



# THE LAST DAYS

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RETHINKING BIBLE PROPHECY IN THE LIGHT OF SCRIPTURE AND HISTORY

'Eschatology' is the study of last things. Christians should never fear having their eschatological 'system' scrutinised by the plain teaching of the Bible. If you subscribe to the currently popular "Left Behind" system of eschatology, prepare to be challenged by Scripture and history. Moreover, prepare to gain a greater respect for the integrity of the Bible.

## LOOKING FOR A NEW HEAVENS & A NEW EARTH

(PART TWO) BY DAVID H. CHILTON, M.DIV., PH.D.



*"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."*

As we saw in the previous article, Puritan theologian John Owen 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 term "heavens and earth" are 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." [1]

Owen offers two further reasons ("of many that might be insisted on from the text," he says) for adopting the A.D. 70 interpretation of 2 Peter 3. First, he observes, "whatever is here mentioned was to have its particular influence on the men of that generation." [2] 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. I 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

*"For then must he often have suffered since the foundation of the world: but now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Heb. 9:26)*

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what He affirms to be at the door let no man declare to be far away. [3]

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 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 ambiguity and variableness which will make it impossible to tell 'What manner of time the Spirit of Christ in the prophets may signify' [cf. I 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

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.' [4]

Continuing his analysis, John Owen cites verse 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 context, 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. [5]

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." [6] 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 (I 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" [KJV wrongly translates Mtt.24:3 as "world." Should be "age"—"...and the end of the age" NOT "...end of the world." ED.] 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). [7]

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

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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 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 wrote:

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. [8]

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 late-20th-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 own promise, the saving knowledge of Him will fill the earth, as the waters cover the sea (Isa. 11:9).

#### Notes

1. John Owen, “Providential Changes, an Argument for Universal Holiness,” in *The Works of John Owen*, 16 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust), 9:135.
  2. “Providential Changes, an Argument for Universal Holiness,” 134.
  3. Milton Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 406.
  4. J. Stuart Russell, *The Parousia* (Bradford, PA: Kingdom Publications, n.d.), 321-23.
  5. “Providential Changes, an Argument for Universal Holiness,” 134-35.
  6. John L. Bray, *Heaven and Earth Shall Pass Away* (Lakeland, FL: John L. Bray Ministries, 1995), 26.
  7. Quoted in Roderick Campbell, *Israel and the New Covenant* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1954), 107.
  8. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 489.
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# *No Future Temple*

BY GARY DEMAR

**Q: I often hear premillennialists, especially dispensationalists, talk about a new temple being built in Israel. Where do they find this in Scripture, and why would it be necessary?**

A: Dispensational premillennialists need a future “tribulation temple” so their idea of antichrist can take his seat (2 Thess. 2:4), place a statue for people to worship (Rev. 13:14–15), and proclaim himself to be god (2 Thess. 2:4). But what the dispensationalists really need is a verse that states that there will be another rebuilt temple since there’s already been one. Rebuilt-temple advocates Tommy Ice and Randall Price admit the following in their book *Ready to Rebuild*: “There are no Bible verses that say, ‘There is going to be a third temple’” (197–198). Having admitted this, they go on to claim “that there will be a Jewish Temple in Jerusalem at least by the midpoint of the seven-year tribulation period” (198). As we will see, the Bible says no such thing.

Does the Bible predict that a third temple will be built, one following Solomon’s temple and the post-exile temple that was still standing in Jesus’ day? Don Stewart and Chuck Missler write the following in their book *The Coming Temple*, “The

crucial issue boils down to how we interpret prophecy. There are two basic ways to interpret Bible prophecy. Either you understand it literally or you do not. If a person rejects the literal interpretation then they [sic] are left to their own imagination as to what the Scripture means. . . . We believe it makes sense to understand the Scriptures as literally requiring the eventual construction and desecration of a Third Temple” (193). Notice that they do not say that the Scriptures say there will be another rebuilt temple but only that it is required. Another rebuilt temple is required only if you are a dispensationalist.

Stewart and Missler have made it very simple for us. If the Bible is interpreted literally, according to them, the need for a third temple should be explicitly stated. What biblical evidence do they offer to support their claim that “the Bible, in both testaments, speaks of a Temple that has yet to appear” (194)? From the OT they quote Daniel 9:27, 11:31, and 12:11 for sup-

port. Ice and Price find only one OT passage to establish their position (Dan. 9:27). The Book of Daniel was written after Solomon's temple had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C. (2 Kings 25:8–9; Dan. 1:1–2) and before the temple had been rebuilt by the returning exiles (Ezra 6:13–15). It was this post-exile rebuilt temple that was desecrated by the pig-sacrificing Antiochus Epiphanes around 170 B.C. After a period of misuse and disuse, the temple was in need of repair. Herod the Great restored and enlarged this rebuilt second temple, a project that started around 20 B.C. and was completed just a few years before it was destroyed in A.D. 70. It was this same temple that Zacharias served in (Luke 1:9), that Jesus was taken to as an infant (2:27), that had been under construction forty-six years (John 2:20), that Jesus cleansed of the money changers (Matt. 21:12), that He predicted would be left desolate (Matt. 23:38; 24:2), and that was finally destroyed by Titus in A.D. 70.

Is there any indication in these passages from Daniel that they skip over the temple that would be rebuilt, refurbished, enlarged, and still standing in Jesus' day and refer to a future post-rapture great tribulation? Would Jews living in the first century have made the historical leap over the temple that was standing before them and suppose Jesus was describing yet another rebuilt temple? As Ice and Price admit, the Bible doesn't say anything about another rebuilt temple. The passages from Daniel cited by Stewart, Missler, Ice, and Price can easily find their fulfillment in the rebuilt temple that was standing during the reign of Antiochus in the second century B.C. (Dan. 11:31; 12:11) and the second temple's destruction in A.D. 70 (9:27).

What's amazing is that Price and Ice, in their book *Ready to Rebuild*, find the fulfillment of Daniel 9:26 in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and the dismantling of the rebuilt temple (Luke 21:6): "Jesus, seeing Himself as the Messiah, therefore saw the Romans as the people . . . who will destroy the city and the sanctuary. Knowing that He would soon be cut off (crucified), He likewise knew that the Temple's destruction would soon occur" (68). In the span of two verses, they find two temples separated by 2000 years. As a careful reader

will note, the word "sanctuary" (temple) that appears in Daniel 9:26 does not appear in 9:27. This means that Daniel 9:27 is describing events related to the same sanctuary of 9:26. For Ice and Price to find another rebuilt temple, Daniel 9:27 would have to say something like this: "And he will make a firm covenant with the many for one week, but in the middle of the week he will put a stop to sacrifice and grain offering in the new rebuilt sanctuary; and on the wing of abominations will come one who makes desolate, even until a complete destruction of the second rebuilt sanctuary, one that is decreed, is poured out on the one who makes desolate."

Stewart, Missler, Ice, and Price claim to have incontrovertible biblical evidence for a rebuilt temple in three NT passages: Matthew 24:15, 2 Thessalonians 2:3–4, and Revelation 11:1–2. On Matthew 24:15, Stewart and Missler write: "Jesus spoke of this prophecy being still future to His time (Matthew 24:15)" (194). This is true. But the rebuilt temple was still standing when Jesus said that "the abomination of desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet" would stand "in the holy place." Notice the audience context: "Therefore when you see the abomination of desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet" (Matt. 24:15). When who sees it? When "you see it;" that is, when those in Jesus' audience see it. Ice and Price never explain the audience reference "you." If Jesus had a distant future audience in view, He would have said "when they see the abomination of desolation." Here's their interpretation of Matthew 24:15: "'The holy place' is a reference to the most sacred room within Israel's Temple. What temple? The third Temple, since it is a future event" (199). There is no mention of a future rebuilt temple or even an implied reference. Jesus does not say, "When they see the abomination of desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet standing in the rebuilt holy place." The holy place, the sanctuary, was right before their eyes (Matt. 24:1–2).

Ice and Price argue that "the apostle Paul gives us perhaps the clearest passage relating to the third Temple in 2 Thessalonians 2:3, 4" (199). Since Paul wrote before the rebuilt temple was destroyed in A.D. 70, what is it in these

verses that tells us that the temple in which the "man of lawlessness" takes his seat is "the third temple"? Paul does not describe "the temple" (lit. sanctuary) as a rebuilt temple. What would have led his audience to conclude that he was referring to, using Ice and Price's words, "the future third Temple" (199) when the temple was still standing in Jerusalem? The "man of lawlessness" was being restrained "now," in their day (2:6, 7), and the Christians at Thessalonica knew the identity of the restrainer (2:6). For a verse-by-verse exposition of 2 Thessalonians 2, see my book *Last Days Madness*.

Third-temple advocates find support for their position in Revelation 11:1–2. They begin by assuming that Revelation was written nearly three decades after the temple was destroyed. From this unproven assumption, they conclude that John must be measuring a rebuilt temple. The passage says nothing about a rebuilt temple. The words "shortly" and "near" (Rev. 1:1, 3) are used to describe the time when the events outlined in Revelation were to take place. These words are meaningless if the events have not taken place. The fact that John is told to "rise and measure the temple of God, and the altar, and those who worship in it" (11:1), is *prima facie* evidence that the temple was still standing when John received the revelation. How could John have measured a temple that did not exist in his day? Price and Ice insist that the temple that John is told to measure is the literal temple, not a "spiritual temple" (200). "For example, in Matthew 24 Jesus is speaking about a literal Temple, since in the context of the passage he is standing and looking directly at the second Temple" (200). The same was true of John. He was told to measure the literal Temple that still had worshipers in it. If the temple was no longer standing, then John was measuring a "spiritual temple."

The burden of proof is on rebuilt-temple advocates to come up with just one verse that unequivocally states that there will be a rebuilt temple. Since they admit that "There are no Bible verses that say, 'There is going to be a third temple,'" we must conclude that dispensationalism's preoccupation with a rebuilt temple is misguided.