and vibrant.

As we saw in chapter 12, Romans 8:19-23 inseparably links the destinies of mankind and Earth. As such, the earth will be raised to new life in the same way our bodies will be raised to new life.

Redemption Means Restoration

Even if the term *New Earth* appeared nowhere in Scripture, even if we didn't have dozens of other passages such as Isaiah 60 that refer to it so clearly, Acts 3:21 would be sufficient. It tells us that Christ will "remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets." When Christ returns, God's agenda is not to destroy everything and start over, but to "restore everything." The perfection of creation once lost will be fully regained, and then some. The same Peter who spoke these words in Acts 3 wrote the words about the earth's destruction in 2 Peter 3—apparently he saw no conflict between them.

Albert Wolters says, "Redemption means *restoration*—that is, the return to the goodness of an originally unscathed creation and not merely the addition of something supracreational. . . . This restoration affects the *whole* of creational life and not merely some limited area within it."¹² It will be as if an artist wiped away the old paint, stained and cracking, and started a new and better painting, but using the same images on the same canvas.

Still, many cannot reconcile the idea of redemption through restoration with the statements of 2 Peter 3:10 that "the heavens will disappear with a roar," and "the elements will be destroyed by fire," and "the earth and everything in it will be laid bare." John Piper says of this passage, "What Peter may well mean is that at the end of this age there will be cataclysmic events that bring this world to an end as we know it—not putting it out of existence, but wiping out all that is evil and cleansing it by fire and fitting it for an age of glory and righteousness and peace that will never end."¹³

I think the key to understanding the qualified meaning of these images of destruction in 2 Peter lies within the passage itself. The passage draws a parallel between the earth in the time of Noah, which was "destroyed" through the Flood, and the time to come when the present world will be destroyed in judgment again, this time not by water but by fire (2 Peter 3:6-7). The stated reference point for understanding the future destruction of the world is the Flood. The Flood was certainly cataclysmic and devastating. But did it obliterate the world, making it cease to exist? No. Noah and his family and the animals were delivered from God's judgment in order to reinhabit a new world made ready for them by God's cleansing judgment. Flooding the whole world didn't destroy all the mountains (Genesis 8:4). Though many people believe that the Tigris and Euphrates rivers near Eden (Genesis 2:14) weren't the same rivers as those we know today, the fact that they were given the same names as the originals suggests some continuity.

The cleansing with fire will be more thorough than the Flood in that it will permanently eliminate sin. But just as God's judgment by water didn't make the earth permanently uninhabitable, neither will God's judgment by fire.

The King James Version translates 2 Peter 3:10 this way: "The earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up." But the word translated "burned up" does not appear in the oldest Greek manuscripts, which contain a word that means "found" or "shown." The New International Version translates it "laid bare," and the English Standard Version renders it as "exposed." God's fire of judgment will consume the bad but refine the good, exposing things as they really are.

Theologian Cornelius Venema explains, "The word used in the older and better manuscripts conveys the idea of a process that does not so much destroy or burn up, but uncovers or lays open for discovery the creation, now in a renewed state of pristine

purity.”¹¹⁴ Likewise rejecting “burned up” as the best translation, Albert Wolters argues that “translations of this text have often been influenced by a world view that denies the continuity between the present and future state of creation.”¹¹⁵ Venema makes the connection between 2 Peter 3 and Romans 8 when he observes, “Second Peter 3:5-13 confirms . . . the basic ideal also expressed, though in different language, in Romans 8. The new heavens and earth will issue from God’s sovereign and redemptive work. . . . It will involve the renewal of all things, not the creation of all new things . . . [and] it follows that the life to come in the new creation will be as rich and full of activity in the service of the Lord as was intended at the beginning.”¹¹⁶

Several prominent ancient theologians acknowledged the continuity between the present Earth and the New Earth. Jerome often said that Heaven and Earth would not be annihilated but would be transformed into something better. Augustine wrote similarly, as did Gregory the Great, Thomas Aquinas, and many medieval theologians.¹¹⁷

The Meaning of “New”

As we’ve seen, the expression “Heaven and Earth” is a biblical designation for the entire universe. So when Revelation 21:1 speaks of “a new heaven and a new earth,” it indicates a transformation of the entire universe. The Greek word *kainos*, translated “new,” indicates that the earth God creates won’t merely be new as opposed to old, but new in quality and superior in character. According to Walter Bauer’s lexicon, *kainos* means new “in the sense that what is old has become obsolete, and should be replaced by what is new. In such a case the new is, as a rule, superior in kind to the old.”¹¹⁸

It means, therefore, “not the emergence of a cosmos totally other than the present one, but the creation of a universe which, though it has been gloriously renewed, stands in continuity with the present one.”¹¹⁹

Paul uses the same word, *kainos*, when he speaks of a believer becoming “a new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17). The New Earth will be the same as the old Earth, just as a new Christian is still the same person he was before. Different? Yes. But also the same.

When a house burns to the ground, the components of the house do not cease to exist, but take on another form. According to the first law of thermodynamics (conservation of energy), the fire doesn’t obliterate the wood but transforms it into different substances, including charcoal and carbon dioxide. What we consider annihilation is not what it appears.

Resurrection, however, goes beyond that. A new house is not made out of the materials of a house that burned, but out of new materials. Though it may be on the same ground, made according to the same blueprint, it’s a different house. Resurrection, however, is about continuity—the *same* body that was destroyed is reconstructed into the new.

As God may gather the scattered DNA and atoms and molecules of our bodies, he will regather all he needs of the scorched and disfigured Earth. As our old bodies will be raised to new bodies, so the old Earth will be raised to become the New Earth. So, will the earth be destroyed or renewed? The answer is *both*—but the “destruction” will be temporal and partial, whereas the renewal will be eternal and complete.

The doctrine of the new creation, extending not only to mankind, but to the world, the natural realm, and even nations and cultures, is a major biblical theme, though you would never know it judging by how little attention it receives among Christians.

In an important essay, theologian Greg Beale argues that “new creation is a plausible and defensible centre for New Testament theology.” He states, “The Bible begins with original creation which is corrupted, and the rest of the Old Testament is a redemptive-historical process working toward a restoration of the fallen creation in a new creation. The New Testament then sees these hopes beginning fulfillment and prophesies a future time of fulfillment in a consummated new creation, which Revelation 21:1–22:5 portrays.”¹²⁰

Hence, as we’ve seen from Isaiah and throughout the Old Testament, the doctrine of the new heavens and New Earth is not some late-developing afterthought but a central component of redemptive history and intention. It is the paradigm of biblical perspective—inclusive of but broader than the themes of kingdom, covenant, resurrection, and salvation. As Beale puts it, “New creation is the New Testament’s hermeneutical and eschatological centre of gravity.”¹²¹

Summarizing theologian William Dumbrell’s views of new creation, Beale says, “All of the Old Testament works toward the goal of new creation, and the New Testament begins to fulfill that primary goal. . . . Redemption is always subordinate to creation in that it is the means of reintroducing the conditions of the new creation. All events since the fall are to be seen as a process leading to the reintroduction of the original creation. Dumbrell is correct in understanding new creation as the dominating notion of biblical theology because new creation is the goal or purpose of God’s redemptive-historical plan; new creation is the logical main point of Scripture.”¹²²

The earth’s death will be no more final than our own. The destruction of the old Earth in God’s purifying judgment will immediately be followed by its resurrection to new life. Earth’s fiery “end” will open straight into a glorious new beginning. And as we’ll see later, it will just keep getting better and better.



eternal perspective ministries
with author Randy Alcorn

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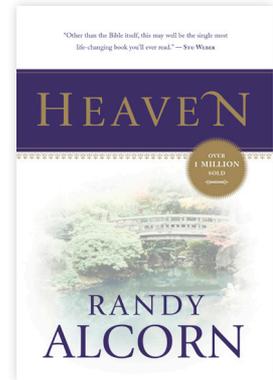
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About Randy Alcorn

Randy is the founder and director of Eternal Perspective Ministries and the best-selling author of over 50 books (over nine million in print) including *Heaven*, *The Treasure Principle*, and the Gold Medallion winner *Safely Home*.

Randy resides in Gresham, Oregon with his wife, Nanci. They have two married daughters and five grandsons. He enjoys hanging out with his family, biking, tennis, research, and reading.



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Eternal Perspective Ministries (EPM) is a nonprofit ministry dedicated to teaching principles of God’s Word and assisting the church in ministering to the unreached, unfed, unborn, uneducated, unreconciled, and unsupported people around the world. The common element in all of our writing and teaching ministry is an emphasis on seeing life through the eyes of eternity, and thereby learning to live now to the glory of God.

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