

The new heaven and new earth, where righteousness dwells

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(Note: All underlining of Scripture quotations for emphasis has been added by the author.)

2 Peter 3:13:

But in keeping with God's promise, we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.

The context helps determine Peter's meaning.

So, let's examine the whole chapter (2 Peter 3) to get a handle on the context.

1. The apostle Peter is writing to Christians, both Jewish and Gentile, in Asia Minor (present day Turkey).

Peter had written previously to these believers (3:1; cf. 1Pet 1:1).

Both epistles were probably penned in the early 60s AD.

In his first letter Peter had declared the end of all things to be "at hand" (1Pet 4:7, **ESV**) and THE Judgment about to begin (1Pet 4:5, 17).¹ The "revelation of Jesus Christ" was imminent (1Pet 1:7, 13) — the revelation of his heavenly glory (1Pet 4:13; 5:1).²

2. Here, in 2 Peter 3, the apostle addresses the apparent delay in Jesus' return.

Jesus' followers had been proclaiming that their Lord would come again:

They expected Jesus to come back soon, for he had explicitly promised to return in their generation.³

Peter warns his first-century readers that before long, "scoffers" will arise to ridicule the Christian hope of the Parousia (3:3-4).

These will claim that "ever since our fathers fell asleep" everything continues on just as it always has.

The reference to "our fathers" (in 3:4) helps us identify these scoffers:

They will be Jewish scoffers, for our fathers refers to their Israelite forefathers of the Old Covenant.

The scoffers will particularly mock the promise and threat of judgment against themselves and their city and temple. With 30+ years having already elapsed, they will allege the promise's non-fulfillment.⁴

¹ 1 Peter 4:17 (Greek text): τὸ κρίμα (*to krima*) = THE Judgment. The following translations include the definite article: CJB, Darby, DLNT, GW, JUB, LEB, NABRE, NCB, NEB, NOG, YLT.

² Concerning Jesus' "revelation" in 1 Peter 1:7, 13; 4:13: The Greek noun *apokalypsis* (Strong's G602) is the same as that found in 1 Corinthians 1:7; 2 Thessalonians 1:7; and Revelation 1:1.

³ See, for example, Matthew 16:27-28; 24:34; 1 Corinthians 1:7; Philippians 4:5; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 10:37; James 5:7-9.

⁴ Jesus had promised to return "on the clouds of heaven" (Mt 24:30; 26:64) — as the divine Judge. His return would culminate in the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple (Mt 23:35 – 24:21; Lk 21:20-24). All this would transpire before that generation had passed (Mt 16:27-28; 24:34; Lk 21:32).

These scoffers will come “in the last days” — the last days of Israel and of the old order (3:3; cf. 1Pet 4:7).⁵

3. To his readers Peter now points to God’s intervention at the Flood (3:5-7).

He had already reminded them of previous interventions: God’s judgment on fallen angels, at the Flood, and on Sodom and Gomorrah (2Pet 2:4-9).

The point being that judgment, though delayed, was absolutely certain.

For, whatever God promises will always be fulfilled. But whether such fulfillment transpires the following day or after 1000 years is irrelevant to him (3:8).⁶

Indeed, the delay shows God’s patience, allowing time for all his elect people to repent and be saved (3:9).

Importantly, the purpose of the day of judgment is the “destruction of ungodly men” (3:7).

The world that was destroyed in the Flood (3:6) was the world of wicked men, not the physical globe:

“... he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly” (2Pet 2:5, ESV).

And so it would be in the coming judgment by fire.

4. Peter evidently saw a close parallel between his own time and the days of Noah.

A time of world judgment was imminent, and the present order was coming to an end (1Pet 4:5, 7, 17).

Amidst all the chaos baptized believers would be “saved”, just as Noah and his family were.

For Christ was their Ark, and those in him were safe. Like Noah, they would be borne above the flood of God’s wrath and brought safely into the New World. Through baptism they were joined to him who died and who rose again above the power of death and was now in heaven (1Pet 3:20-22).

5. Peter’s intended recipients were themselves eagerly awaiting the day of God, and they could even hasten its arrival (3:12).

6. The coming of the new heaven and new earth, notes Peter, is in accordance with God’s promise (3:13).

Which promise?

Evidently the promises of Isaiah 65:17ff., which mostly describe conditions in a new/renewed Jerusalem. But note, Isaiah’s new creation is to be identified with the messianic kingdom of his earlier prophecies — compare Isaiah 65:25 with 11:6-9.

The whole of Isaiah 40 – 66 relates to the restorative work of Yahweh’s Servant (Jesus).

Isaiah is therefore anticipating the messianic kingdom — the present gospel or Church age.⁷

7. “Righteousness” will dwell in the new creation (3:13).

The Greek verb translated “dwell” (*katoikeō*, Strong’s G2730) means “to settle down as a permanent resident.” The new world will be characterized by ever-increasing righteousness and justice.

Such a characterization should make us recall Old Testament prophecies relating to the future messianic kingdom, as found, for example, in Psalm 72; Isaiah 9:6-7; 11:1-5; 42:1-4; Jeremiah 23:5-6.

Having examined the context, we shall now consider the expectations of Peter and his readers in relation to the new age that was on the horizon.

⁵ “Last days” here means the last days of Israel and of institutional Judaism — prior to that nation’s termination in AD 70. It probably also denotes the last days of the old world order prior to the coming of the new. See James 5:3; 1 Peter 4:7; 1 John 2:18.

⁶ 2 Peter 3:8 is often misused to assert that God’s sense of time is radically different to ours. But that is not what Peter intends! James Stuart Russell, in *The Parousia* (1878), explains Peter’s intent thus:

“Yet it is not unusual to quote these words as an argument or excuse for the total disregard of the element of time in the prophetic writings. ... [But Peter’s meaning is that to God] one day and a thousand years are alike: that is to say, the promise which falls due in a day will be performed punctually, and the promise which falls due in a thousand years will be performed with equal punctuality. Length of time makes no difference to Him.”

All this is further developed in the article on this website: “*With the Lord ... a thousand years [are] as one day*” (2 Peter 3:8).

⁷ Note that people still die in Isaiah’s new creation, albeit at a great age (Isa 65:20).

This age, and the age to come

The Jews of old divided history into two time periods: the then present age, and the following age to come.

We see this, for example, in **Matthew 12:32**, where Jesus declares:

"... but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the one to come."

We again see this in the judgment parables of Matthew 13.

Matthew 13:39-40, 49:

³⁹ *"... The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.*

⁴⁰ *As the weeds are collected and burned in the fire, so will it be at the end of the age."*

⁴⁹ *"So will it be at the end of the age: The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous,"*

We further see this in the Olivet Discourse with the disciples' question about the temple's destruction.

Matthew 24:3:

While Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately.

"Tell us," they said, "when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming and of the end of the age?"

Here are three points from the above:

- The Jews divided history into two periods: the present age, and the future messianic age.
- The present age would conclude with a time of judgment, during which the wicked would be separated out and incinerated.
- The disciples equated the end of the old, pre-messianic age, with Jesus' return as King and Judge.

They correctly understood that his return would coincide with judgment on Jerusalem and the temple.⁸

Concerning this last point, William Barclay comments:

Some verses [of Matthew 24] paint pictures taken from the Jewish conception of the Day of the Lord. ... The Jews divided all time into two ages — this present age, and the age to come. The present age is wholly bad and beyond all hope of human reformation. It can be mended only by the direct intervention of God. When God does intervene, the golden age, the age to come, will arrive. But in between the two ages there will come the Day of the Lord, which will be a time of terrible and fearful upheaval, like the birth-pangs of a new age.⁹

The first age would conclude with the Day of the Lord — a time of great distress and upheaval.

Messiah would finally make his appearance and inaugurate the new age; he would bring the kingdom of God foretold by the prophets. A whole new order would come about.

⁸ In their reporting of the Olivet Discourse, the evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke give no hint that the disciples were misguided in conjoining events that would be separated by 2000 or more years. On the contrary, there is every indication that the disciples were correct to associate Jesus' coming (his parousia) with the fall of Jerusalem and its temple. Immediately prior to his Discourse Jesus had pronounced seven "woes" on the religious leaders and had castigated Jerusalem for its long history of persecution. Judgment was to come upon that very generation. See Matthew 23, especially vss. 33-39.

⁹ William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 2* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1957). Via the Bible Portal website: <https://bibleportal.com/commentary/chapter/william-barclay/matthew/24>.

The messianic age has come!

We have noted that terms such as *this age*, *end of the age*, and *age to come* all reflect the Jewish belief in the world's two great eras:

The hopelessly evil pre-messianic age, and the subsequent good age under Messiah's rule.

Such a view derives from Old Testament prophetic expectations concerning the future:

The Messiah will usher in the universal, eternal, and righteous kingdom of God.

He will rule from the heavenly Zion: alongside Yahweh, over the world but not upon it.

This is clearly taught in Psalm 2:6; 110:1-2; Daniel 7:13-14.

Moreover, he will rule in the midst of ongoing rebellion. See Psalm 2:9.

Peter knew full well that the prophets of old spoke of his own time and not of some distant, far-off era.

See Acts 3:18-24; 1 Peter 1:10-12.

Hence his expectation (and that of his readers) that the messianic age was imminent.

John's final vision in Revelation 21 – 22 shows the arrival of the same new heaven and earth that Peter was anticipating.

As explained elsewhere on this website, John's vision depicts the present gospel/kingdom/Church age.

It shows the nations of the world firmly under the beneficent rule of Christ.

It shows the New Jerusalem as the ruling (capital) city of this new order.

Christians live within the city, enjoying God's presence and serving before him as priests.

Outside the city's walls are the unconverted — sinners under God's curse.

Yet the gospel call goes out to them, inviting them to repent and enter the city via the gates and to partake of the tree and water of life (22:14-15, 17).

The city as the Church serves as a light and ministers gospel healing to the surrounding nations (21:24; 22:2).

Thus is it apparent that the new order John describes, with sinners present, is not the final (heavenly) state.

The kingdom's establishment and growth

Jesus brought the kingdom with his first advent. This is clearly affirmed in Matthew 3:2; 4:17; 10:7.

The kingdom grows through the proclamation of the gospel as people are brought under the rule of Christ.

But early believers also anticipated the kingdom coming more fully with Jesus' return. See Luke 21:31.

According to 2 Peter 3:13, the prime characteristic of this new messianic age is "righteousness".

Many Christians fail to see that the kingdom has come. The world is simply too bad.

But we need to understand that the kingdom and its "righteousness" are progressive and forever increasing.

Recall the Parable of the Mustard Seed, where the sown seed ultimately becomes a large tree (Mt 13:31-32).

So too, in the Parable of the Yeast, the yeast finally permeates through the whole batch of dough (Mt 13:33).

Then there is Daniel's vision of the rock that grows to becomes a mountain that fills the whole world.

See Daniel 2:35, 44-45.

Psalm 72 gives a wonderful depiction of Messiah's reign — the justice and prosperity to be enjoyed under his rule. Consider also the description in Isaiah 11:1-10.

But note that such conditions would not come about all at once.

The kingdom begins with personal relationships, and only as more and more people are converted are entire nations and cultures transformed.

We have seen such transformative growth, especially in those nations blessed with a Protestant heritage.

In these nations the gospel and law of God have had a profound influence for good in every area of national life.

One should note the element of progress and growth in the following description of the messianic kingdom:

Isaiah 9:6-7:

⁶ *For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government will be upon His shoulders.*

And He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

⁷ *Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end.*

He will reign on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish and sustain it with justice and righteousness from that time and forevermore.

The zeal of the LORD of Hosts will accomplish this.

Consider the underlined statements in particular:

“... the government will be upon His shoulders.”

“Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end.”

These words are echoed in the Annunciation to Mary:

Luke 1:32-33:

³² *He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David, ³³ and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever. His kingdom will never end!”*

What wonderful truths we can celebrate this (and every) Christmas:

The coming of Messiah into the world to inaugurate the promised kingdom!

There is no need to wait for some as-yet-future “second coming” for it to be properly established.

No, the kingdom came “with power” in (or by) AD 70.

Jesus himself clearly foretold this:

Mark 9:1:

Then Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God arrive with power.”

Belief in an as-yet-future coming is predicated on the notion that Jesus failed to properly establish the kingdom with his first advent.¹⁰

But no, Jesus did not fail. The Old Testament promises concerning the kingdom have been, and are being, progressively realized in this present gospel/kingdom/Church age.

An age that will continue, to all intents, “forever”.

See 2 Samuel 7:16; Psalm 72:5; Isaiah 9:7; Daniel 2:44; 7:14, 27; Luke 1:33; Revelation 11:15.

¹⁰ Note that we do not deny Jesus’ Second Coming; on the contrary, we fully affirm that coming to have transpired in AD 70. See Matthew 16:27-28; 24:30, 34; Mark 8:38 – 9:1; Luke 21:27, 32; Hebrews 10:25, 37; James 5:7-9; Revelation 22:7, 12, 20.

Summary and Conclusion

The present gospel/kingdom/Church age is what the first-century Jews called “the age to come.”

The first age was “wholly bad and beyond all hope of human reformation.” (William Barclay)

But God has intervened. The new age, characterized by ever-increasing righteousness, has come.

Jesus on the cross has dealt with our deepest woes — sin, death, Satan, our liability to condemnation and hell.

We are now individually righteous “in Christ” — justified, pronounced “not guilty” and imputed with his own perfect righteousness. See Romans 4:5-8; 1 Corinthians 5:21; Philippians 3:9.

As more and more people are converted, cultures become transformed. We have already noted the blessings enjoyed by those nations with a Protestant heritage. The rule of law prevails, allowing for peace and prosperity.

And things can only get better: the gospel will yet convert the nations, and universal peace will prevail.

How do we know this?

Because God has promised these things in his word:

- All nations belong to Christ as his reward and inheritance. Psalm 2:8; Romans 4:13.
- Christ was vested with universal authority in his ascension. Psalm 110:1-2; Daniel 7:13-14; Matthew 28:18.
- The promises of blessing to the nations given to Abraham are fulfilled through the gospel. Galatians 3:8, 14.
- People from all nations will come to worship God. Psalm 22:27-31; 72:8-11; 86:9; 102:22; Revelation 15:4. The nations themselves will be transformed through obedience to God’s law. Isaiah 2:1-4; 11:10; 19:23-25.
- Christ’s rule is one of justice and equity. Psalm 72:1-4, 12-14; Isaiah 11:1-5; 42:1-7; 49:1-7; (cf. 51:4-5).
- His beneficent rule will continue forever.

2 Samuel 7:16; Psalm 72:5; 110:1-4; Isaiah 9:6-7; Daniel 2:44; 7:14, 27; Micah 4:7; Luke 1:33;

Revelation 11:15.