

Heaven and Earth

One beautiful day from the gentle slopes of a lush green hillside of Judea, our Lord addressed a great throng of disciples who had followed Him from Galilee, Decapolis, Jerusalem, all of Judea, and even from beyond the Jordan River. For many centuries now, devoted followers of our Lord Jesus have appropriately spoken of this address as Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount." In this discourse, The Master spoke of the marvelous blessings that were soon to be enjoyed by all of God's faithful, for THEN God would dwell or tabernacle with them. (Rev. 21:3) In this sermon Jesus speaks of those blessed as those who were humble and saw themselves as spiritually destitute; those who mourned their sins; those who were gentle or meek; those who hungered and thirsted after righteousness; those who showed mercy; those whose hearts were pure; those who sought to make peace; those who were already being persecuted because of their righteous living; and those who would receive insults and have all kinds of false charges sworn against them because of their devotion to their Messiah (Vv3-11). He further says in Vv 13,14 that, as His disciples, they were the "salt of the earth" and the very "light of the world."

But just 3 verses later, in Vv 17,18 The Master speaks words of great import to these disciples; things which they needed to understand, and things of which I am convinced they DID understand. Albeit, in our present day, these words (especially vs. 18) seem to get very little attention by most folks for whatever reason. Perhaps with many folks, it's for the same reason that I once avoided it. My good brethren, I wish, at the moment, that you would simply read vs.18 before we proceed any further, and just see if you have any difficulty whatsoever in reconciling our Lord's words there! If you do, then it's not anything of which you should be ashamed. I'm certainly not going to be critical of you, because I cannot deny it; for many years this little verse just really tied me in knots! But I NOW see in this verse, a statement which is quite revealing when considering the matter of "Covenant Eschatology." Here are the things our Lord said: "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets, I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly, I say to you, UNTIL HEAVEN AND EARTH PASS AWAY, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished." As I've already said, in the past, I did not give much attention to the things said in vs.18 of this account. And my reason for this was because when viewing this verse through "futuristic" lenses as I was doing, the verse becomes quite confusing and seemingly contradictory. Yes, at first blush, I understood our Lord to be saying that this physical universe was going to have to "pass away" or come to an end before the "Law of Moses" would pass away. Of course I knew this understanding was an impossibility but I also knew that my "unwritten church creed" would not allow for an eschatological view outside the church's established view (amillennialist). So I just honestly had no reasonable explanation for our Lord's statement in that passage, and consequently for all practical purposes, I gave as little attention to it as I possibly could for a long, long time.

Well, to make a long story short, I wore those same "futuristic" lenses for some 32 years until just 2 1/2 years ago, when I viewed this same verse from the perspective of "realized eschatology" which is often referred to as the "preterist" view, which simply is the understanding that ALL prophecies have been fulfilled. My good brothers and sisters, please believe me when I say that my new understanding on these matters is in no way based on what "my church" says. I also would like for everyone reading this little treatise to know that I don't feel that I have the final word on this or any other Bible matter, nor do I feel that you must agree with me. I certainly make no claims of scholarship! I don't feel that I have the corner on truth! I'm simply a meager disciple, a learner, a student no different from yourself, with that simple burning desire to understand the Words of our Master as best I can, and who desires to conform to His image more and more as each day of this earthly existence slowly slips away! I certainly don't see the study of eschatology as a "lost or saved" matter. And for that reason, it saddens me so, when I see the bitterness and anger expressed by some just because it's different from their view. I will tell you right now, the only reason that I am presently writing this little piece: It is certainly not for the purpose of wrangling with my brethren; those days are long gone as of more than 20 years ago! Yes, I desire to be a "peacemaker" and not a "piece maker!" But I simply want everybody to be as excited with their bible study as they possibly can be, and to enjoy their salvation as much as they possibly can. And I just believe that if folks would just simply investigate these things; put this view to the test! Just simply try reading the Scriptures from that

paradigm and just see if some of the passages which once may have tied you in knots, suddenly begin to fall into place and come into clearer focus! Then, if it doesn't help clear up some of the obscure passages, then just simply retain what you previously believed!

Now, with that said, let's go back to the passage of discussion, and I will explain what I now understand Jesus' words here to mean! Now I would suppose that all of us understand Jesus' use of the term "Law and Prophets" in vs.17, as ALL those things that are written in the Old Testament Scriptures; those writings which also contained the law under which the Jews lived and served Jehovah. Often times we simply refer to that law as "The Law of Moses" or "The Old Covenant." It is also my understanding that Jesus' words "until ALL is accomplished" means just that i.e., it would include the FULFILLMENT of ALL the prophecies of God's Old Testament Prophets as well as the Psalms; just as Jesus said in vs.18, "UNTIL ALL IS ACCOMPLISHED." Beloved, please read also the following passages, for I believe this to be critical to our understanding: Mat.24:34,35; Lk.18:31; Lk. 21:22,32; Lk. 24:27,44; Ax.3:21,

Now, in light of all this, notice what our Savior reveals about the duration of the Law of Moses! He very clearly declares, "...UNTIL HEAVEN AND EARTH PASS AWAY, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until ALL is accomplished." Now, as I intimated before, this is where I had my struggle before I changed my eschatological view! It's here where there APPEARED to me to be a contradiction, simply because I was not able to reconcile two indisputable facts: (1) The Law of Moses HAS indeed passed away. and yet, (2) The physical universe still stands. Do you see what I'm saying here? Maybe you too have been puzzled by these things as well. For sure, you and I today do not serve our Master under The Law of Moses, but rather under the New and glorious Covenant of The Lord Jesus Christ! So then, just how do we explain this verse in light of the fact that the physical heavens and earth have NOT passed away? Please allow me to answer that question with another question: "Could it be possible that the 'heavens and earth' indeed HAVE passed away?" Is there a possibility that all of us could maybe have overlooked the real message our Lord was trying to convey here to Israel? Well, I for one, am willing to seriously consider that possibility, for I am fully persuaded by these words of Jesus, that if "heaven and earth" have indeed NOT "passed away," then we today would of necessity still be held sway under the Old Covenant or Law of Moses! If in fact "heaven and earth" have not "passed away," then it would mean that not ONE "stroke or the smallest letter" found in the Law has passed away! I'm sure that you clearly see the the dilemma here! Of course, you and I know that when there is a seeming contradiction in Heaven's message, it's not because there really IS one, but rather it's because we are simply not properly understanding the message that God is conveying to us. So, it's WE who are the problem, NOT God or His Word! So, just how then, do we reconcile this problem? Just what lesson was Jesus conveying to that great mass of Jews that covered that Judaeian hillside some 2,000 years ago? Well, that's what I would like to take the next few minutes to talk about; to simply express what I NOW understand to be our Master's message.

With regard to just what was meant by Jesus' words, "heaven and earth must pass away" before the Law of Moses could also pass away, I believe that we must have a clear and correct understanding of terms. We have already concluded that "The Law and The Prophets" clearly refer to "The Law of Moses and ALL the things written in the Old Testament Scriptures, including the Prophets and the Psalms. And this "Law of Moses" was the law which the Jews were under at the time that Jesus spoke those words. I truly don't see where there is any problem of understanding these facts. Therefore, with these central facts established in our minds, I am certain that if we can now come to a clear understanding of the definition of the term "heaven and earth" as the Lord uses it here, then we can reconcile these "seemingly" contradictory statements!

A passage which I find to be so interesting in this regard is Is.51:15,16. Here, Jehovah says, "But I am the Lord thy God, that divided the sea, whose waves roared: The Lord of hosts is his name. And I have put my words in thy mouth, and I have covered thee in the shadow of mine hand, that I may plant the heavens, and lay the foundations of the earth, and say unto Zion, Thou art my people." Upon taking a closer look at the things God tells Israel that He had done for them, things began to clear up for me. Notice all the marvelous things He declares:

(1) He says that He had, "divided the sea, whose waves roared." i.e., He had delivered them from Egyptian bondage, dividing the Red Sea that they might cross over on dry land to safety!

(2) "I have put My words in thy mouth." i.e., to Israel was given the very oracles of God. They had received the Law through Moses on Mt. Sinai which was to act as their schoolmaster which was to ultimately bring them to their Messiah.

(3) "I have covered thee with the shadow of Mine hand." Yes, God had so graciously taken Israel under His hand, protecting them from their enemies, while at the same time, extending His providential care to suit all their needs.

Now, beloved in light of all the marvelous things that we have just seen that God did for Israel, look very closely now in vs. 16 and see just what these things constituted: This is very important, for this second half of that verse helps us to clearly understand all that is said before it! God said He did all those things, "that I may PLANT THE HEAVENS, and LAY THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE EARTH, and say unto Zion, Thou art my people." Brethren, do you see what I'm getting at here? It's ever so clear here that Jehovah is not alluding to the Genesis account of His creation of the physical "heavens and earth" back at the beginning. I'm sure that you can see as well as I, that the "heavens and earth" that are spoken of here were created AFTER God led them out of bondage and through the sea. That's what this text clearly says! Yes, my dear brethren, God created for Israel, THEIR "heavens and earth."

If you are anything like me, you thoroughly enjoy reading the historical account by Josephus of those days. Even though not an inspired man, he, being a Jew and historian contemporary with those times of the 1st century, was so familiar with the construction of the temple and I believe that his description of the inside of the temple/tabernacle gives us a little additional insight into why our Lord used that particular term "heaven and earth" in Mat.5:18. It certainly doesn't seem to have not been understood by those Jewish disciples who heard Him! Yes, the temple, or tabernacle was at the very center of Israel's "heaven and earth!" The following excerpts are some of the things Josephus recorded in his "Antiquities of the Jews." First, Book III, chap.6, section 4: "Now the room within those pillars was the most holy place; but the rest of the room was the tabernacle, which was open for the priests. However, this proportion of the measures of the tabernacle proved to be an imitation of the SYSTEM OF THE WORLD; for that third part thereof which was within the four pillars, to which the priests were not admitted, is, as it were, a HEAVEN peculiar to God." Of the veil at the holy of holies, he said, "This veil was very ornamental, and embroidered with all sorts of FLOWERS which THE EARTH produces; and there were interwoven into it all sorts of variety that might be an ornament, excepting the forms of ANIMALS"

Now, here's another excerpt taken from his Book III, Chap.7, Section 7: Of the fabric of the Tabernacle, he said, "...they were, every one made in way of imitation and representation of THE UNIVERSE. When Moses distinguished the tabernacle into three parts, and allowed two of them to the priests, as a place accessible and common, he denoted the LAND and SEA, these being of general access to all; but he set apart the third division for God, because HEAVEN is inaccessible to men. And when he ordered twelve loaves to be set on the table, he denoted the year, as distinguished into so many months. By branching out the candlestick into seventy parts, he secretly intimated the Decani, or seventy divisions of THE PLANETS; and as to the seven lamps upon the candlesticks, they referred to the COURSE OF THE PLANETS, of which that is the number. The veils, too, which were composed of four things, they declared the FOUR ELEMENTS; for the fine linen was proper to signify THE EARTH, because the FLAX grows out of THE EARTH' the purple signified THE SEA, because that color is dyed by the blood of a SEA SHELL-FISH; the blue is fit to signify THE AIR; and the scarlet will naturally be an indication of FIRE. Now the vestment of the high priest being made of linen, signified THE EARTH; the blue denoted THE SKY, being like LIGHTNING in its POMEGRANATES, and in the noise of the bells resembling THUNDER. And for the ephod, it showed that God had made THE UNIVERSE of FOUR ELEMENTS; and as for the gold interwoven, I suppose it related to the splendor by which all things are enlightened. He also appointed the breastplate to be placed in the middle of the ephod, to resemble THE EARTH, for that has the very middle place OF THE WORLD. And the girdle which encompassed the high priest round, signified the OCEAN, for that goes round about and includes THE UNIVERSE. Each of the sardonyxes

declares to us THE SUN and THE MOON...And as for the mitre, which was of a blue color, it seems to me to mean HEAVEN." Beloved, even though the preceding were not the words of an inspired man, still the fact that Josephus was a Jewish Historian who was contemporary with the times of the Temple and its destruction, I believe, places him in a unique position for information and insight into such things as we have just read!

In addition to the Is.51:15,16 passage we cited, I would like to cite a few more, albeit not all, of the passages dealing with Israel's "heaven and earth." For example, in Lev.26:19, Jehovah warned Israel of the consequences of their not carrying out His commandments of The Law as it related to their "heaven and earth." He said, "And I will also break down your own pride of power; I will also make your "SKY" like iron and your "EARTH" like bronze." Please take note also of the fact that God assigns the "personal pronoun" YOUR to this judgment, denoting that He was speaking specifically of ISRAEL'S "sky;" ISRAEL'S "earth!" Now look at Deut.4:25,26 as God promises judgment on Israel if they act corruptly against Him. And then He said, "I call HEAVEN and EARTH to witness against you today that you shall surely perish quickly from the land where you are going over the Jordan to possess it." It seems clear here, to me, that God's witnesses of "heaven and earth" against Israel was the covenant world which He had created for them upon their deliverance, and governed by The Law that He had given to them. Notice in Deut.30:19 where this very promise is repeated to them, and again, God calls their "heaven and earth" as witnesses against them. Please compare these passages with Moses' final words to Israel and see if you get the same understanding of this term "heaven and earth!" "And it came about, when Moses finished writing the words of this law in a book until they were complete, that Moses commanded the Levites who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, saying, Take this book of the law and place it beside the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, that it may remain there as a witness against you. For I know your rebellion and your stubbornness; behold, while I am still alive with you today, you have been rebellious against the Lord; how much more, then, after my death? Assemble to me all the elders of your tribes and your officers, that I may speak these words in their hearing and call the HEAVENS and the EARTH to witness against them." Brothers and sisters, it just seems to me that with God's taking Israel as His people, giving to Israel His law and His gracious providence, He founded (created and established) "their world;" their "heavens and earth!"

But sadly enough, Moses' works concerning Israel's stubbornness and disobedience and blatant disregard for God's law, the time would come that Israel's world, their "heavens and earth" would be destroyed as God had said it would. Only a remnant would be faithful to Him. Of former Israel, Jehovah said, "Thus says the Lord, As the new wine is found in the cluster, And one says, 'Do not destroy it, for there is benefit in it,' So I will act on behalf of My servants in order NOT to destroy all of them. And I will bring forth offspring from Jacob. And an heir of My mountains from Judah; Even My chosen ones shall inherit it, and My servants shall dwell there." (Is.65:8,9) So, here we see the promise of a destruction of the Old fleshly, temporal world of Judaism; the Old "heavens and earth." Yes, in 70 A.D., God, through His lethal instrument of Titus and the Roman Legions and allies, razed Jerusalem and the temple to the ground along with all that was IN the temple and ark. In addition, with the slaughter of all the priests (some say 2,000 to 2,500 priests), this brought an end to the old Covenant priesthood with all of its animal sacrifices. Therefore, with all these things, one can see that Israel's world truly did come to an end! For fleshly Israel, "heaven and earth" indeed did pass away just as our Master promised.

With these things in mind, it greatly highlights what The Holy Spirit had the Hebrew writer to pen only 2 or 3 years before this shaking of Israel's "heaven and earth," as he wrote with a noticeable tone of "finality!" In Heb.12:26,27, He said, contrasting God's shaking of the earth by His voice at Mt. Sinai, with what He was about to do shortly, "And His voice shook the EARTH then, but NOW He has promised, saying, "Yet ONCE MORE I will shake, not only the EARTH, but also the HEAVEN, And this expression, 'Yet once more,' denotes THE REMOVING of those things which CAN BE SHAKEN as of CREATED things, in order that those things which CAN NOT BE SHAKEN, may remain." Friends, it just seems so clear to me, especially upon reading Vv18-29, that the writer is indeed contrasting the Old Covenant world of Judaism and its earthly priesthood, sacrifices and ordinances with The great and glorious New Covenant and Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So, in this prophecy, God succinctly expresses that still, there was one obstacle which stood in the way of His glorious New Covenant world or New "heavens and earth," being totally perfected or completed: I understand that to be the Old Covenant fleshly world or "heavens and earth" of Judaism. it would have to be removed! I call to your attention more words from the pen of the writer of Hebrews! In Chapter 9, Vv8-10, he says this: "The Holy Spirit is signifying this, that the way into the holy place HAS NOT YET been disclosed while the outer TABERNACLE IS STILL STANDING, which is a SYMBOL FOR THE PRESENT TIME (1st century present time--emph. mine JG). Accordingly, both gifts and sacrifices ARE OFFERED, which cannot make the worshiper perfect in conscience since they relate only to food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body IMPOSED UNTIL A TIME OF REFORMATION.' Gentle reader, these words clearly state that The Tabernacle, or Temple, which was at the very epicenter of Judaism, with its temporal Holy of Holies, the old priesthood, the ordinances etc., was still standing at THAT PRESENT TIME (vs.8) when these words were penned. But he then says that all of that was only until a TIME OF REFORMATION." (vs.10) I am persuaded that "time of reformation" is exactly what is in view in Chapter 12, Vv 26,27 when God would once more "shake not only the EARTH, BUT ALSO THE HEAVEN," and removing the things "which could be shaken" (the created things), leaving only the things "which COULD NOT BE SHAKEN" viz., "The glorious Kingdom" (vs.28), "Mt. Zion," "the city of the living God," "the Heavenly Jerusalem," "the general assembly and ekklesia of the firstborn. Yes, beloved, the "new heavens and earth" as promised in 2Pet.3:8-13; Is.65:17-19; Is.66:22,23; and also Rev.21:1-5. When our Savior shed His blood on the cross, rose from the dead, He then entered into Heaven, the true "Holy of Holies (Heb.9:24). It was there, in His role as High Priest, that He offered His blood as a true and complete atonement for man's sins.

Now, with the preceding facts offered by the scribe of the Hebrews epistle, and all the related passages referenced, please look with me now at Paul's allegory to the Galatian saints, and just see if he doesn't speak of the same thing we've just talked about! Here, Paul's allegory is precipitated by some of the brethren there being influenced by the Judaizing teachers to abandon the gospel of salvation by grace through faith, for attempted salvation by works of The Law. In Chap.4, verses 19,20, Paul expresses his sorrow and disappointment in those brethren. Then, beginning in vs.21 He says, "Tell me, you who want to be under law, do you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman, and one by the free woman. But the son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and the son by the free woman, through the promise. This is allegorically speaking; for these women are two covenants, one proceeding from Mount Sinai bearing children who are to be slaves; she is Hagar. Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and CORRESPONDS TO THE PRESENT JERUSALEM (1st century present Jerusalem--emph. mine JG), for she is in slavery with her children (fleshly Israel--emph. mine JG). But the Jerusalem above is free (those of the faith of Abraham--emph. mine JG); she is our mother." Paul then continues in vs.28, "And you, brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise. But as at that time, he who was born according to the flesh (Hagar's son Ishmael) persecuted him who was born according to The Spirit, SO IT IS NOW ALSO (in the 1st century--emph. mine JG). But what does the Scripture say? Cast out the bondwoman and her son, For the son of the bondwoman shall not be an heir with the son of the free woman. So then, brethren, we are not children of a bondwoman, but of the free woman." Isn't it just remarkable how this allegory comports so well with what the Hebrews writer had to say? Paul makes it so clear that it was the world of Judaism that stood as such a great obstacle during that 40 year period from the Cross to 70 A.D. Folks, it seems so clear, at least to me, that it is "Jewish" persecution that is in view here, NOT Rome. Yes, it was fleshly Jerusalem (Israel) who killed God's PROPHETS, NOT Rome.(Mt.23:29-39) Surely, Nero did viciously persecute Christians beginning in 64 A.D. till his death in 68 A.D., but that's NOT what Paul is focusing on here; it was fleshly Jerusalem, those NOT of "the faith of Abraham." But Paul assures these brethren that God was soon to remove that great obstacle; casting out the bondwoman and her son. Yes, our Creator was about to fulfill His words of Mal.4:1 where He said, "For behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace, and all the arrogant and every evildoer will be chaff; and the day that is coming will set them ablaze, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them NEITHER ROOT OR BRANCH."

The following are a few other passages which also point to that great and eventful day:

(1) In Matt.3:10,12, John the baptizer, the second Elijah, said, "And the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire...And His

winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

(2) In Mat.16:27,28, our Master told His apostles that some of them would still be alive when He returned to carry out judgment on the wicked. He said, "For the Son of Man is GOING TO (Greek 'mello'--about to) come in the glory of His Father with His angels; and will then recompense every man according to his deeds. Truly, I say to you, there are some of those who are stranding here who shall not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom." Daniel was told by the angel that this would come to pass at the time spoken of as the time, "...as soon as they (Rome) finish shattering the power of the HOLY PEOPLE (emph. mine JG) Dan.12:7. Please read also, ALL of Daniel 12!

(3) In the Matt.23 passage cited above, our Lord pronounces doom upon the Jews for their treatment of all of God's faithful from the time of Abel, and especially all of His prophets. And He speaks specifically to those of His own generation, "...that upon YOU, all these things shall come upon THIS GENERATION...behold your house is left unto you desolate. For I say to YOU, from now on YOU shall not see Me until you say, blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." (Matt.23:35,36,38,39)

(4) Speaking again of "heaven and earth," our Lord also said in Matt.24:34,35, "Truly, I say to you; THIS GENERATION will not pass away until all these things take place. HEAVEN AND EARTH WILL PASS AWAY, but MY words shall not pass away."

Among the plethora of passages in the epistles, which speak to then "soon to occur" coming of the Lord, are these few:

(1) In Heb.10:37, the writer warned, very close to the end of the Jewish age, "For yet IN A VERY LITTLE WHILE, He who is coming, will come, and WILL NOT DELAY."

(2) James, The Lord's brother, writing to Jews in the last days of that age wrote, "You too, be patient; strengthen your hearts, for THE COMING of The Lord IS AT HAND." Do not complain, brethren, against one another, that you yourselves may not be judged: behold the Judge is STANDING RIGHT AT THE DOOR.' (Jas.5:8,9)

(3) Peter wrote also to Jewish Christians scattered abroad, also in the last days, "...but they shall give account to Him who IS READY to judge the living and the dead....THE END OF ALL THINGS IS AT HAND; therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer...for IT IS TIME for The Judgment (original text does bear the definite article 'the') to begin with THE HOUSEHOLD OF GOD (Israel--emph. mine JG) (1Pet.4:5,7,17)

(4) Peter again, in 2Pet.3:10,11 said, "But, the DAY OF THE LORD will come like a thief, in which THE HEAVENS WILL PASS AWAY with a great roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and THE EARTH, and it's works will be burned up. Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought YOU (those of that generation) to be in holy conduct and godliness.

Brothers and sisters, these are just a few of the many, many eschatological which I believe focus on the dissolution of the world of fleshly Old Covenant Israel which was destined to be destroyed. Therefore, with regard to the words of Jesus in Matt.5:17,18, it just seems so clear to me that what He is saying is that the OLD "heavens and earth" of Judaism, with its fleshly, temporal priesthood and animal sacrifices, along with the temple made with hands, would be taken out of the way. With the removal of all these temporal things, then "every jot and tittle" of the Old Covenant Law would then finally and completely "pass away!" To me, all of this says, "No temple, no ark, no earthly priesthood, no more animal sacrifices,---No Old Covenant!" Thank you very much for your consideration of these things!

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