

# *The Revelation of Righteous Judgment Series*

## PART 22

### JUDGMENT AT THE HOUSE

(CONTINUED)

**I Peter 4:17**...*For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?*

**II Peter 3:3-13**... *"Knowing this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, and saying, Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation. For this they willingly are ignorant of, that by the Word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of the water and in the water: whereby **the world that then was**, being overflowed with water, perished: but **the heavens and the earth, which are now**, by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men. But beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning His promise; but is longsuffering toward us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. But the Day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up. Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the Day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for **new heavens and a new earth**, wherein dwelleth righteousness."*

Considering the direction in which our studies have been heading, it would be only logical according to the Spirit that we turn our attention toward the book of Second Peter. Having laid a foundation for it in preceding articles, it is now with great joy that we delve into its contents.

As most of you know, this second epistle has been a favorite sourcebook of reference for those discussing eschatological issues. Its words have probably been quoted, expounded, and elaborated upon as much as any other in the New Testament, in regard to the end-times; but it is doubtful that any have been more misrepresented than these. Failure to properly compare spiritual things with spiritual has resulted in some extremely wild and far-fetched speculations concerning them. To say the very least, these private interpretations have done severe damage to the original intent, and have misconstrued the message in the minds of many who have been subjected to them. What a tremendous loss

the church has suffered as a result of this! Simple truth has been set aside for science-fiction, simply because of what might be deemed the excitement factor! Allow us to say up front that while we believe Peter's words were meant to be taken as a very sobering admonition, and words to be given strict heed, they were never meant to be interpreted as they so popularly have. Biblical soothsayers and secular speculators alike, have, in their attempts to support their doomsday scenarios, sought to explain in literal terms what was spoken with spiritual designs. And, we might add, there is an ever increasing interest throughout the world for such frightful predictions, especially as we near the end of this millennium (if there is any doubt about this, just notice the headlines of the local grocery store gossip rags ...THE END OF THE WORLD IS NEAR, ACCORDING TO TOP PSYCHICS, ASTROLOGERS, SPACE ALIENS, NOSTRADAMUS, ELVIS, AND THE BIBLE...or some other such nonsense. And to think, millions of people actually buy the stuff! Amazing). But let us assure you, brethren...even though it might appear to be the case (when taken out of context), not once did Peter intend to suggest that the world would ultimately end in nuclear holocaust, or that the human race would go up in smoke. That was simply not what he had in mind! True enough, wars may continue for a season, and the destructive use of firepower may for the time being be employed to take men's lives in mass quantities. We cannot say. But to say that the earth and it's inhabitants will finally self-destruct by the push of a button would clearly contradict the plainly declared purposes of God in His Word! Despite what the defeatists and escapists of our day have taught, His plans are to be fulfilled, not way out beyond the Milky Way somewhere, and not on some other planet (created to replace this one once we have destroyed it), but right here, on terra firma, on this swirling clay- ball we call earth. This, dear friends, is where He has fixed His focus throughout scripture; and this is where the overcomers shall reign as kings and priests in the coming age (Rev. 5:10; 20:6; 22:5). Furthermore, according to Psa. 37, verses 9, 11, 22, 29, and 34, the earth is (in part) the inheritance of those who wait upon the Lord. Though it might not always look that way, it is, at this very moment, the Lord's (Psa. 24:1; 50:12; I Cor. 10:26). It is His, to do with as He wills (Eph. 1:11). And though it will certainly undergo some radical changes (as He completely reverses the effects of the curse), He has declared that He shall preserve it for the meek (Matt. 5:5). Hath He said, and shall He not do it? Or hath He spoken, and shall He not make it good? (Num. 23:19). We believe that He has; and we also believe that He shall! Therefore, let the matter be settled. The future has been predicted, the end has been foretold: THE PLANET STAYS! Thus saith the Lord! One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh; but the earth abideth forever (Eccl. 1:4). For thus says the Lord --- Who created the heavens, God Himself, Who formed the earth and made it, Who established it and did not create it to be a worthless waste; He formed it to be inhabited --- I am the Lord, and there is no one else (Isa. 45:18, Ampl.). And the Lord smelled a sweet savour; and the Lord said in His heart, I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake; for the imagination of man's heart is evil from His youth; neither will I again smite any more every thing living, as I have done. While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease (Gen. 8:21-22). Get the picture?

### **A MESSAGE FOR "THE LAST DAYS"**

Now, if we would be so bold as to say what Peter was not suggesting in his speech, then we must also be ready to show what he was. This we will endeavor to do in the course of our study. In order to give fair treatment to our text, therefore, we will notice some of the major themes of the book. Then, with some necessary defining of key words, we will be better prepared to understand what was actually being said, and why. As we begin our observations, we should do so by first establishing the fact that when this letter was originally written, it was postmarked, First century, A.D.. That is to say, it was a contemporary message, primarily addressed to a particular group of people at a particular point in time. Underscore that thought! It had a specific meaning to them, and was relative to the situations facing them in their day. Now, we know that there are some who would argue this point, saying that Peter specifically stated that these things would come to pass in the last days. This is true. But did you also know that he claimed to have been living in the last days? That's right! You can read it for yourselves in I Peter 1:20, 4:7, as well as Acts 2:17 (see also Heb. 1:1-2, I John 2:18, and I Cor. 10:11 for corroboration). As are we, he was living at the end of one age, and at the beginning of another. That qualified his to be a last days generation!

It is our persuasion that one of the main reasons why the understanding of our text has been so ambiguous is because folks have failed to incorporate this simple but vital consideration into their approach to the Scriptures. You see, without viewing it in it's imminent sense, and without using it as a general pattern for future applications, folks have been free to make the Word say whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted it to fit; hence, there is the confusion that is so prominent nowadays. Therefore, it is critical for us that we begin on this basic premise. Once we have seen how the early church viewed it, we will then be able to safely consider the principle.

First of all, this epistle could be looked upon as somewhat of a farewell speech. As far as Peter was concerned, this could well have been the last message he would have opportunity to share with his readers (1:14-15; and apparently, he was right). This would explain why we sense such stress on his words. He was urging the saints to carefully consider what he had to say; for he might not be able to say them again!

In typical apostolic fashion, he begins with a very uplifting salutation, followed with a reminder that according to the divine power of God, they had already received everything they would ever need to lead a life of godliness, as well as promises which enabled them to completely escape the corruption that is in the world through covetousness (lust and greed). By diligently building virtue, knowledge, self-control, patient endurance, godliness, brotherly affection, and love upon the foundation of faith, an entrance would be unveiled to them into the higher echelons of the Kingdom. Or, to put it in the symbolic language of the book of Revelation, we might say that a door would be opened to them in heaven (Rev. 4:1)! This was a sure word of prophecy, an assurance from the Spirit that their labors would not be in vain in the Lord (I Cor. 15:58). Since their willful obedience to the law of the Spirit of Life would be their way of giv[ing] diligence to make [their] calling and election sure; they would therefore secure for themselves a position in the heavenlies from whence they would never fall (verse 10). He was guaranteeing them of

it! Of one thing they could be certain; and that was, the Lord is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him (Heb. 11:6)! He has proven it time and again!

The burden of his heart becomes evident early on in the letter, as he admonishes the believers to beware of those who would preach cunningly devised fables concerning the power and coming (or, presence) of the Lord (1:16). This seems to have been an issue to which much confusion had been circulated; and this was the group with which he was primarily concerned. Certain teachers were obviously discounting the truth concerning the manner and purpose of Christ's coming (by denying its transforming power in the lives of the saints), while others were denying that He would ever come to bring an end to the present order of things (3:4). Collectively, they were saying in effect, All things continue as they have from the beginning of creation. Nothing ever changes. We should therefore perceive the power of Christ as having freed us from the guilt of sin, but not necessarily from the power of sin. This means that we are at liberty to fulfill our heart's lusts without the fear of retribution. He will not break out upon us, or come to judge us for things which we are powerless to resist. In fact, He has delivered us so that we might indulge in the flesh to our heart's content (kind of like those in Jeremiah's day, who stood in the house of the Lord, saying, We are delivered to do all these abominations ---Jere. 7:8-10. What audacity they had!). No doubt, these were the great swelling words of vanity, the allurements through the lusts of the flesh (2:18), the promises of liberty which came from these servants of corruption (v. 19). And these were the feigned words wherewith they would attempt to make merchandise of, or exploit those who had previously clean escaped from them who live in error (2:3, 18). How very convincing they could be! They were grossly distorting the grace of God into a message of license (Jude 4), and denying the Lord the right to His purchased possession (2:1)! Of a truth, Peter said, their judgment was nigh at hand. It was not idle; it would not slumber. It would come as a swift destruction from the Almighty, Who is not slack concerning His promise! Notwithstanding, Peter knew of the power of God unto salvation. He had been an eyewitness of His majesty, when he beheld his Lord transformed in glorious splendor in the holy mount (1:16-18; Matt. 17:1-8)! He had seen the unveiled glory of sonship with his own eyes...and so, he could tell the saints with absolute assurance how drastically God's power could produce change! This was not a false hope!

Chapter one concludes with an interesting line. The apostle writes, And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark (obscure) place, until the Day dawns and the Morning Star rises in your hearts. Knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation (1:19-20, NKJV). The marginal rendering gives this as no prophecy of Scripture is of its own interpretation, i.e. not isolated from all that the Word has given elsewhere. This agrees with the Interlinear Greek-English New Testament. Basically, he was exhorting them (and us) that though the prophetic word may have come during a night season of spiritual depravity, at a time when darkness covered the earth, and gross darkness the people, and though it may seem as if it might never come to pass, **HOLD ON TO THE PROMISE!** For as we take heed to it, keeping in mind that no prophecy of Scripture is isolated to itself (and can only be understood when examined in light of other passages of holy Writ), in due season, the Day will dawn, and the Morning Star will arise in our hearts.

Christ will come in all the glory of His kingdom like the breaking rays of sunshine over the dew-kissed horizon...and we shall be changed! We have His Word on it! This is an important principle for us to keep in mind, especially as we consider Peter's prediction in chapter 3.

### **"OUT OF THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES..."**

In our next message, we intend to deal more about the rising of the Morning Star in our hearts. To say that this is highly significant would be an understatement of large proportions. But associated with this principle that no singular prophecy of scripture can be separated from the body of scripture are two statements surrounding our text. These statements prove to be extremely helpful to our study, as that they bring forth out of the Treasury things both Old and New (Matt. 13:52). The first one is found in the first two verses of chapter 3, while the second is found in verses 15 and 16. We will quote them together for your convenience. This second epistle, beloved, I now write to you; in both which I stir up your pure minds by way of remembrance: that ye may be mindful 1) of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and 2) of the commandments of us, the apostles of the Lord and Savior...even as 3) our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath also written unto you; as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unsettled wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction (numbers added for reference). In other words, the things about which Peter was discussing here, and the way in which he discussed them, were not unique or isolated to his writings; for they had previously been spoken of by others in the prophetic/apostolic community. They were but a reuse of terminology frequently employed by the prophets of old, commented on in the commandments (epistles) of the apostles...and things of which Paul had specifically addressed in his writings. This is so plain, no one should be able to err therein!

In light of this first reference (to the prophets), we learn that there are interpretive keys to be discovered in their writings. However, in order to unlock the meaning of Peter's expressions by them, we must needs be acquainted with Old Testament language. This was no problem to the first century church. As we have mentioned previously, Peter was addressing an audience that was intimately familiar with the most obscure details of sacred literature. They had heard the ancient writings read and expounded countless times throughout their lives, and had memorized lengthy passages of scripture from their youth up. Biblical imagery and forms of expression had completely formed their culture, environment, and vocabulary from their earliest recollections; and this had been true for numerous generations. This is why it came so easy for them to comprehend. They naturally thought in these terms, just as we understand the use of language in modern times (imagine, if you can, how some of our slang expressions would have sounded to them)!

The fact is that when Peter spoke to his readers about the coming of the Day of God in fire, he was employing common prophetic vocabulary, describing in poetic terms what was to be expected in the very near future. There is an exclusive parlance of prophecy

(that is, language, or form of speech), instantly recognizable to those familiar with Semitic symbolism in scripture, but strangely foreign to those who are not. Therefore, when Peter told of the dawning deliverance of the saints, and the impending judgment of the ungodly, he spoke of it as any of the prophets would have, full of powerful, spiritual phraseology.

For example, when Isaiah told of the judgment that would come upon Assyria and its arrogant, boastful king, he prophesied, Therefore the Lord, the Lord of hosts, will send leanness among his fat ones; and under his glory He will kindle a burning like the burning of a fire. So the Light of Israel shall be for a fire, and his Holy One shall be for a flame; it will burn and devour his thorns and briars in one day. And it will consume the glory of his forest and of his fruitful field, both soul and body; and they will be as when a sick man wastes away. Then the rest of the trees of his forest will be so few in number that a child may write them (Isa. 10:16-19). When he told of Samaria's judgment, he did so in similar imagery: For wickedness burns as the fire; it shall devour the briars and thorns, and kindle in the thickets of the forest; they shall mount up like rising smoke. Through the wrath of the Lord of Hosts the land is burned up, and the people shall be as fuel for the fire; no man shall spare his brother (Isa. 9:18-19). Surely, no one in his day would have been so foolish as to assume that the prophet was predicting a natural forest fire. To make sure of that, the explanations were even included in the prophecies! The Light of Israel was the Fire; the people would be as the fuel for the Fire. The Lord would allow their own wickedness to kindle in their midst, and utterly consume them from within, in much the same way that disease internally ravages a sick man's body. As a result, the population of these nations would be so decimated, a child would be able to number them!

Also, when Isaiah predicted the fall of Babylon to the Medes in 539 B.C. (quite accurately, we might add), he did so by saying, Howl ye; for the Day of the Lord is at hand; it will come as destruction from the Almighty. Therefore shall all hands be limp, and every man's heart will melt: and they shall be afraid...they will be amazed one at another; their faces shall be as flames. Behold, the Day of the Lord cometh, cruel both with wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate; and He will destroy the sinners thereof out of it. For the stars of heaven and the constellations shall not give their light: the sun shall be darkened in his going forth, and the moon shall not cause her light to shine. And I will punish the world for their evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; and I will cause the arrogance of the proud to cease, and will lay low the haughtiness of the terrible...and Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldees' excellency, shall be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah (Isa. 13:6-11, 19). Here again, though the judgment was directed toward a specific nation (this time, Babylon), it was spoken of in terms of worldwide devastation, or what has been referred to as collapsing universe terminology. (If you noticed a similarity between the words of Isaiah, and those of our Lord in Matthew 24:29, it is because it was deliberate. Jesus intentionally used these expressions to describe the destruction of old Jerusalem in 70 A.D., so that His followers would know how widespread and complete the judgment would be). Because of their religious training, it was immediately understood by Isaiah's audience that his mention of the stars of heavens and the constellations was descriptive of the ruling party,

that is, those who were in positions of authority in Babylon; while the reference, I will punish the world for their evil, was generally directed toward the nation of Babylon itself (which was at that time the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldee's excellency). It could certainly be said that when the Lord poured out His fury upon them in the form of foreign invasion, the lights went out in Babylon! Their world fell apart!

Zeph. 3:8-9 reads, Therefore wait ye upon Me, saith the Lord, until the day that I rise up to the prey: for My determination is to gather the nations, that I may assemble the kingdoms, to pour upon them My indignation, even all My fierce anger: for all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of My jealousy. For then will I turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the Lord, to serve Him with one consent. Notice that after the nations have been gathered together, and the kingdoms have been assembled, all the earth is devoured with the fire of God's jealousy. Yet, strangely enough, once the consumption has occurred, and the fire of His fierce anger has burned in their midst, the very people of these nations and kingdoms which have just been devoured are able to call upon His name, and to serve Him with one consent! Is there a problem with this picture? Not at all. But the only way we can make any sense of it is to see that Zephaniah was not speaking of a literal fire, but the purging, correcting fire of God's divine presence. This is the way the Hebrew mind would have understood it; and this is the way that it was intended.

Joel's prophecy is of great significance to us, since it, too, has often been taken out of context. The Lord said through him, And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out My Spirit upon all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions. And also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out My Spirit. And I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth: blood, and fire, and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and terrible Day of the Lord come. And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be delivered (Joel 2:30-31). Now, it has been suggested that these pillars of smoke refer to the mushroom clouds which accompany nuclear explosions, while the blood and fire are seen as the results from them. Considering the effects the atomic bomb had on Hiroshima, we can see why the natural man might draw that conclusion. However, Peter plainly said that Joel's prophecy was descriptive of what transpired when the Day of Pentecost was fully come, and the days which immediately followed (Acts 2:14-21)! Did the sun literally turn into darkness in those days, or the moon into blood? Not to our knowledge! But what did happen is that Jerusalem was compassed about with armies, and her light was extinguished completely! As one has well put it, this prediction spanned all the way from Pentecost to Holocaust (you can read about it in the writings of Josephus, where vision became reality in dramatic fashion)!

Of course, we would be amiss not to at least mention Malachi's prophecy. For, behold, the Day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the Day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the Lord of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch. But unto you that fear My name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in His wings; and ye shall go forth, and

grow up as calves of the stall. And ye shall tread down the wicked; for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet in the Day that I shall do this, saith the Lord of hosts (Mal. 4:1-3). As does Peter's epistle (which can be summed up in chapter 2, verse 9, where it says, The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust unto the Day of judgment to be punished...), this vividly expresses the two-fold effect of the Day of the Lord. For some, it brings blessing and deliverance; for others, it spells trouble! However, since we have commented on this passage earlier in our series, we will not take up much space with it here. We would simply call your attention to the fact that the way in which the prophets used these terms was illustrative of the way Peter did. He was merely making use of Hebrew hyperbole, describing in familiar language the things which would shortly come to pass.

### **“THE EARTH...WHOSE END IS TO BE BURNED”**

Peter said that the things of which he spoke could also be found in the epistles of his colleagues. There are several places to which we could look, but for the sake of brevity, we will mention but two. Of them, Hebrews 6:1-12 first comes to mind. The writer begins this chapter by saying, “Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection...”. He then gives a list of those foundational principles, punctuating this charge with the statement, “And this will we do, if God permit”. And why, pray tell, might God not permit it? Because “it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted of the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, if they should fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing (the Greek text reads, “as long as”) they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put Him to an open shame”. Simply stated, as long as folks are in a fallen state, and are continuing to crucify the Son of God afresh, publicly putting Him to an open shame (either by their legalistic, or their lascivious lifestyles), it is impossible for them to be renewed unto repentance, or to go on unto perfection. That makes perfect sense, doesn't it? You can't turn toward the Lord as long as you are facing away from Him, now, can you?

Then, in regard to these lines, he adds this powerful and pertinent allegory to drive the point home: “For THE EARTH which drinketh in the rain that cometh oft upon it, and bringeth forth herbs meet for them by whom it is dressed, receiveth blessing from God: but that which beareth thorns and briars is rejected, and is nigh unto cursing; whose end is to be burned”. Now, shall we suppose that the writer has suddenly decided to give us a lesson in farming and land management? Hardly! He is merely alluding to two types of people; the one, who is building upon the foundational principles of the doctrine of Christ, and is therefore advancing toward a state of perfection (receiving “blessing from God”); the other, who has fallen from a place of enlightenment, expressing itself through the unfruitful works of darkness (bearing “thorns and briars”), and is nigh unto cursing. The end of this latter group is to be burned. (This should immediately bring to mind the passage we dealt with previously in I Cor. 3:14-15: “If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire”). To confirm that this is but an allegory pertaining to people, and not to the literal earth, notice the closing

remarks directly following it: “But, beloved, we are persuaded better things OF YOU, and things that accompany salvation, though we thus speak” (v. 9). His interests remain the same, which is directed toward those to whom he writes. Need we say more?

The second place wherein our attention is drawn is the general epistle of Jude. Jude’s terminology and outline are so similar to that of Peter’s, you would almost think that they conferred one with the other (this is the beauty of divine inspiration). Both recognize the same damnable doctrine having crept into the church; and both pronounce the judgment that will speedily be executed upon those who propagate such vile heresies (so as not to use up precious space, we will leave a more thorough comparison of these books to the reader). After describing these degenerates in colorful detail, Jude climaxes his letter in very much the same way Peter does, with an admonition to the faithful: “And of some have compassion, making a difference: and others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh. Now unto Him Who is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen.” Now, if the epistles of Jude and Second Peter are based upon the same spiritual “blueprint”, then it would seem feasible that the fire which Jude refers to is the same fire to which Peter refers. And if the fire to which Peter refers is some sort of a natural fire, then the same should be true for Jude. Right? Shall we therefore conclude that Jude is commanding the saints to pull certain ungodly characters out of literal fire? We’ll let you decide that for yourself!

### **“THE DISSOLVING OF THE “STOICHEION”**

In addition to being commented upon by the apostles and prophets, Peter also said that the things of which he addressed were very notably spoken of by Paul. For this, our thoughts turn toward his letters to the Galatians and the Colossians. In order to make our connection, however, we find it necessary to define a couple of the words Peter used in the Greek. The first word, commonly translated as “world”, is “kosmos”, and in this instance means, “an orderly arrangement, or world-system”. The other word, “stoicheion” (# 4747 in Strong’s), is twice translated in this chapter as “elements”. It means, “something orderly in arrangement, i.e. a serial, fundamental, or initial constituent; element, principle, or rudiment”. (In other words, the “stoicheion” comprise the basic building blocks of a “kosmos”, or the elementary principles upon which any orderly arrangement or world-system is based). The way it is used throughout Scripture (found only five other times in the New Testament) is very revealing, to say the least.

As has already been said, Peter and Jude were primarily concerned with those who were turning the grace of God into lasciviousness. Paul’s focus, however, was on another front. In his letter to the Galatians, he wastes no time in addressing it. Almost immediately from the opening line, he boldly takes the offensive, launching a verbal assault on those who were perverting the gospel of Christ (1:6-7). He follows that by issuing one the most severe condemnations to be found anywhere in the Bible upon them (verses 8-9). Without doubt, this was an extremely serious matter with him; and he was not the least bit concerned how folks might perceive him for it (verse 10). The reason for this was, the

judgments he pronounced were spoken in obedience to Christ. Personal feelings had nothing to do with it. He was wholly concerned with the welfare of the saints!

The question might be asked, “What was this ‘other gospel’ with which he was grieved?” It was a counterfeit gospel which mixed law with grace. You see, false brethren had slipped in unawares, with the sole intention of spying out the liberty which the believers had obtained in Christ (2:4). Once they had gained favor with them, and won a certain amount of confidence, these clandestine connivers then sought to place a yoke of bondage on the saints, by teaching that while perfection was possible, it could only be reached through the observance of the Law. This, according to Paul, was a frustration of the grace of God (2:21), and an insult to the work of the cross! It was a deliberate attempt to undermine the truth for which Christ died, and through which the righteous live! In no wise would he tolerate this!

Throughout his reproof, it should be noticed that Paul was never disrespectful to the Law. He explained that it had had its purpose, which was to direct men to Christ. It was “our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith” (3:24). The word translated here, “schoolmaster”, is “paidagogos”, and literally means, “a child conductor”. The pedagogue’s responsibility in ancient times was not so much to teach [by giving explanation for his commands], as it was to guard over the child in his charge, till the child came of age). However, “after that faith is come”, the apostle said, “we are no longer under a schoolmaster” (verse 25). Its authority ceased to have influence once Christ came. This prompted Paul to write, “Now I say that the heir, as long as he is a child, differeth nothing from a servant, though he be lord of all; but is under tutors and governors until the time appointed of the father. Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world: but when the fullness of time was come, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons” (4:1-5). When Paul told his readers they had previously been “in bondage under the elements of the world”, surely no one would assume (then or now) that he meant the natural elements, such as rocks and minerals, trees and sod. That would have been ridiculous! Nay, rather, he meant that they had once been under the “stoicheion”, or elementary principles of the Law, until the fullness of time came, and Christ, by His indwelling Spirit, provided a more excellent way. Since the Law was limited in its ability to produce change in the adherent, it was only through Christ that folks could ever hope to attain perfection, or to receive their adoption as sons. “For the law made nothing perfect, but the bringing in of a better hope did; by the which we draw nigh unto God” (Heb. 7:19). Nevertheless, being amazed at how easily they could be bewitched, and how soon they could be removed from Him Who had called them into the grace of God unto another gospel (3:1, 1:6), Paul queried, “Howbeit...now, after ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements (“stoicheion”), whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage? Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years. I am afraid of (for) you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain” (4:8-11). After they had experienced the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, how could they even consider going back under the weakness and unprofitableness of the Law? It was a

system that was decaying and waxing old, and was about to vanish away (Heb. 8:13)! What astounded him most was that they couldn't seem to see this!

This explains why the apostle inquired of the Colossians, "Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments ("stoicheion") of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances, (touch not; taste not; handle not; which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men?" (Col. 2:20-22). And again, in chapter 2, verses 8 through 10, where he warned, "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments ("stoicheion") of the world, and not after Christ. For in Him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in Him...". It was his desire that they should grow in grace, and in the knowledge of the truth. This would have placed them out of harm's reach, and into a place of confidence and assurance in the fullness of Christ. Nevertheless, for many of them, when for the time they ought to have been teachers, they had need that one teach them again which be the first principles ("stoicheion") of the oracles of God (Heb. 5:12). Because they were not firmly established in present truth, they were in the precarious position of falling from their own steadfastness into the error of the wicked. No wonder Paul was afraid for them! It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to turn from it, once they had (II Pet. 2:20-22)!

To summarize, then, we have seen that Paul's definition of the word, "stoicheion", was done with reference to traditions, commandments, and doctrines of men; to philosophy and vain deceit; to the observance of days, months, times, and years; to rules and ordinances which demand that we "touch not, taste not, handle not". Also, we have noticed how he interchangeably used the terms, "the Law", "our Schoolmaster", "tutors and governors", "the elements of the world", and "the rudiments of the world", to describe that under which we were once in bondage. In every case we found, his application of the word was the same.

Perhaps from these considerations, we now have a better idea of Peter's meaning to those in his generation. From a first-century perspective, we would say that when he prophesied of the heavens and earth dissolving, he was definitely not speaking in a literal sense. He was primarily referring to the world of his day---the religious and social order of that time. They were about to witness the collapse of the Old covenant system, with all of its sacrifices, shadows, laws, and ritual --- and along with it, the way of life which revolved around it. The elementary principles upon which that world was built, as well as the ruling forces which presided over them, were about to be "burned up", reduced to ashes, and scattered like chaff by the driving winds of God's Spirit. Things would never be the same! Furthermore, he was declaring irreversible judgment upon the "world" of certain deceivers... those who were either trying to take away the true spiritual liberty that is found in Christ, or those who were offering a false one in its place. The demise of these "antichrists" was nearer than they might have believed! The fire would find them out! For this reason, Peter thrice admonished the saints, "Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, looking for and hasting unto the coming of the Day of God... Wherefore, beloved, seeing

that ye look for such things, be diligent to be found of Him in peace, without spot, and blameless... Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness. But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" II Pet. 3:11, 14, 17). You might say he was making a public service announcement, forewarning the spiritual community of the demolition scheduled to occur: "STEP BACK FROM THE LINE, PLEASE! SUDDEN DESTRUCTION IS ABOUT TO TAKE PLACE"! If they would keep their spiritual eyes opened, carefully guarding themselves against crossing over into "the danger zone", they would not be involved in the judgment to come (I Thess. 5:1-9; Rev. 18:4)!

Well, we have almost totally devoted this article to the presentation of it's past-tense perspective... but with just cause. The benefit of seeing it in this light is that now, we can be relieved of the need to reserve it for some literal fulfillment in the future, and released to see it as the Spirit would reveal. Beloved, we have not yet begun to contemplate the vast potentiality provided by these words! There is a wealth of spiritual truth to be extracted from them! The uniqueness of Scripture is that it possesses eternal qualities... it is "the same, yesterday, today, and forever". So while in one sense, these things may have been fulfilled in days gone by, it still has meaning for us today. The principles remain with us, to guide and instruct us along the way!

There is much more to be said concerning this, and much more which will demand explanation. By the grace of God, He will give us the words necessary to address these things in the following message(s). The thought we would like to leave you with for now, however, is the one which Peter mentions in his closing. As saints, we are taught not only to look for, but also to hasten the coming of the Day of God. But how could we possibly do a thing like that? And how could we shorten the days of our waiting? Simple. By living lives unencumbered by the flesh, and unentangled in the yoke of bondage, we capture the attention of the Almighty; and like a Bridegroom coming out of His chamber, and a Strongman to run a race, He races ahead to meet us (Psa. 19:1-5)! Therefore, we encourage each of you to walk in all manner of holy conversation and godliness, so that the Day of His manifest presence might come speedily into your lives, and work what is necessary for your perfection. If you should remember nothing else about this article, we beseech you to remember this: the beauties of holiness are extremely attractive to the Lord! It hastens His coming!

to be continued...

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672 Goodman Rd.  
Dawson, GA USA 31742