

# Old age, New Age and the age to come

A Biblical view of the future of the earth.

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Many Christians are persuaded that the world will one day come to an end, that it will be destroyed by God and replaced with something else. This world, they maintain, is corrupted by sin and is not worth saving: it is worn out and contaminated to such an extent that it must make way for a better world.

Other people, who are attracted by the ideas of the New Age movement, which is a form of modern paganism, believe that the earth does have a future, but it is a future in which there is little place for God. We all become gods ourselves through a process of evolution and growth.

Jesus on the other hand, spoke much about the age to come, the age in which the Kingdom of God would be manifested in its fullness. In that age, righteousness, peace and harmony will characterise life on earth under the rule of God himself.

What are we to make of three such disparate views of the future of the earth, especially when we consider that the first view, that the earth will be destroyed, is the one most commonly held by Christians, even though it is in direct contrast with what Jesus himself taught about the coming of the kingdom of God.

These three views can be fitted into an outline of basic conceptions about the future of the earth, which I have called Old Age, New Age and the Age to Come.

The **Old Age** view is that the earth will one day wear out and will be discarded and replaced by a totally different world.

The **New Age** view is that there will be a steadily evolving humanity which will eventually become fully divine and live in harmony with the earth which is also seen as divine.

The **Age to Come** is the biblical vision that the earth will be renewed, freed from all trace of sin, and it will become the venue for the kingdom of God.

These three views of the future of the earth also reflect the basic worldviews they are built on. Each implies different things about the nature of creation, the nature of sin and the nature of redemption.

The “old age” view emphasises the extent of sin and the corruption and contamination of this earth, but it does not recognise the extent of Christ's redemptive power. This view is not new: it had its proponents in the early church. Cyprian, bishop of Carthage in North Africa in the second century, held that the earth was growing old and would one day wear out.

You must in the first place know this, that the world has now grown old, and does not abide in the strength in which it formerly stood; nor has it that vigour and force which it formerly possessed... This is the sentence passed on the world, this is God's law, that everything that has had a beginning should perish, and things that have grown should become old, and that strong things should become weak, and great things become small, and that, when they have become weakened and diminished, they should come to an end.<sup>1</sup>

Cyprian considered that the moral and physical degeneration of the community around him was evidence of the old age of the earth.

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<sup>1</sup> Cyprian. *An exhortation to martyrdom addressed to Demetrianus*, 3.

...whatever is now born degenerates with the old age of the world itself; so that no one ought to wonder that everything begins to fail in the world, when the whole world itself is already in process of failing, and in its end.<sup>2</sup>

The “New Age” view recognises that things are not what they could be and seeks a change and renewal, leading to greater things. But it sees renewal to be rooted in evolutionary process, not in deliverance from sin. Contrary to what the New Age movement teaches, the renewal of creation, and of human beings, does not take place without Christ.

The third view, that the earth has a future in the age to come, recognises that things are not what they should be, but neither can change come without a radical work of redemption. Only in Christ can the earth be set free from its bondage to sin. But already we can see signs of the renewal of the earth which has already begun, even though it will not be fully renewed until the return of Christ to reign. Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem in the third century, was convinced that the earth would be renewed.

So, our Lord Jesus Christ comes from heaven, and comes with glory at the last day to bring this world to its close. For this world will accomplish its course, and the world that once came into being is hereafter to be renewed... This world passes away that the fairer world may be revealed... Stars perish also, and it may well be that they too are revived. Now the Lord will “roll up the heavens,” not for their destruction, but to raise them up again more fair. Listen to these prophetic words of David; “Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of thy hands; they shall perish, but thou remainest.” There! someone will say, he says explicitly that they “shall perish.” Listen to me. This is how you must understand the words “shall perish,” and it is clear from the context; “and they all shall wax old as doth a garment; and as a vesture shalt thou fold them up, and they shall be changed.” For it is just as when one speaks of a man “perishing,” as in the text “The righteous perish,

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<sup>2</sup> Cyprian. *An exhortation to martyrdom addressed to Demetrianus*, 4.

and no man layeth it to heart.” Now this is said in full expectation that he will rise again. And in like manner we look for a sort of resurrection of the heavens also.<sup>3</sup>

Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons in the second century, was convinced that the righteous will rise to reign with Christ in the same creation in which they were persecuted. The creation will also be “resurrected” so to speak, being renewed by Christ.

For it is just that in that very creation in which they toiled or were afflicted, being proved in every way by suffering, they should receive the reward of their suffering; and that in the creation in which they were slain because of their love to God, in that they should be revived again; and that in the creation in which they endured servitude, they should reign. For God is rich in all things, and all things are His. It is fitting, therefore, that the creation itself, being restored to its primeval condition, should without restraint be under the dominion of the righteous.<sup>4</sup>

The world will not be destroyed, according to Methodius, because he thought that because God made the world, it is destined for a better fate than simply destruction.

But it is not satisfactory to say that the universe will be utterly destroyed, and sea and air and sky will be no longer. For the whole world will be deluged with fire from heaven, and burnt for the purpose of purification and renewal; it will not, however, come to complete ruin and destruction. For if it were better for the world not to be than to be, why did God, in making the world, take the worse course? But God did not work in vain, or do that which was worst. God therefore ordered the creation with a view to its existence and continuance.

Methodius quoted Romans 8:19-21 in support of his view:

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<sup>3</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem. *Catechetical Lectures* 15.3. The Library of Christian Classics, Vol. 4. London: S.C.M., 1955, p. 149-150.

<sup>4</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.32.1. ANF 1, p. 561.

For the creation was made subject to vanity, [Paul] says, and he expects that it will be set free from such servitude, as he intends to call this world by the name of creation. For it is not what is unseen but what is seen that is subject to corruption. The creation, then, after being restored to a better and more seemly state, remains, rejoicing and exulting over the children of God at the resurrection; for whose sake it now groans and travails, waiting itself also for our redemption from the corruption of the body, that, when we have risen and shaken off the mortality of the flesh, according to that which is written, “Shake off the dust, and arise, and sit down, O Jerusalem,” and have been set free from sin, it also shall be freed from corruption and subject no longer to vanity, but to righteousness. Isaiah says, too, “For as the new heaven and the new earth which I make, remaineth before me, says the Lord, so shall your seed and your name be;” and again, “Thus saith the Lord that created the heaven, it is He who prepared the earth and created it, He determined it; He created it not in vain, but formed it to be inhabited.” For in reality God did not establish the universe in vain, or to no purpose but destruction, as those weak-minded men say, but to exist, and be inhabited, and continue. Wherefore the earth and the heaven must exist again after the conflagration and shaking of all things.<sup>5</sup>

Another early Christian, Rufinus, wrote the same about the deliverance of the world. He held that Christ would not only release human beings from sin, but would also release the earth from the curse which had come upon it because of human sin.

It was appropriate that He who came to remove the sins of the world should at the same time release the earth from the curses inflicted upon it when the first-formed man sinned, and it received the sentence of transgression in the Lord's words: “Cursed is the earth in thy works: thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to thee.” Jesus was therefore crowned with

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<sup>5</sup> Methodius. The Discourse on the Resurrection 1.8.

thorns in order that the primordial sentence of condemnation might be removed. He was led to the cross, and the life of the whole world hung suspended from its wood.<sup>6</sup>

We can see then the view that the earth will be destroyed and human beings taken to heaven is not the view held by every Christian. While there were those even in the early church who had a negative view of the church and of human bodily life, it was the ones who expected the earth to be renewed as a home for the righteous who had been raised from the dead who were expressing the true biblical hope.

Romans 8:18-25 is one passage that was important in leading the early Christians to the conviction that the earth would be renewed. The sin which holds the earth in bondage is not its own sin, but the sin of those who were appointed as stewards over the earth, to care for it and to develop it in harmony with the instructions of God. God's intention in creating this earth was to see it developed and its potential unfolded by the human beings he formed to serve him as his caretakers and stewards. However human sin entered the picture and as a result distortion, corruption and brokenness have dominated the way we have treated the earth and its creatures.

The renewal of the earth is not the creation of something new, but the revelation of what always existed but has not until now been manifested because human sin has oppressed the earth. The creation did not wish to be subjected to frustration, but it has this forced upon it as a result of the sin of its stewards, the ones who had authority over it. It is because of our sin that the whole creation groans in pain, waiting to be delivered from its bondage, so it can find its glorious freedom in God. Because it was our sin, and not the sin of the creation, that it is in bondage, it would be unjust of God to destroy it. God has liberated us in Christ even though we chose to sin, will he not also liberate the creation, which did not choose sin? But if Christ died to take away the sin of human beings, who were created to care for the earth, and whose sin has instead had such devastating results for the earth, what then becomes of the earth they were

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<sup>6</sup> Rufinus. Commentary on the Creed, 22.

created to care for? Our perspective on redemption usually focuses on our individual salvation, and has little place for the earth and non-human creatures.

We have violated the commission given by God to us to care for and develop the earth in faithful response to his Word. But the creation will be released from its bondage when its stewards are brought into the full realisation of their inheritance - the redemption of the body, namely the resurrection.

Colossians 1:15-20 tells us in no uncertain terms that the creation is also included in the redemptive work of Christ.

Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fulness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

The creation will not be redeemed without us, nor will we be redeemed without the creation, for we are part of the creation. We cannot separate ourselves from the rest of the creatures God has made. Christ did not die to redeem human beings, he died to redeem all God's creatures from sin and its effects. While the animals and plants have not sinned themselves, they are affected by our sin, and so by liberating us from sin the animals and plants are likewise set free. That full freedom from sin does not come for us until the resurrection, the redemption of our bodies of which Paul speaks in Romans 8.

Creation as a whole will also groan in travail until that time, but the certainty of its deliverance is tied up with our deliverance. But we are not the same as the rest of

creation; there is a distinctive difference between human beings and other creatures. While we are all creatures of God, under his rule and care, human beings are stewards under God of the rest of the creation. While we are part of the creation as a whole, we are also responsible for the rest of it in a way which is given to no other creature.

While we are certainly stewards of the earth, one of the problems with using this term is that it is understood in a very human-centred way. Stewardship is to be exercised for God, to whom all of creation belongs. But we are called to care for and develop the earth in a stewardly way. This has often been interpreted to mean that the earth must be developed if we are to be stewardly in our attitude towards it. But the earth is not developing solely because of our work with it; the earth develops because of its own inner dynamic, which arises from the work of the Holy Spirit who has been brooding over the creation ever since its formation in the beginning.

The relationship of the Holy Spirit to the creation is to drive it on to reach its fullest potential, to develop it and unfold it to the glory of God. The work of the Holy Spirit is in leading the creation to its fulfillment. The whole of creation is the field of action of the Holy Spirit, and no area of life is cut off from the Holy Spirit. The glory of God is the ultimate end of every creature and the work of the Holy Spirit is to lead and transform the creation to show that glory. That programme of development is not something which we determine, but it is something with which we can co-operate, and indeed we should be co-operating with it if we are truly faithful stewards who carry out the desires of our master, God, and not arrogant stewards who have usurped the right to determine the direction in which development must take.

We have too often seen stewardship as the need to use things and control them, so as to make the maximum profit from them. Perhaps we need to consider the nature of stewardship in more hands-off terms so that we leave the creation to develop in its own way, and to see our stewardship as a protection of the creation from those who would wish to force it to serve their own ends rather than God's. This does not mean that we cannot till the ground and develop it for our use, but it should be more explicit in our view of stewardship, that we can care for the creation by enabling it to find freedom rather than through seeking to control it.



We have lost something of the grandeur of untamed nature from our Christian perspective: any sentiments we have in that direction will probably owe more to Romanticism than to our faith. God did not create a tame world, he created a world sometimes dazzlingly wild and very untameable. But we have insisted that the world must be tamed by us, rather than coming to recognise that the world is in turmoil because of human sin, and therefore seeking to tame ourselves. If that were to happen, maybe the world would become a tamer place. As we read in Genesis, the animals have become wild and untamed in order to protect them from human beings: they will no longer submit to our will but instead run from us in fear. Isaiah tells us that in the new creation, the lion will lie down with the lamb. We tend to see this as a radical change in the nature of animals. Perhaps it is time we considered whether the lion can live in peace with the lamb because the whole of creation will have been liberated from human sin. It is the end of **human** sin which makes it possible for lions and lambs to coexist peacefully, not the end to **lion** sin.

The world will then be redeemed and set free through Christ, since we are responsible for its bondage, and therefore through our liberation from sin we will be responsible for its freedom. That freedom comes because of Christ, not because of us, since we are unable to free ourselves from sin. It is only the grace of God which sets us free from sin, and it is only the grace of God which will set free the creation as a whole. I am simply stressing that the redemption of human beings is essential to permit the liberation of the whole of creation.

So then, if the creation is to be set free from its sin, is the world going to be destroyed? What of the belief that the world will be consumed by fire at the end, and all the believers will be taken off to heaven to live forever with God? Those who hold to the view that the earth will be annihilated prior to the establishment of the eternal reign of Christ have an implicit anti-creational viewpoint, in which the earth is seen as something intrinsically “unspiritual” which can only be done away with.

But this earth has special significance for us. It is our home, the place where we dwell. It was created as our home, and it always will be our home. However some Christians see this world as something less than homely; in fact, as something from which we must escape. Rather than accepting this earth as our home, these Christians see our home in Heaven, in an altogether different realm of existence. Tied in with this is the idea that at the return of Christ this earth will no longer be of any significance. It is merely a temporary stage on which we play out our parts. It is a proving ground, from where those qualify will be elevated to a more spiritual existence in heaven.

This view I believe owes more to the pagan religion of Greece than to the Scriptures. The Bible never promises that we will be taken to heaven to live with God; rather, it promises that at the end of this age we will all be raised from the dead, transformed from mortal to immortal and from corruptible to incorruptible, the earth will be renewed, and God will come from heaven to live with us here on earth. The new Jerusalem will descend from heaven, and God will dwell with us and he will be our God, and we shall be his people. The Scriptures clearly teach us that the new life, which those in Christ will receive after the resurrection, is a life of peace and fulfillment on the new earth. We are not to ascend to heaven after the resurrection, the raising of all the righteous dead at the return of Christ. Instead heaven will come down to earth, and God himself will have his throne in our midst.

The intention of God was not to make us fit to go to heaven to live with him, but to make us fit for him to come from heaven to live with us. The earth is not to be destroyed, since this is where God desires to live. In the Old Testament he chose to dwell among the human race in the temple in Jerusalem, but in the New Testament the whole earth becomes his dwelling-place and it will show his glory to the whole of the universe.

The prophet Isaiah was granted an insight into the marvellous character of the new age to come, a vision which is recorded for us in chapter 65. Isaiah too speaks of the new heavens and the new earth, and describes in terms of the faith of Israel what that new earth will be like. Isaiah did not have the full insight granted to those who come after Christ, since the prophets saw only partially what was to come (1 Peter 1:10-12). They

did not see the full glory that was to be revealed in Christ, but we have been granted insight denied even to such a great prophet as Isaiah. So Isaiah expressed his hope of redemption and the glory to come in terms of the redemption of Israel. And what we have recorded for us in the passage in chapter 65 is a very vivid image of the redemption of all things which is yet to come.

The new heavens and the new earth are so full of glory that the trials and tribulations of the present earth will no longer be recalled. This does not indicate that this life we now lead will not be remembered but that the “former things,” the former troubles will no longer be recalled. Instead of remembering the evil times of the past, the Lord exhorts his people to rejoice in his new creation. Jerusalem will no longer be a cause for distress, as it was for Isaiah. Earlier in this chapter we read of the idolatry and iniquity that plagued the city. Sacrifices at night on tombs, eating of swine's flesh, burning incense in the high places; all these were an abomination to God. They were connected with worship of nature, a false righteousness which led people to despise others. In contrast to this, Isaiah prophesied of a time in which the earth will be renewed so that when the redeemed enter it they find only righteousness and peace.

So then, if the earth is so important to God, that he will leave heaven and come to dwell here with us, why is it that Christians are so keen to leave this earth? Our spirituality and our vision of life is not rooted in life on this earth, but in aspiring to life in heaven. We have been seduced by some of the pagan religions of Greece and Rome which devalued this earth and sought to avoid being entangled in its affairs. As a result, we have lost sight of God's intention for this earth, which he created for our eternal home. Because of our alienation from God, human beings have also been alienated from this earth which he has made. And as a consequence of failing to grasp a truly Biblical view of life, we are also alienated from this earth, seeking to have a relationship to God, but not a relationship to the earth which he has made for us to dwell in. As a result of our alienation from this world, not only do we fail to grasp the significance and worth of our tasks here and now, we are also ready to see the whole place go up in smoke and to abandon it forever.

What then of the passages which seem to indicate that the earth will be destroyed? For instance, 2 Peter 3:10 seems to say that the world will be destroyed by fire. But this passage does not say what it appears to in many translations. The NIV expresses it more accurately: “The heavens will disappear with a roar, the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.”

Just what it means for the elements to be destroyed by fire is unclear. But it evidently does not mean that the world will be destroyed, since the earth will be laid bare, not burnt up. Perhaps the best interpretation is that it will be revealed for what it really is, that is, it will be seen for its true self when the bondage placed upon it because of sin is removed. It is the purging of the earth from the dross of human sin that is envisaged, not the destruction of the earth itself.

A Biblical eschatology is the story of the triumph of God's plan of redemption. It is not the abandonment of this earth but the final overthrow of all the forces of evil which seek to make this earth into something other than God's intention for it. The future of the earth is not to be destroyed so we can be set free from sin and evil, but for sin and evil to be destroyed so that we and the earth might be set free. The idea that the earth will be destroyed comes not from the Scriptures but from the pagan religions of Greece and Rome, shaped by people who were alienated from God and from the creation he has made. Those who are fully reconciled to God will also be reconciled to their lives on this earth. God placed us here because he loves us, and so the earth cannot be anything but a good place to be, even though at present we see it only subject to sin and corruption.

The new heavens and the new earth which we are promised in the books of Isaiah and Revelation, are actually the result of the renewal of creation, not a replacement of it. Only views which see the creation as irredeemably corrupt tend to prefer destruction and replacement over cleansing and renewal as the paradigm for change. Much of that arises from an unbiblical view of creation as something intrinsically opposed to the spiritual life. It is therefore considered impossible to have a spiritual kingdom in the creation. However this view is alien to the Scriptures, and has its origin in pagan thought.

The church has to a considerable extent lost sight of the promise of the redemption of the body (Romans 8:23) that is our hope, yet to be fulfilled, but certain as it is founded in the promises of God. As a result of this loss of vision, the Christian community has thereby lost sight of the significance of life in this world and its redemption in Christ. By considering the future of humanity separately from the future of the rest of creation is one indication that for us the rest of creation did not really matter, and our relationship to it is not that important. But if God created us to serve him as stewards of the creation, then for us to find redemption without the rest of the creation is to leave us less than we were originally created to be. God would then have stewards with nothing to care for.

However, human life is bodily life, life in this world. As a result of seeing this present life as of little importance, the hope of the resurrection of the body and the renewal of the earth are both minimised. This indicates an anti-creational stance in the church, which has not come to terms with this world. However if we see human life in this world as the good thing which God declares it to be, and if we look for the renewal and continuation of this world as the Scriptures teach us to do, then caring for and nurturing this world in responsible stewardship, including all our bodily activities, will become significant and meaningful.

By denying the goodness of the creation in which we live, we are in fact showing contempt for the handiwork of God, not to say his own clear approval of this world recorded in Genesis 1-2. There we read not only that each of God's creatures was declared very good, but that the entire created order in all its richness and diversity, in its complex and intimate inter-relatedness, was declared to be "very good."

At the return of Christ we will see all things fully restored through the redemption of Christ, and on the new earth every area of life will be subject to the Father. Christ will rule in the world to come; all the kingdoms of this world will become his kingdom, there will be no other king. The dead will be raised, the wicked judged and the faithful servants of God will enter into eternal life. That eternal life will not be in some cloudy heaven, outside of time and unsullied with the things of this present earth. It will rather

be a new life for the redeemed on an earth which has been purified from the contamination of human sin. The return of Christ to reign on earth is not a temporary interlude before we all are taken to heaven, but it is the culmination of the whole plan of redemption. The earth and all its creatures will be restored to newness at the return of Christ, culminating all the work of redemption which has been going on through all ages.

But not only will the redeemed be living together as God intended, on a new earth. Then the task of caring for the new earth will be carried out in obedience to God. We will then still be human creatures, with physical (though glorified) bodies, dwelling together on an earth which will continue to require our attentions. We will then be able to fulfill our original calling, to care for and develop the earth in obedience and faith, as God has created us so to do. And we will do this, as an enormous community of believers from every tribe, language and race, as well as every time. We will no doubt again scatter all over the earth. Every human occupation, apart from those which deal with the consequences of sin, will still find a place in the new creation.

At present we still await this renewal, and can only do our work obediently, seeking redemption of our lives now, while we hold the hope of the renewal of all things before us. However we can have confidence that our work will be blessed by the Lord and that at His appearing will be revealed for the kind of work that it is. That which is done in and through the grace of God will be seen as such, while that which is done in the power of the flesh will be discarded.