

THE FLOOD IS AS BAD AS IT GETS: NEVER AGAIN WILL GOD DESTROY THE EARTH

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GROWING UP IN DISPENSATIONAL CHURCHES in the latter half of the twentieth century, it was common to hear preachers predict the end of the age and the annihilation of the earth in a fiery judgment. In light of that end, care for the environment was considered a waste of time. Widely repeated was the quip, often attributed to J. Vernon McGee, “You don’t polish the brass on a sinking ship.”¹ The application seemed clear: Since the world is a sinking ship, we should not devote limited time and resources to making it a better place to live. Critics of dispensationalism have used this and similar statements to create an impression of the movement that is, quite frankly, sometimes deserved.²

Hal Lindsey, the author of *The Late Great Planet Earth*, once retorted: “God didn’t send me to clean the fishbowl, he sent me to fish.”³ The implication is that the job of Christians is evangelism,

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¹ An Internet search for this quote finds it widely attributed to McGee (or sometimes to Magee) but without documentation as to the original source.

² It is not uncommon for critics of dispensationalism to use such comments as the reason to reject dispensationalism. See, for example, John Barber, *The Road from Eden: Studies in Christianity and Culture* (Palo Alto, CA: Academica Press, 2009), 438. He concludes: “These inauthentic calls have at their center the presupposition that true Christian experience is to be limited to the sacrosanct realm of spirituality, while interaction with culture is to be tolerated as the mere necessity of human experience.”

³ Hal Lindsey, “The Great Cosmic Meltdown: Hal Lindsey on the Future,” *Eternity*, January 1977, 21; quoted in Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1992), 299; Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972).

not caring for the environment or the physical needs of people.

D. L. Moody famously said,

I have felt like working three times as hard ever since I came to understand that my Lord was coming back again. I look on this world as a wrecked vessel. God has given me a life-boat, and said to me, "Moody, save all you can." God will come in judgment and burn up this world, but the children of God don't belong to this world; they are in it, but not of it, like a ship in the water. The world is getting darker and darker; its ruin is coming nearer and nearer. If you have any friends on this wreck unsaved, you had better lose no time in getting them off.⁴

The "leaky dispensationalist" John MacArthur has written:

But man's efforts to bring about a better world, however well intended, are ultimately doomed. They amount to little more than rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic to give everyone a better view as the ship sinks. The truth is that not a better day, but an unimaginably worse day lies ahead for man and his world. In the future, God will pour out His wrath and judgment on a scale never before seen. Only after the earth is utterly devastated and unbelievers judged will a better day come—the blessed earthly kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ.⁵

Timothy Weber correctly notes that one positive benefit of this mindset is that it "injected a new note of urgency into evangelism" and gave a strong impetus to evangelicals to awaken the redeemed "from their spiritual lethargy."⁶ But the negative impact is also strong: if the world is going to be destroyed and soon, and if things are going to continue to go rapidly from bad to worse, trying to stem the tide has little value. Rather, Christians should devote all their time and resources to evangelism and not to social or environmental concerns.

Dispensationalists are not alone in expressing theological pessimism, defeatism, and escapism. They have, however, sometimes

⁴ Dwight Lyman Moody, *New Sermons, Addresses, and Prayers* (New York: Henry S. Goodspeed, 1877), 535. See Gregg Quiggles, "Bread or Bibles: A Reevaluation of the Social Work of Dwight Moody," a paper presented to the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, San Francisco, CA, 16 November 2011.

⁵ The label "leaky dispensationalist" comes from MacArthur himself and is widely quoted on Internet sources. See the interviews where he used the term, <http://www.middletonbiblechurch.org/dispenn/jmacdis.html>, accessed 30 October 2012. The quotation above is from John MacArthur, *Revelation 12–22*, *MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2000), 84.

⁶ Timothy P. Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism 1875–1982*, enlarged edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 52, 53.

defended these views systemically and systematically, believing they had biblical, theological, and historical support for them. In short, they believed that the Bible was on their side. The goal of this essay is not to critique those arguments but to support the claim that the metanarrative of Scripture, not to mention individual texts, provides compelling biblical and theological support for responsible stewardship of the environment. If the Scriptures teach that God's plan is redemptive, not destructive, that mercy triumphs over judgment, and that although judgment is coming, it is not a judgment of annihilation, neither of the earth nor its inhabitants, then care for the environment is a worthwhile theological goal for believers.⁷

Deeply imbedded in the dispensational system, at least in the past, has been an understanding that history is on an upward trajectory. Dispensationalists have read the biblical story of redemption, of the unfolding of God's plan through distinguishable periods of time, as teaching that each succeeding dispensation is better than the preceding one. There is an arc of improvement as God continues to respond graciously to the rebellious failures of His creatures. Charles Ryrie put it this way: "If the dispensations build on each other, then each one is an advance over the preceding one, culminating in the millennial state."⁸ Of course, if this is true, then the eternal state should be even better than the millennium.

A central text in the narrative of defeat and despair is the Genesis flood narrative. This story of judgment is often read as a foretaste of the judgment to be poured out on the earth at the end of time. In short, the judgment in Noah's day is a preview of a much more severe judgment by fire. Reading the flood narrative in the context of the biblical story of redemption could lead to a different interpretation. Rather than the flood functioning as a foretaste of the worse judgment God will send in the future, it is possible that the judgment in the flood was the worst destruction the world will ever see. Creation and all its inhabitants can hope for a renewed heaven and earth, not an apocalyptic annihilation.

Why does this matter? Is this merely an academic exercise, an exegetical and theological argumentation without ethical import? Or does it make a difference in the way Christians live whether the flood is the worst judgment the world will ever see or only a fore-

⁷ See Richard Stearns, *The Hole in Our Gospel: What Does God Expect of Us? The Answer That Changed My Life and Just Might Change Our World* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010).

⁸ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), 117.

taste of a much more severe judgment in the future?

More implications will come after the thesis has been defended. But for now, here are several preliminary theological presuppositions. First, the narrative of Scripture is one of redemption. In the pattern established early in the biblical story, God's work of redemption consistently begins with what is and makes it better. Second, the character of God is such that God loves what He created, and His love for His creation is demonstrated by His preservation of it even in its fallen and rebellious state (even though cursed) and the promise that one day the curse and all its effects will be removed. Third, the biblical teaching about stewardship implies continuity between this earth and the eternal state. Humans were created in the image of God and given the responsibility to care for the world that God made, to be mediators of blessing to the creatures that God had already blessed. As stewards of the world God made, humans have an obligation to preserve and protect the environment, for their own sake and for the sake of future generations of humans. Since no one knows when the end will come, they surely ought to enhance and preserve the possibility that life on this planet would continue and thrive in the distant future rather than hasten its demise through negligence or disregard. Fourth, the mission God has given is to make disciples who love God and one another with the whole heart, soul, mind, and strength. Surely, care for the whole person and the whole creation is more consistent with the biblical hope than the hope of annihilation.

GENESIS 1–2: CREATION

The biblical story begins with two accounts of creation. When God created Adam, male and female, He declared them to be in His image and likeness.

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth. And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so (Gen. 1:26–30, ESV).

Created to represent God, Adam was commanded to have dominion over creation, to rule over the creatures that God had made. God granted them permission to eat from the plants and trees, but not animal flesh. Since these creatures had been blessed by God (Gen. 1:22), the imagers, who received the same blessing from the Creator, had and have the responsibility and privilege of mediating blessing to creatures blessed by God. To rule over them, to exercise dominion, did not give Adam the right to destroy them, even to provide food for the humans. The imager was to be a mediator of life, not an instrument of death.

In the second chapter of Genesis, the responsibility is repeated and expanded.

When no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground, and a mist was going up from the land and was watering the whole face of the ground—then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature. And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. . . . The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gen. 2:5–9, 15–17, ESV).

The responsibility of Adam to work the ground, to care for it, is implied in verse 5 and stated explicitly in verse 15. The implication is that the lack of plants in the early description (vv. 5–6) was due to the lack of someone to work the ground. After the man was created, when the plants and trees were planted in the garden, Adam was told to work it and keep it. Again, the provision of food through plants and trees is emphasized.

Thus, one of the functions of the divine imagers is to care for creation, to till the ground, to provide an environment that aids life for humans and animals, and to be a mediator of blessing to creatures that God has blessed in an environment that God pronounced “good.” These two accounts of the creation of Adam emphasize that the creation (or cultural) mandate requires cultivation. Andy Crouch explains, “God has provided the raw material—the garden, the animals themselves and Adam’s very breath. But now the Creator graciously steps back just enough to allow humankind to begin to discover what it means to be a creator. Adam, like his Maker,

will be both gardener and poet, both creator and cultivator.”⁹

When, in the next chapter, the imagers rebel against God and He enters their world to pronounce judgment, their relationship with creation is changed but their responsibility is not. The Creator says to Adam, “Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (3:17–19, ESV). Created to live on the earth, these two and all their descendants will live and die there. Created to care for creation, these two and all their descendants will find that creation now will fight against them. Created to work the ground, these two and all their descendants will find that the ground will work against them, will make their work laborious. But the responsibility to care for creation is not changed.

Next in Genesis comes the conflict between Cain and Abel that results in Abel’s death, the genealogy of Adam, and then several chapters devoted to the flood. When the caretakers rebelled in the garden, God responded in judgment tempered by grace. When Cain rebelled against Him, God responded in judgment tempered by grace. In the days of the Nephilim, how will God respond?

GENESIS 6–9: THE FLOOD NARRATIVE

The flood narrative begins with the introduction of the Nephilim, “heroes of old, men of renown” (Gen. 6:4),¹⁰ and then it records this indictment of humanity and the Creator’s response: “The LORD saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain” (vv. 5–6). The LORD’S reaction to the wickedness of these creatures is described as a heart filled with grief and pain. How did the pained Creator respond? The LORD declared, “I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth—men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air—for I am grieved that I have made them” (v. 7).

⁹ Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 110.

¹⁰ Unless indicated otherwise, biblical quotations are from the New International Version (1984).

When God created man and woman in His image and likeness He gave them the responsibility to “rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (1:28). Since the creatures who live in the sea and air had been blessed by God on the day of their creation, one of the responsibilities of the imagers was to mediate blessing to the creatures that God had blessed (vv. 22, 28). Creatures who are blessed by God mediate blessing to other creatures blessed by God. But everything changed after the curse of creation. Rather than mediating blessing to the creatures, the man and woman became the reason creatures die. The first death in the narrative occurs in Genesis 3:21 when God made garments of skin to cover the nakedness of the divine imagers. The mediators of blessing mediated death to creation.

Now, in the flood narrative, the fall is reenacted. When the imagers sin and earn judgment, what happens to them is not limited to them. Rather, their destiny and experience are linked to the rest of creation. When God sends the flood on the earth, it is not just the humans who die but every living creature on the earth. There is solidarity between the imagers and the rest of living creatures, and the earth itself.

The narrator and God declare that the earth is corrupt and full of violence (6:11–13). God’s grief and pain are channeled into judgment that will “destroy all life under the heavens, every creature that has the breath of life in it. Everything on earth will perish” (v. 17). This is language of total devastation. But not every life on the earth was destroyed in the flood. In fact, even before the first drop of rain, God declared: “But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark—you and your sons and your wife and your sons’ wives with you. You are to bring into the ark two of all living creatures, male and female, to keep them alive with you. Two of every kind of bird, of every kind of animal and of every kind of creature that moves along the ground will come to you to be kept alive” (vv. 18–20).

By God’s grace (cf. v. 8), Noah and his family and two of every kind of living creature would be preserved from the judgment that would “destroy all life” on the earth. But God’s grace is even more extensive, for many more than two clean animals would be preserved: “Take with you seven pairs of all clean animals, the male and his mate, and a pair of the animals that are not clean, the male and his mate, and seven pairs of the birds of the heavens also, male and female, to keep their offspring alive on the face of the earth” (7:2–3, ESV). Clearly, the destruction of life on the planet in the flood was never intended to be comprehensive. Instead the lan-

guage of destruction is hyperbolic. Even though the flood was devastating, it was not as bad as it could have been. And even before He sent the judgment, God revealed His plan to repopulate the earth with every kind of living creature, under the rule of the divine imagers.

A little later in the narrative, God promises destruction again: “Seven days from now I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights, and I will wipe from the face of the earth every living creature I have made” (v. 4). And that is what happened. The water covered the earth, “all the high mountains under the entire heavens were covered . . . to a depth of more than twenty feet” (vv. 19–20).¹¹ As a result, “every living thing that moved on the earth perished—birds, livestock, wild animals, all the creatures that swarm over the earth, and all mankind. Everything on dry land that had the breath of life in its nostrils died. Every living thing on the face of the earth was wiped out; men and animals and the creatures that move along the ground and the birds of the air were wiped from the earth” (vv. 21–23). In the flood, all life on the earth was destroyed.

But, of course, there were some who were not taken, some who were left behind. “Only Noah was left, and those with him in the ark” (v. 23).¹² When the water receded, Noah, his family, and all the animals and creatures on the ark came out onto dry ground, according to their kind (8:18–19). Noah offered burnt offerings and the LORD said, after smelling the “pleasing aroma” of the sacrifices, “Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done” (v. 21).¹³ God promised never again to curse the ground because of the imagers, even though they continue to sin and rebel against Him. Never again will He destroy all living creatures as He did in the flood. In short, God promised that the flood is the worst destruction the earth will ever see. The promise of “never again” seems to imply that this kind of destruction will not happen again.

¹¹ The point remains the same whether or not this language denotes a universal or a localized flood. Although I hold to the former, that debate is beyond the scope of this essay.

¹² Also left behind were the creatures that live in the water.

¹³ Apparently, the reason so many clean animals were taken onto the ark was so that there would be sufficient animals for the atoning sacrifices of Noah and his family after the flood was over. In short, God provided in advance for these creatures whom He preserved.

God blessed Noah and his sons and reminded them of the creation mandate to “be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth” (9:1; cf. v. 7). Now He allowed the eating of meat, but with specific limiting instructions; animals can be killed for food or if they kill a human being. “In other words,” Aaron Chalmers argues, “such killing is only to take place in order to insure the continuance of the human species.”¹⁴ Further, humans were forbidden to eat meat with the blood in it.

Then God made a covenant: “I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth. I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth” (vv. 9–11).

The covenant comes with a sign, “I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth. . . . This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth” (vv. 13–17). Chalmers observes that “the title ‘Noahic’ covenant is somewhat inadequate, for the recipients for the covenant are broader than simply Noah and his descendants. ‘God’s covenant with creation’ would perhaps be a better label for what is happening here.”¹⁵

The covenant with the earth and all its inhabitants is an everlasting one and is the promise that never again will the Creator destroy all life on the earth. The promise seems more extensive than merely that there will never again be a flood of the sort God sent in Noah’s day. If the end of creation’s story is annihilation, the language of everlasting covenant rings hollow. If the day is coming when all creatures on the earth will be exterminated, the rainbow appears to be a cruel reminder that destruction is coming. But if the everlasting promise is that God will never again destroy all

¹⁴ Aaron Chalmers, “The Importance of the Noahic Covenant to Biblical Theology,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 60 (2009): 212.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

living creatures, if it is a covenant God has made with the earth itself that she will never again experience the death of all her inhabitants, then the destruction of the flood is the worst judgment the earth will ever experience. This is true even if “every inclination of the [human] heart is evil from childhood” (8:21). In short, even in the event that human behavior becomes as offensive to God as this people’s behavior was, God will still not respond as severely. Chalmers summarizes the significance for biblical theology when he writes:

God’s covenantal concern reaches out beyond his animate creatures to embrace all that he has made and once declared to be “very good” (1:31). This picture is reinforced by those passages which envisage the renewal of the heavens and earth, and which point to some form of “worldly” existence as the culmination of God’s story (e.g. Rev. 21 and 22). God is concerned about his creation as a whole, the earth included, and will one day act to renew this. This seems to be what Paul is alluding to in Romans 8:21–23 where he speaks of creation as a whole groaning in labour pains and longing for the revelation of God’s long awaited, supreme act of restoration. Creation as a whole, the very earth itself, is caught up in God’s plan of redemption.¹⁶

In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus responded to the disciples’ question: “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (Matt. 24:3, ESV). Before telling His disciples that no one knows the time of His return, the time of the end of the age (v. 36), Jesus described a world marked by conflict, false christs, earthquakes, famines, and destruction. He spoke of tribulation and betrayal, even quoting Daniel’s prophecy of “great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be” (Matt. 24:21, ESV; cf. Dan. 12:1).

He compared the end of the age with the days of Noah: “For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man” (Matt. 24:38–39, ESV). According to Jesus, the end of the age will be like the time of Noah in that when judgment comes, some will be swept away while others will be left behind. As it was in the days of Noah, some will survive, and presumably, the earth will remain and be repopulated by those survivors.

¹⁶ Ibid., 214.

In between the reference to Daniel and to the flood, Jesus made this claim: “And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short” (v. 22, ESV).¹⁷ By divine promise, the destruction during the days of unparalleled tribulation, although devastating, will not be comprehensive. Rather, for the sake of the elect, the time of tribulation will be shortened. In the days of the flood, all life on the earth perished, except for those preserved in the ark. In the days of great tribulation, there is a similar promise of preservation. In short, judgment is tempered by grace “for the sake of the elect.” This seems to imply that the judgment at the end of the age will be cut short, thus protecting the earth from a comprehensive destruction.

Even in the flood narrative itself, there appears evidence that the flood is the most devastating judgment God will send to the earth. How does the New Testament teaching about the culmination of the plan of redemption—eschatology—inform the thesis of this article? We turn now to three major eschatology texts.

ROMANS 8: THE HOPE OF CREATION

Paul unpacked in Romans 8:18–25 some of the implications of what it means for God’s children, heirs with Christ, to share in the glory of Christ (cf. v. 17). “Our present sufferings,” Paul wrote, “are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (v. 18), not because present sufferings are mild or insignificant but because the glory to be revealed is great and magnificent. He linked this hope with that of all creation in a somewhat unexpected way—by personifying creation and linking her hope to ours: “The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God” (vv. 19–21). Creation waits for redemption. Creation hopes to be liberated from its bondage to decay. Creation looks forward to experiencing the freedom of the resurrected children of God. Unlike humanity’s bondage to decay because of our willful rebellion in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3), creation was subjected to frustration by the will of the Creator. When the divine imagers sinned, all creation suffered.

¹⁷ “If the Lord had not cut short the days, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he shortened the days” (Mark 13:20, ESV).

Our association with creation is God's original design; it predates the fall. From the creation of divine imagers, the destinies of humans and creation are interconnected. What happens to creation impacts humanity and what humanity does impacts creation. Created to care for creation, humans are distinguished from the rest of creation, but the two can never be separated.

Paul continued, "We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, grown inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Rom. 8:22–23). Creation has been groaning since the fall, and those with ears to hear can hear it. Apparently Paul thought that the believers in Rome had good hearing, since he introduced the idea with "we know" (v. 22; cf. v. 28).

Creation does not groan alone, however. Those who have the Spirit groan along with creation. Thus, the Spirit is not given to satisfy us, to satiate our longing, but to groan with us, to help us groan well while we "wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (v. 23). As in 2 Corinthians 5:1–5, the Spirit's work is to guarantee the resurrection of our bodies. The Spirit also guarantees the regeneration of all things (cf. Matt. 19:28), creation's liberation from bondage to decay.

"For in this hope we were saved" (Rom. 8:24). Our salvation does not end with regeneration. Our salvation does not culminate in justification. Our salvation is not summarized in the indwelling Spirit. The goal of our salvation is found in Christ. He is our hope (1 Tim. 1:1). He is our inheritance (Eph. 1:11; 1 Pet. 1:3–9). And the Spirit is given to us to guarantee our inheritance (Eph. 1:14). Our salvation culminates in a new creation, in the removal of the curse of sin and all its effects, in a new heaven and new earth where God makes His home with us forever (Rev. 21:1–4). Our hope is the resurrection of the body, and the resurrection of the body is the revelation of the sons of God (Rom. 8:19), the sign to creation that its redemption is at hand (vv. 20–21).

What is hope? Paul explained that hope is not sight, hope is not wishful thinking, hope is not certainty. Hope is eager and earnest expectation that God will do what He has promised. In short, hope is confidence or trust in God. "Hope that is seen is not hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has. But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently" (vv. 24–25). Hope is patient waiting on the trustworthy promises of God. We wait because God is faithful. We wait because we have not yet received the goal of our faith, the resurrection of our bodies. We wait because we have not found what we are looking for. And to help us while we

wait, God has granted us the gift of the Holy Spirit (vv. 26–27).

How does understanding this text advance the thesis of this article? For several reasons a view that the final judgment will exterminate all life on the planet through a fiery conflagration conflicts with the teaching of Paul in Romans 8. First, he said that creation is groaning in the pains of childbirth. For this metaphor to make sense, this period of pain must culminate in the birth of a child. The annihilation view culminates in a stillbirth or, perhaps even worse, indicates a false pregnancy. The metaphor of pain in childbirth implies that what comes from the labor pains is a baby, something good, a new being full of life and hope. That fits a renewal model better than annihilation.

Second, Paul said that creation was subjected to frustration “in hope.” Hope that culminates in annihilation would seem to be false hope, a cruel hoax. But hope that culminates in something better, a renewed creation, would be consistent with the meaning of the word “hope.”

Third, Paul said that that creation looks forward to liberation from bondage to decay, to be brought into glorious freedom. It is hard to conceive how annihilation could be described as liberation and freedom. Renewal of creation fits the language of liberation from bondage (to be set free) and glorious freedom (freedom that is glorious) much better.

Fourth, Paul compared and linked humanity’s hope of resurrection with creation’s hope of freedom and liberation. When the Scriptures speak of resurrection, they speak of the resurrection of the body, the same body that died, not the annihilation of the mortal body to be replaced by a completely different body. When the disciples saw the resurrected Christ, they recognized Him because He looked like Jesus. When Paul described the resurrected body in 1 Corinthians 15:42–44 he wrote, “The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power, it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.” And then he concluded, “As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the man from heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven” (vv. 48–49). Surely there is significant discontinuity between the natural body and the spiritual body, but there is also continuity.

Finally, God’s work of redemption is consistently renovation. When humans come to faith in Christ, they are not annihilated but redeemed. The “old man” is not destroyed and replaced by a new

man. The heart of stone is not removed and crushed. To be “born again” does not involve passing out of existence. In the same way that there is continuity between the body that goes into the dust and the one that is raised on the last day, so there is continuity between the cursed creation and the renewed creation in the eschaton. Bavinck’s summary is helpful:

Old Testament prophecy, while it looks for an extraordinary transformation in all of nature, refrains from teaching the destruction of the present world. The passages that are assumed to teach the latter (Ps. 102:26; Isa. 34:4; 51:6, 16; 65:17; 66:22) do indeed describe in very graphic terms the change that will set in after the day of the Lord, but they do not imply the destruction of the substance of the world. . . . In the same way, the New Testament proclaims that heaven and earth will pass away (Matt. 5:18; 24:35; 2 Pet. 3:10; 1 John 2:17; Rev. 21:1), that they will perish and wear out like clothing (Heb. 11:1), dissolve (2 Pet. 3:10), be burned with fire (3:10), and be changed (Heb. 1:12). But none of these expressions implies a destruction of substance. Peter, for example, expressly teaches that the old earth, which originated as a result of the separation of waters, was deluged with water and so perished (2 Pet. 3:6), and that the present world would also perish, not—thanks to the divine promise—by water but by fire. Accordingly, with reference to the passing of the present world, we must no more think of destruction of substance than [we would] with regard to the passing of the earlier world in the flood. Fire burns, cleanses, purifies, but does not destroy. The contrast in 1 John 2:17 (‘the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever’) teaches us that the first statement does not imply a destruction of the substance of the world but a vanishing of the world in its present, sin-damaged form. Paul, accordingly, also states very clearly that the present form (τὸ σχῆμα, *to schema*) of this world passes away (1 Cor. 7:31). Only such a renewal of the world, for that matter, accords with what the Scripture teaches about redemption. For the latter is never a second, brand-new creation but a re-creation of the existing world. God’s honor consists precisely in the fact that he redeems and renews the same humanity, the same world, the same heaven, and the same earth that have been corrupted and polluted by sin. Just as anyone in Christ is a new creation in whom the old has passed away and everything has become new (2 Cor. 5:17), so also this world passes away in its present form as well, in order out of its womb, at God’s word of power, to give birth and being to a new world. Just as in the case of an individual human being, so at the end of time a rebirth of the world will take place as well (Matt. 19:28). This constitutes a spiritual renewal, not a physical creation.¹⁸

¹⁸ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, *Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 716–17.

2 PETER 3: THE SCOFFERS SCOFF

In his second letter, Peter corrects the false teaching of the scoffers, those who teach that the delay in Christ's return means that it will not happen. These deliberately forget both the promise of the return of Christ and the work of creation (2 Pet. 3:5). They also intentionally ignore the judgment of the earth in the time of the flood (v. 6). Peter reminds his readers that the return is coming, the delay in the Day of the Lord is not due to God's lack of truthfulness or faithfulness, but due to His patience and compassion (vv. 8–9). Verse 10 is variously translated:

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 (NASB).

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed (ESV).

But 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 done in it will be laid bare (NIV).

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief; when it comes, the heavens will disappear with a horrific noise, and the celestial bodies will melt away in a blaze, and the earth and every deed done on it will be laid bare (NET).

What does it mean that the heavenly bodies will be burned up or dissolved? And what does it mean that the earth and its works will be burned up, exposed, or laid bare? This language sounds to many like the promise of annihilation. Is that the best way to understand it?

One issue that must be addressed by exegetes of this passage is a significant textual problem. The note on verse 10 in the NET Bible calls this "one of the most difficult textual problems in the NT." After surveying various options, including the major attempts at emendation, the translators conclude that Peter's meaning is that the earth and human works will be stripped bare before God.¹⁹ "The meaning of the text then is that all but the earth and men's works will be destroyed. Everything will be removed so that hu-

¹⁹ It is beyond the scope of this article to deal with all the textual considerations. See the NET Bible note for a brief summary and the commentaries on 2 Peter for more detail. Especially helpful is Richard J. Bauckham, *2 Peter and Jude*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1983).

manity will stand naked before God.”²⁰

Al Wolters takes a slightly different approach. He writes, “The author of 2 Peter (whom we take to be either the apostle Peter himself or a close associate writing on his behalf) pictures the day of judgment as a smelting process from which the world will emerge purified. In the light of this understanding of the apostle’s worldview, we shall return to the verb *heurethesetai* and suggest that it is a metallurgical term appropriate to smelting and refining.”²¹ In this case, the fire purifies the earth and its inhabitants; it does not destroy everything. What the readings of the NET Bible translators and Wolters have in common is that the earth is not destroyed. But are they correct?

Peter aims in this chapter to remind his readers of the imminence of the Day of the Lord. The prophets predicted the Lord’s coming. Scoffers scoff because of the delay. They appear to have the upper hand, since “things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation” (2 Pet. 3:4, ESV). But Peter reminds his readers that the scoffers have selective memory. They deliberately forget the judgment in the flood. “The earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished” (vv. 5–6, ESV). The reference is clearly to the flood that destroyed the earth in Noah’s day. Having looked back at the judgment in the flood, Peter then looks forward: “By the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly” (v. 7, ESV). In the flood, the earth was destroyed. In the future day of judgment, it is the ungodly who will be destroyed. It is important to note that the two judgments are not parallel. The former includes the destruction of all life. The latter focuses on ungodly humanity. The two have in common that the earth remains after the judgment, and righteous people are left behind.

The comparison between the judgment in the flood and the future judgment by fire is used by Peter to respond to the deliberately ignorant scoffers. The certainty that the word of God created the earth and that the first judgment was by means of the word of God provides evidence that the future judgment is also secure. As

²⁰ Years of exegetical work and many pages of commentary have not resolved the differences of opinion. The citation of this note from the NET Bible is merely to identify the difficulty.

²¹ Al Wolters, “Worldview and Textual Criticism in 2 Peter 3:10,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 49 (1987): 408.

the flood destroyed the earth, so the heavens and earth are stored up for fire. The flood, of course, did not actually destroy the earth. All life on the earth was destroyed, except those preserved in the ark, but the earth, the planet, itself remained when the waters receded. In short, the waters that covered the earth destroyed life on the earth but not the earth itself. In the same way, the fiery judgment to come will not annihilate the earth but expose it, or lay it bare. The earth will be preserved. This promise is guaranteed by the sure word of God.

Since the waters of the flood did not destroy the earth, and Peter links the eschatological judgment to that deluge, it would seem that the final judgment will be devastating but will not result in the annihilation of the earth and all its inhabitants. In the flood, all living creatures on the earth died. There were, however, humans and animals preserved in the ark. When the waters receded, the passengers on the ark repopulated and filled the earth that had been covered in water. Similarly, “the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men” (v. 7). Thus, presumably, when the ungodly are taken in judgment, the godly will be left behind to repopulate the earth. The hope of the earth and its inhabitants is not annihilation but “a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness” (v. 13).

REVELATION 21–22: THE NEW HEAVEN AND NEW EARTH

John’s series of visions on the island of Patmos concludes with the image of a “new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away . . . I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away’ ” (Rev. 21:1–4). This description is identical to the promise God made through Ezekiel: “I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people. Then the nations will know that I the LORD make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever” (Ezek. 37:26–28).

As in 2 Peter 3:10, there is a difference of opinion on how to

understand the term “pass away” (ἀπῆλθαι) in Revelation 21:1 and 4. Does this mean the first heaven and earth will be annihilated or that they will be renewed into a new heaven and new earth? Will there be continuity between the old and new or will the old be obliterated and replaced by something brand new? NET Bible notes explain that ἀπέρχομαι means “to cease to exist, to pass away, to cease.”²² Similarly, Aune asserts that the language here “makes it difficult to avoid the conclusion that the author has in view the complete destruction of the physical universe.”²³ Were the answer to the question limited to the language of this text alone, it would be hard to argue with that interpretation. But this text needs to be interpreted within the context of the biblical story, and in a way that is consistent with the rest of the canon.

Richard Bauckham’s argument is compelling. He observes that

the words “first” and “new” here carry their almost technical apocalyptic reference to the contrast between, on the one hand, the creation of the present age which is passing away, and, on the other hand, the *eschatologically* new, that is, the qualitatively quite different life of the eternal age to come. The discontinuity is parallel, on a cosmic scale, to the discontinuity, in the case of human persons, between this mortal life and the eschatologically new life of resurrection.²⁴

Later, he writes,

That the contrast between “the first heaven and the first earth,” on the one hand, and “the new heavens and the new earth,” on the other, refers to the eschatological renewal of this creation, not its replacement by another, is further confirmed by the observation that Jewish and Christian could speak rather similarly of the earth that perished in the Flood and the new world that emerged from the Flood (cf. 2 Pet. 3:6), understanding the Flood as a reversion of creation to the chaos from which it was first created.²⁵

Surely this is correct. The pattern established in Scripture is one of renewal and redemption, not annihilation and destruction.

²² The purpose of citing the NET Bible is to observe what seems to be an inconsistency between the conclusions drawn by the translator(s) of 2 Peter 3 and Revelation 21. In Peter’s letter, the translators seem to take the view that the earth will survive judgment, whereas here they seem to defend annihilation of the earth.

²³ David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1998; electronic edition, Logos Library System), S. 1117.

²⁴ Richard Bauckham, *New Testament Theology: The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 49.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 49–50.

This pattern is, perhaps, most particularly seen in salvation and in the promise of resurrection. The body that will be resurrected, Paul said, is the one that was placed in the ground: “The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body” (1 Cor. 15:42–44). Michael Horton puts it well: “The resurrection of the body underscores the anticipation of the final state as redemption of nature rather than its oblivion.”²⁶ He continues,

In the New Testament as well, the final heavenly abode is a created place (Lk 24:51; Jn 14:2–4, Ac 1:11; 7:55–56; 1Pe 3:22). To be sure, the renewal is so radical that it can only be described in apocalyptic terms (2Pe 3:12–13), as passing away (Rev 21:2–3).

Nevertheless, we should not think in terms of the end of God’s creation itself but of the end of creation in its current condition. Steven Prediger-Bouma observes: “An orthodox Christian eschatology speaks not of annihilation of the earth but its renewal and restoration.” Our heavenly hope is not only of saved souls but of a saved creation (Ro 8:19–21).²⁷

The dispensationalist Craig Blaising agrees. The idea of annihilation of the earth, Blaising writes,

does not fit with biblical eschatology generally, which speaks of a redemption and renewal of the creation, not its annihilation. The idea of cosmic annihilation properly belongs to Gnostic eschatology, which generally held that materiality as such would be annihilated to make way for a purely spiritual order. Biblical eschatology knows nothing of this, but emphasizes rather a holistic redemption of the created order. What will be eliminated in the Day of the Lord is not the cosmos or materiality as such, but sin and evil. And this is where the language of refinement by fire finds its proper place.²⁸

²⁶ Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 988.

²⁷ Horton, *Systematic Theology*, 988. The quotation is from Steven Prediger-Bouma, *For the Beauty of the Earth* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 125.

²⁸ Craig A. Blaising, “The Day of the Lord Will Come: An Exposition of 2 Peter 3:1–8,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 169 (October–December 2012): 389. Al Wolters, “Worldview and Textual Criticism in 2 Peter 3:10,” 413, makes a similar point. “Textual criticism seems in this case to have read into Peter’s text features of a Gnostic worldview which looked on the present created order as expendable in the overall scheme of things. The text of 2 Pet. 3:10, on our interpretation, lends no support to this perspective, but stresses instead the permanence of the created earth, despite the coming judgement.”

IMPLICATIONS

But, so what? What difference does it make? Is this an exegetical and theological battleground that has little impact on the way Christians practice the faith? Or does it matter whether one believes the earth will be annihilated or will be renewed? Gale Heide writes: "If this earth on which we live is going to be completely destroyed, as many evangelicals believe it is, then we have little more responsibility to it than to act as good stewards of the resources God has given us. But if this world has a future in God's plan, being renewed rather than re-created *ex nihilo*, then perhaps we have a much greater responsibility than to merely act as good managers."²⁹ Then he makes a telling admission: "While I do not think of myself as an environmentalist, I must admit that they are concerned about the right things. Too often this issue is passed off by Christians as a secular or liberal concern, important only to radicals or new-age spiritualists. Evangelicals speak of it only occasionally, and then usually from the standpoint of a mere consumer. Further, when evangelicals do address creation's future it often sounds quite dismal."³⁰ Perhaps evangelicals ought to begin thinking of themselves as environmentalists.

Good theology is always intensely practical. Systematic theology should be in service of ethics. The issue of stewardship of the environment has significant implications for life and ministry. God created humanity with the responsibility to care for creation. That mandate has never been changed. The stewardship of creation remains our responsibility. Heide concludes,

We were given the responsibility to act as stewards over this created world (Gen 2:15–25). This responsibility has not diminished, even though sin permeates the world and all things in it. It would be easy to disregard the creation if we believe it has no future beyond the final judgment. We could simply treat it as a resource to be managed, for the sake of optimum production. But if it does have a future existence, and if God feels strongly enough about saving it to make it a part of his eternal plan of redemption, then perhaps we should regard

²⁹ Gale Z. Heide, "What Is New about the New Heaven and the New Earth? A Theology of Creation from Revelation 21 and 2 Peter 3," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40 (March 1997): 39.

³⁰ Heide, "What Is New?" 40. He goes on to quote A. Truesdale, "Last Things First: The Impact of Eschatology on Ecology," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 46 (June 1994): 119–20, who writes: "Dispensational premillennialism defrauds the creation of the gospel's promise that it too 'will be liberated from its bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God' (Rom. 8:21, NKJV). It also cripples the witness of evangelical faith in the world."

it as more than simply a choice of good. It is hard to imagine that God is dispassionate about anything, especially about something he plans to redeem. Scripture teaches quite clearly that the objects of his redemption are also the objects of his love. Certainly God loves those created in his image. But it also seems apparent that his love extends even to the minutest of creatures. God loves all his handiwork. Could it be that we should love it too?³¹

Second, stewardship of creation is a responsibility given to all humanity, not just to the unredeemed. Creation care is not the responsibility of the non-Christians but all humans. Some Christians have argued that we should leave such issues to the unregenerate because their hope is here, and we have much more important things to do. Surely not! Should not Christians be setting the example, leading the charge on environmental issues? Should not evangelical theologians be at the front of the pack? After all, it is we who believe the Bible is inspired and thus inerrant and authoritative, and the Bible mandates stewardship of creation.

Third, creation care should not be a political issue. It is a theological and ethical issue. When it is turned into a political football, it is easily fumbled and lost. In a “two-party” system, political concerns often result in polarities that are unhelpful. To change metaphors, common concerns across the political spectrum ought to unite everyone on this issue.

Fourth, creation care is a sanctity of life issue. Providing clean environments for animals and humans extends life and enhances its quality. Providing healthy food extends life and enhances its quality. Preserving clean water and air extends life and enhances its quality. Quality of life, in a healthy environment, is surely as important as defending the right to life at the beginning (against abortion) and the end (against euthanasia) of life. Surely a slow death from polluted air and water, contaminated food, and other environmental issues ought to concern us. How could we justify silence, apathy, or inactivity when we could do something to preserve and protect life, both of humans and other creatures, the stewardship of which was given to our care?

Fifth, creation care is a gospel issue. Dead people cannot respond to the gospel. And the gospel is not merely a matter of preparing people to go to heaven when they die.³² Feeding the hungry

³¹ Heide, “What Is New?” 56.

³² Stearns, *The Hole in Our Gospel*, is an excellent resource. See also N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2008).

and meeting the needs of the poor is the essence of true religion (cf. Jas. 2:14–17). “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (v. 27). Surely providing clean air and water is as important as providing food and clothes.

Sixth, even if I am wrong and when the judgment comes the earth will be annihilated, we still ought to care for the creation. Nowhere in Scripture is there even a hint that we can hasten the return of Christ by destroying His earth. Nowhere in Scripture is there even a hint that we can destroy the earth with impunity. In fact, Revelation 11:18 seems to imply the converse: “The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your saints and those who reverence your name, both small and great—and for destroying those who destroy the earth.” In short, since we live on this planet and, for all we know, generations to come will live here too, creation care enhances the quality of life for us and our children and grandchildren.

Perhaps it is the case that if a ship is sinking it would be a waste of time to polish the brass. But while the ship is sailing on the open seas, even if everyone knows that ship will eventually sink, polishing the brass makes the journey more enjoyable and extends the life of the fixtures until the ship sinks. After all, it might be several more trips before she sinks. In that case, would not keeping the brass shining be preferable to allowing it to tarnish, corrode, and thus hasten its demise?

Michael Horton concludes his recent *Systematic Theology* with these words, which make a fitting end to this article: “If our goal is to be liberated *from* creation rather than the liberation *of* creation, we will understandably display little concern for the world that God has made. If, however, we are looking forward to ‘the restoration of all things’ (Ac 3:21) and the participation of the whole creation in our redemption (Ro 8:18–21), then our actions here and now pertain to the same world that will one day be finally and fully renewed.”³³

³³ Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology*, 989–90.