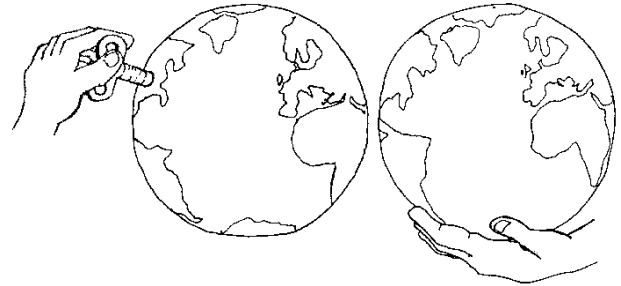


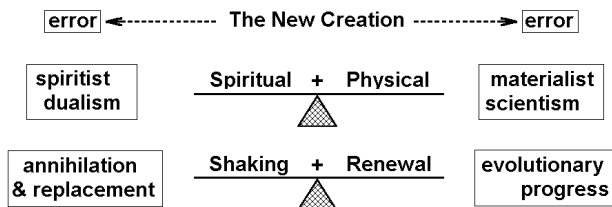
Creation's Destiny in Jesus Christ

All hope centres on Jesus Christ, for *“all things were created by him and for him”* (Col 1: 16). His cross, resurrection and promised return point to God's wonderful purposes for His creation.

God alone knows the future, and the Bible reveals the general direction of his purposes, not a timetable or specific details to cater to our curiosity. The tentative exploration of biblical teaching provided here can be summarised by two ‘balances’ (shown below). One affirms that creation is both physical and spiritual, and the other holds together judgement and restoration in our view of the future.



Wound up once and then left to run down? OR Held in His Hand, today and tomorrow.



Materialist scientism

One response to the observation that all things decay is a scientism that lacks the humility of true science and asserts that when you die you are finished. It says that life on earth began by chance, and will be ended by the Sun five billion years from now.

But this is not the full picture, because when Jesus died *“his flesh did not see decay”* (Acts 2:31). Our creator is not like the Deist's watchmaker who abandons what he makes and leaves it to run down. God sustains His creation today, and promises that he will unfold the *“restoration of all things”* (Acts 3:21).

“It would not be wise ... to speculate ... how the biblical and scientific accounts of reality correspond ... The general promise of the renovation and transformation of nature is plain ... God's material creation will be redeemed and glorified.” (John Stott)

Spiritist dualism

Another response is body-soul dualism, which regards soul as pure and immortal, body as inherently corrupt and temporary. Dualists aspire to free spirit from body, and imagine a non-material eternity. But the truth is that our whole being, body and soul, is alienated from its Creator, and needs His redemption.

The biblical hope is not a ghostly ‘afterlife’, but bodily resurrection and a ‘new earth’. If this surprises us, it may be that we have been confused by Christian language that can sometimes *sound* Dualist.

For example, St Paul uses contrasting pairs of words such as ‘heavenly-earthly’ and ‘spiritual-fleshly’ as metaphors for the contrasting pair ‘godly-ungodly’. In this way, spiritual conditions such as envy and selfish ambition can be described as ‘fleshly’ (Gal 5:19).

“What Paul says about ‘flesh’ ... must not be taken as applying to the physical body ... [which] will one day be redeemed from mortality and invested with glory.” (F F Bruce)

“In Paul's epistles, the word ‘spiritual’ never means non-physical but ‘consistent with the character of the Holy Spirit’ ... a physical body raised to the perfection for which God originally intended it.” (W Grudem)

Some confuse the two stages of our future hope: first the interval after death when we are ‘with Christ’ but not yet resurrected, and then the eternal state after our bodily resurrection. If we talk of eternity as “going to heaven” or “up there”, we stray into dualism.

“Heaven ... [is] not the ultimatum ... a disembodied spirit never can be perfect until it is reunited to its body”. (C H Spurgeon)

“What is commonly described as ‘heaven’ in scripture is the intermediate state ... Heaven in an eternal sense is going to be heaven on earth. Heaven on Earth – that is where we shall spend our eternity, and not as disembodied spirits.” (Martyn Lloyd-Jones)

Biblical view of creation

In the beginning, God created heaven and earth, all things visible and invisible. The physical and spiritual aspects of creation are integral and enduring parts of His design (Ps 104). The problem is not any inherent defect in creation, but rebellion.

The fallen angels, cast down from the heavens, plotted to ruin God's creation. And later, Adam and Eve were deceived into joining this rebellion. Since they were made to be earth's royal family, their declaration of independence from God brought a curse not only on them but also upon their planet.

God's plan – the mission to earth

God's solution is that the eternal Son comes into His own creation as a man, and bears God's curse upon the Cross. The implication for mankind is clear; 'in Christ' is salvation, outside Him remains the penalty of sin. But what does it mean for the rest of creation? God's plan is "through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven" (Col 1: 20).

At the heart of Romans, Paul wrote this: "The creation waits in eager expectation for the Sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration... in hope, because the creation itself will be liberated from bondage to decay, and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Rom 8:19-22).

"These words of Paul point **not** to the annihilation of the present material universe on the day of revelation, to be replaced by a universe entirely new, but to the transformation of the present universe so it will fulfil the purpose for which God created it." (F F Bruce)

There is a unity in biblical truth, that heaven will be "dissolved" (2 Pet 3:11, *luomenôn*, commonly meaning 'loosened', 'unbound' or 'set free'), and that "all things" will be "restored" (Acts 3:21) and "renewed" (Matt 19:28, *palingenesia*, literally 'born-again'). What ends in the 'end of the world' is not creation's **identity**, but its present cursed condition or **state**, described by Paul as "bondage to decay" and "frustration" ('not fulfilling the purpose for which God intended it').

Continuous identity + changed state = hope

This change will not come by evolutionary progress. Nor will it come through an annihilation and replacement of creation, as Scripture indicates in various ways.

1. God's curse on Adam included the ground (Gen 3). Since the curse on the earth is rooted in Adam, so just as Christ lifts the curse from Adam, it lifts also from the earth, since "the fate of creation is indissolubly linked with that of man" (Martyn Lloyd-Jones)

"Through the redemptive work of the second man [Jesus] the fall's entail is broken not only for man himself but [also] for the creation." (F F Bruce)

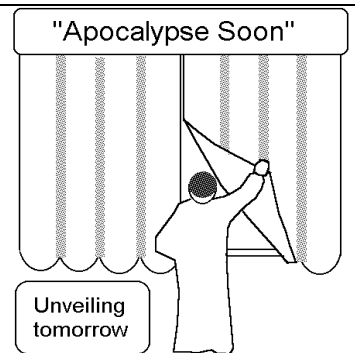
2. God's decree establishes the earth forever (Ps 78:69, 148:1-3). God owes nothing to any creature. He chose to destroy by the Flood, and afterward He chose to make "an everlasting covenant between God and all the living creatures of every kind on the earth" (Gen 9:16), "never again will I destroy all living creatures" (Gen 8:21). The latter text does not limit the promise to floods.

3. God's honour forbids that satan's plot should finally succeed. God's creation is not lost, for "the mystery of his will [is] to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" (Eph 1:10).

4. God's judgement is 'good news' for the creatures on earth; "they will sing before the Lord, for he comes, he comes to judge the earth" (Ps 96:12, Rev 5:13).

God's work of art is the church, set upon the earth, and God's restoration project is being revealed.

"God will restore the present fallen world to perfect condition". (John Calvin)



'Apocalypse' in English acquired a negative meaning, but is from the Greek word for 'revelation'.

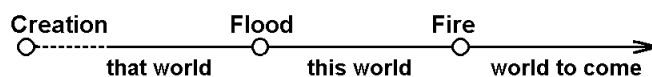
The end of the world ?

"The world (*kosmos*) of that time perished by water ... the heaven and earth of this time is stored up for fire, the day of destruction of ungodly men" (2Pet 3:6-7)

Peter says the world (*kosmos*) was utterly destroyed (*apôleto*) by the Flood. Yet he knew that even outside the Ark, fish and seeds survived (Gen 8:11). He seems to be using the term 'world' to refer to a passing state of creation, and mentions three states of creation:

1. "the world of that time", (2Pet 3:6) which is "the ancient world" before the Flood (2Pet 2:5);
2. "the present heaven and earth" (2Pet 3:7);
3. "a new heaven and a new earth" (2Pet 3:13).

New Testament view of the Ages of creation



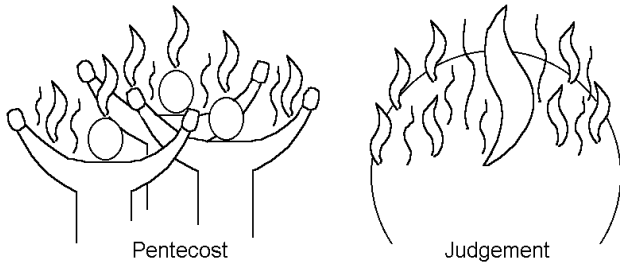
In the Bible, 'the end' refers to "the end of the age" (e.g. Matt 13:40, 24:3), which is followed by the beginning of "the age to come" (Mk 10:30) and an eternal time.

"It is not the substance or essence of creation that is brought to an end (for he who established it is true and constant) but 'the fashion of this world passeth away', that is, those aspects in which transgression has been committed." (Irenaeus, 2nd century church leader)

Some identify judgement fire pseudo-scientifically with atomic bombs, a comet, or an expanding sun. But it has qualities unlike any of these, for it tests (1Cor 3:13); it discriminates, destroying evil but healing and liberating the good (Mal 4:1-3, 2Thess 1:5-10); this fire reaches into heaven (2Pet 3:7) and destroys the spiritual powers (Rev 20:10). Even if this picture is interpreted literally, the 'elements' (*stoicheia*) which fire 'melts' (2Pet 3:10) are not the kind that you see on a Periodic Table. In all five other biblical usages of the word 'stoicheia' (Col 2:8,20, Gal 4:3,9, Heb 5:12) it refers to non-material entities, and in 2 Peter it may refer to evil 'heavenly powers' destroyed by divine fire.

What kind of fire is this? God's fire amazed Moses by burning in a bush without consuming the bush (Ex 3:2). Peter had seen at Pentecost divine fire on the disciples' heads, preceded by a rushing noise (Acts 2:1-4) and he knew a greater "roar" would accompany this fire when it filled heaven and earth on Judgement Day (2 Pet 3:10). At that time "*the earth will be laid bare*" (heurethêsetai, 2 Pet 3:12, literally 'discovered' or 'found') suggesting a world-wide judicial scrutiny.

This view fits the letter's context. Peter was dealing with men of unrestrained lusts (2 Pet 3:3) – the prospect of an *indiscriminate* universal annihilation would spur them on to sin faster "for tomorrow we die"! Instead, Peter warns them of a *discriminating* judgement (2Pet 3:7).



Resurrection and glorification

Jesus is the pioneer and pattern for the new creation, our resurrection (1 Cor 15:49) and the renewal of the earth. Jesus died on the cross, but the man born at Bethlehem did not suffer decay (Acts 2:31), but was raised from death (1 Cor 15:12), physically left the tomb, and still bears the scars of His wounds (John 20:27).

There is physical continuity between the crucified and risen Jesus, one body before and after the resurrection. However, he was not merely resuscitated, or raised like Lazarus who died again. In Jesus, death is destroyed and the body is 'glorified'. Similarly, in the transition from old to new creation is not a loss of identity, but a change of state. Here are three illustrations:

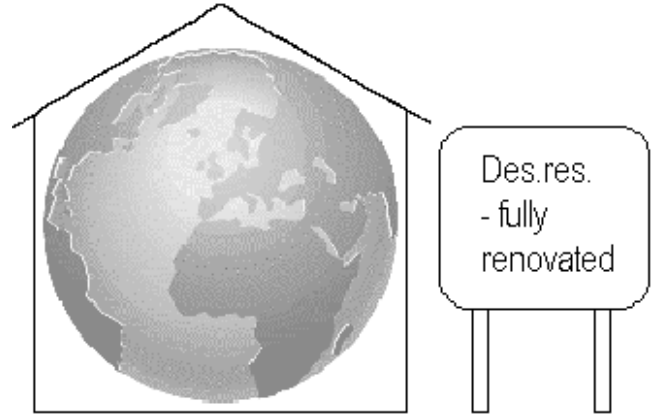
1. Today, "*if anyone is in Christ Jesus he is a new creation: the old has gone, the new has come!*" (2 Cor 5:17). When someone is 'born again' they do not vanish, to be replaced by a different person; they are changed.
2. "*Jesus ... will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body*" (Phil 3:21, Romans 8:11, 1 Cor 15:37), indicates change rather than replacement.
3. Lastly, the special case of those who are alive when Jesus returns makes it clear that our original physical identities are not discarded and replaced, but "changed", for "*we shall not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye*" (1 Cor:15:51).

Man's way is give up on what is spoilt; to throw it away and get a replacement. God's way of going from old to new is to restore what has been spoilt. This applies to us, and the earth. The "new creation" is the original creation renewed, for "*the old order of things has passed away ... I am making everything new!*" (Rev 21:4-5).

"*There is going to be both continuity and discontinuity in the regeneration of the world, as in the resurrection of the body.*" (John Stott)

"*God will one day change our bodies and then he will change this world itself. We expect to see this world that is now full of sin turned into a paradise, a garden of God. In this very place, where sin has triumphed, ... grace will much more abound.*" (C H Spurgeon)

"*We shall live in the body, on this renewed, renovated, regenerated earth.*" (Martyn Lloyd-Jones)



The return of King Jesus

Christ is coming to reign over the earth. There will be a miraculous meeting and welcome at his homecoming. The young church at Thessalonika worried that only those "*still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord*" would see the Kingdom. Paul reassured them that those who died would be raised from their graves and together with those still alive be "*caught up ... in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air*" (1 Thess 4:15-17).

A popular belief is that this refers to a permanent escape from earth. But the text offers a different picture, related to ancient customs of greeting. The word *parousia* (v.15, translated 'coming') alludes to a custom in which "*an official visits a city ... when [he] got near, all the citizens would stream out and line the road to welcome him ...*" (Balchin). Also, the word *parousia* refers as much to the subsequent presence of the official or king in the city as it does to the moment of arrival.

The word *apantêsin* (v.17, translated 'meet') refers to the welcoming custom and only appears three times in the Bible. Firstly in a parable when wedding guests hear of the bridegroom's approach and go out from the feasting hall some way to meet and escort him into the hall (Matt 25:6). Secondly when Christians from the city of Rome, hearing news of Paul travelling under arrest, honoured him by going by road some miles to meet him and then turned around to escort him into their city (Acts 28:15). And thirdly in this 'rapture' text (1 Thess 4:17).

So the picture of Jesus returning to earth (Acts 1:11) is that his people go out and up to meet him and then turn around to join in His triumphal procession to earth. The Second Coming is a 'coming' not a 'going'!

God's eternal reign on earth

"I saw the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God ... Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them" (Rev 21:2-3)

"The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever." (Rev 11:15)

Christ's kingdom on earth is not temporary. This is the inheritance promised to Jesus (Ps 2:8), and His co-heirs such as Abraham (Rom 4:13). *"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth"* (Matt 5:5), and *"they will reign on the Earth"* (Rev 5:10).

We await *"the restoration of the whole creation, not only to what it was before, but to something yet more glorious ... this is not temporary, it is final, it is full, it is permanent."* (Martyn Lloyd-Jones)

This is beyond imagination and the Bible provides pictures of healed lands and waters, peace among all creatures (Isaiah 2:4, 11:6-9), an end of pain, and a renewed diversity of living creatures and the *"trees of all kinds whose fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing"* (Ezek 47:6-12).

How does the future affect the present?

"Christians should know what their hope is and draw from it power ... and direction for living" (J I Packer)

God's reign is 'now' and 'not yet'. Creation is not yet liberated, and 'groans' with the church for Christ's advent (Rom 8:22-23, 1 Cor 15:58). But the rule of God, the new creation, is advancing today (Heb 6:5). Biblical hope helps us in very practical ways.

1. An awareness of God's purposes gives us direction.
2. When destructive Powers seem overwhelming, we can act in the hope that all things are in God's hands.



3. An expectation of Jesus' return reminds us that we are accountable to God. Jesus compared himself to a king who goes on a journey, and later returns to his kingdom (Lk 19:15). Are we good stewards of His dominion? We watch (discerning) and pray, urgently seeking for God's reign to be a reality in our lives.

"[Since] there is going to be total redemption in the future, not only of man, but of all creation, the Christian ... should be the man who, with Gods help ... is treating nature now in the direction of the way nature will be then. It will not now be perfect, but it must be substantial, or we have missed our calling ... a substantial healing here and now, between man and nature, and nature and itself." (Francis Schaeffer)

Page references for quotations are given in the online version of this briefing paper.

Suggestions for further reading:

David Lawrence, *Heaven – it's not the end of the world*, Scripture Union, 1995.

Stephen Travis, *End of Story?*, IVP, 1997.

N T Wright, *New Heavens, New Earth*, B11, Grove Biblical Series, Grove Books, 1999.

This brief was prepared for the John Ray Initiative by John McKeown, with thanks to many for their helpful comments. It is a response to negative language about the earth, and attempts to show that earth-affirming theology is compatible with literal and futurist interpretations of texts associated with eschatology.

THE·JOHN·RAY·INITIATIVE

The John Ray Initiative promotes responsible environmental stewardship in accordance with Christian principles and the wise use of science and technology. The JRI organises seminars and disseminates information on environmental stewardship.

Inspiration for the JRI is taken from John Ray (1627-1705), scientist and Christian, who pioneered systematic classification of plants and animals.

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