

THE FUTURE OF PLANET EARTH

Habakkuk 2v14

Over recent years there has been plenty of speculation about what will become of our planet. Most of it is pessimistic. When I was a boy it was the prospect of nuclear war which threatened the planet. I still remember the Cuba crisis. Nuclear bunkers were prepared in the event of the worst case scenario. The threat has not gone away, of course. The prospect of a nation like Iran having nuclear capability is currently making many western nations anxious. Living post 9/11 has also made us aware of the danger of terrorist organisations getting hold of chemical or nuclear weapons.

Those with their eye to telescopes may have other theories. Could the earth one day be sucked into a black hole? Will there be a Big Bang in reverse? Some thought the earth might come to an end in September when the £5 billion Large Hadron Collider experiment started in a 27k long tunnel on the Swiss / French border. Or will we be hit by some stray meteorite – unless we can send Bruce Willis into space to land on it and save the world?

Or will climate change be the agent of Doomsday? Nations are already ravaged by earthquakes, tsunamis and hurricanes. Now some experts are saying that even an increase between 2 and 4 degrees will be sufficient to plunge the whole world into an era of floods, famine and drought. A film like 'The Day After Tomorrow' claimed to show us what it might be like.

In the background are the accusations that right wing Christian in the USA are guzzling the earth's resources as well as trigger happy because they believe the world is going to be burned up anyway when Jesus returns and they will be whisked off to heaven.

Well, what does the Bible have to say about this? Does God have a plan for planet earth? The Bible is more than a text book on personal salvation. It also has a mighty global perspective.

Over the next three weeks then, we are looking at a great, global, prophetic promise in the Bible. Habakkuk lived in seventh century BC at a time when the Babylonians were about to wreak havoc upon Jerusalem. It didn't make sense to him that God would use such a nation to bring judgement on His own people. Habakkuk was bewildered and poured out his protests as doomsday approached. But he also listened for God's reply. And as he did he began to understand something of God's global purpose. **The earth will be full of the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.** (Habakkuk 2v14)

This is precisely what God had also said to Isaiah in one of the great Messianic prophecies: Isaiah 11v9,10: *“the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious.”* So, what might God be saying to us through this great, global, prophetic promise? What can we learn?

1. It explains why the world is as it is today.

There is a glory missing from the earth. This earth is not the best it can be. We instinctively know this, but our text helps us understand what is wrong. What is missing is “the knowledge of the glory of the Lord”.

Yes, the earth is beautiful and full of mysteries and wonders. But it is also fierce and threatening with earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods, tsunamis, and hurricanes. And yes, the earth is filled with the most amazing variety of animal life; but it is also “*red in tooth and claw.*” Some of you watched the BBC’s “Big Cat Live” from Kenya’s Masai Mara recently and witnessed the beauty and the terror of life in the wild.

Yes, humanity is capable of great good and intellectual brilliance. But the twentieth century, for all its technological progress also experienced the biggest bloodbaths in history with two world wars and the vicious ideologies of dictators like Stalin, Hitler, and Mao. These men, and others like them, disposed of many millions of men, women and children – most of them from their own nations. And there are plenty of fanatics still today who will happily destroy life as we know it.

Every day we hear in the news or experience in our own lives this same fact; something has gone seriously wrong. At this time the earth is *not* “filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea”.

The Bible says that this is because we live in a “*fallen*” world. In the beginning God made the earth and every living thing perfect and He was pleased with it. He pronounced it to be “good”. It was good because it reflected something of His glory. And finally, as the crown of creation, He made a man in his own image and a woman as the man’s companion. But they mutinied and sin infected all of creation, every living creature and every man, woman and child.

It is not that there is *no* knowledge of the glory of the Lord. If that were true then everything would have folded long ago. But this world is certainly not *filled* with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord.

And now, without God at the centre man’s best efforts to rule the world or save the earth are doomed to fail. Habakkuk 2v13,14: “*Has not the LORD Almighty determined that the people’s labour is only fuel for the fire, that nations exhaust themselves for nothing? For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.*”

When you pray the Lord’s Prayer and say “*Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*” – you are praying this great promise into being. This world is not as it should be. But there is a day coming when it will be different. “For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.” God is still the Sovereign Lord of all creation. He has not lost control.

2. It speaks of the certainty of God's glory filling the earth

"The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea." How are we to understand this great prophetic promise and its fulfilment? *When* will this take place? Christians through the centuries have answered this in different ways. I wonder what you believe.

2.1. The Church Fathers (Pre-Millennialism): In the first three centuries persecuted Christians looked for a mighty, dramatic, supernatural intervention of God. They believed Christ Himself would come to reverse history and overcome evil with good. Church Fathers like Irenaeus, Justin Martyr and Tertullian looked at Revelation 20v1-9 and understood it to mean that Jesus would return to earth and usher in a golden age of a thousand years before the final judgement and His eternal reign. This golden age was referred to as the Millennium (Latin for "a thousand"). During this Millennium the great prophetic promises would be fulfilled. "The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea." This is referred to as *Historic Pre-Millennialism* because it states that Christ will return *before* (*pre*) this golden age. During the thousand years He will reign in righteousness on earth.

2.2. Augustine and the Reformers (A-Millennialism): In the fourth century this changed with the conversion of Emperor Constantine and the adoption of Christianity as the favoured Imperial religion. Because of this the earth (was already) "filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea." It was spreading everywhere. A new perspective was now championed by Augustine, Bishop of Hippo. Influenced by Greek thinking, he veered away from a literal and physical interpretation of the great prophetic promises. Instead he emphasised the spiritual element of the great prophecies. God had already triumphed over Satan through the cross. Now Christ was already reigning in heaven with His saints. At the end of this age Jesus will return and wrap up history.

This teaching was the very opposite of Pre-Millennialism, and it came to be known as *A-Millennialism* (*a* = *without a Millennium*). It became such accepted orthodoxy that in AD 531 the Council of Ephesus declared Pre-Millennialism a heresy. Apart from some counterculture groups A-Millennialism dominated for many centuries, through the Middle Ages and into the Reformation in the sixteenth century when Luther and Calvin still held to it.

2.3. The Puritans (Post-Millennialism): In the seventeenth century a new millennial view began to grow in prominence among Puritan scholars. They believed that Scripture pointed to a great era of success for the gospel before the return of Christ. The great Old Testament prophecies were not just for the Jews they were relevant to the Church and its mission. They believed that unprecedented numbers would come to faith including a significant turning among Jews. While evil would not be eliminated it would be reduced to a minimum as the moral and spiritual influence of Christians increased. The church would assume greater and greater importance and this would result in economic and social problems being solved.

This came to be known as *Post-Millennialism*; “post” means “after” – i.e. Christ will return after this season of success. “The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.” This golden age (not literally a thousand years) would end with the second coming of Christ, the resurrection of the dead and the last judgment. Ian H. Murray describes this in his book ‘The Puritan Hope.’

This passionate and prayerful Post-Millennialism was diluted in the centuries that followed. Some equated the “New World” of America or the “Christian” British Empire in Victorian times with the kingdom of God. Others identified the golden age with the spread of democracy or western civilisation. But dark and deadly forces also took up a millennial vision. Hitler’s “Third Reich” was sometimes called “The Thousand Year Reich” because he believed it would last for 1000 years like the Roman Empire. All this was far removed from the Puritan Hope with its biblical roots and passion for the gospel.

2.4. Irving, Darby & Scofield (Dispensationalism): The nineteenth century saw another new element added. A controversial Church of Scotland pastor in the 1820’s, Edward Irving championed *Dispensational Pre-Millennialism* in a series of published works on prophecy. He saw history divided into different “dispensations” i.e. periods characterised by some special feature. So, at present, we are in the dispensation of grace (the church age), but this will be followed by the dispensation of the kingdom, the Millennium. During this Millennial age Israel will come into the full blessing of all her earthly promises while the church would be taken up out of the earth. Irving believed the Millennium would begin in 1867.

J.N. Darby developed this among the Plymouth Brethren. “*He taught that the church was in a state of irrecoverable ruin; that the Jews were God’s ‘earthly’ and Christians his ‘heavenly’ people, kept separate for all eternity; and above all, that Christ would come again twice, once secretly to take his church away before the Great Tribulation (a doctrine of “Pre-Tribulation Rapture”) and then publicly, to rule the world.*” (David Pawson) Dr. C.I. Scofield made this interpretation an integral part of an elaborate system of notes in his best selling Scofield Reference Bible, which influenced generations of Christians.

2.5. Today - all four strands are alive and kicking! *Historic Pre-Millennialism*, with its literal interpretation of Revelation 20, has seen something of a resurgence, with respected theologians like George Eldon Ladd and G.R. Beasley-Murray and popular teachers like David Pawson arguing its case. At the same time *Dispensational Pre-Millennialism* remains strong, especially in the USA thanks to books like Hal Lindsay’s ‘The Late Great Planet Earth’ and more recently the “Left Behind” series of “Christian” novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. Many who would never read such theology have drunk it in through fiction.

The evangelical theology I was first introduced to as a new believer in the 1960’s tended to be *A-Millennial*. The great prophetic promises were to be understood spiritually, not literally.

Churches like ours have tended to lean more towards a modified form of Puritan *Post-Millennialism*. This resists any thought of a weak church clinging on desperately for Christ's return, or needing to be whisked away from the earth. However, it does not mean that everything will be undiluted success or that the world will be "Christianized". Alongside the success of the gospel there will be great persecution. In our own day we have seen great success and terrible persecution running side by side in China. Such gospel success among the nations in the last days will give a glorious foretaste of the future.

There may still be questions in your mind about "when" this will happen. But there should not be any about "if". It is certain. "The earth will be full of the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea." Don't despair about planet earth. God is sovereign. Don't live your life in fear. Go out and live one hundred percent for Christ on the earth now.

God doesn't give us a truth like this as a puzzle to solve or to simply satisfy our curiosity. It is to build our faith and stir us into action. And so this has proved. In fact one of these interpretations, above all the others, launched the modern missionary movement. If ever we needed it, here is proof that theology matters. What you believe determines how you live.

3. It is a stimulus to world mission.

Jesus said that the gospel of the kingdom would be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations (people groups), and then the end would come. (Matthew 24v14; Mark 13v10). This is a tremendous encouragement to world mission.

The Puritans put this together with the great prophetic promise of the earth being "filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord." This "Puritan Hope" of an era of great success before the return of Christ proved to be *the major influence* behind the modern missionary movement.

As a result Christians have been launched all around the world with the gospel in the last 400 years and millions from many nations have come to faith in Jesus Christ. Let me give you a few historical snapshots.

3.1. The Puritans in New England: Between 1627 and 1640 15,000 (mostly) Puritans left persecution in England for the New World of America. But they also believed that this was part of God's missionary strategy for the nations. The colonists who arrived at Massachusetts Bay in 1628 were motivated by a desire to preach the gospel to people who had never heard of Jesus. In 1648, one of these pioneers, Thomas Shepard wrote a tract about this work among the indigenous Indians, with the snappy title: *'The Clear Sunshine of the Gospel Breaking Forth upon the Indians in New England'*. He reported on the initial breakthrough but said, "If some beginnings be so full of joy, what will it be when God shall perform his whole work, when the whole earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea, and east and west shall sing together the song of the Lamb."

3.2. Isaac Watt's great missions hymn: In 1719 Isaac Watts wrote the earliest notable English hymn on overseas missions: *"Jesus shall reign where'er the sun, Does his successive journeys run; His kingdom stretch from shore to shore, Till moons shall wax and wane no more."* This great hymn was way ahead of its time. Faith was growing for the spread of the gospel to every nation on earth. 150 years later, on Whit Sunday 1862, it was sung by thousands of South Sea islanders - including many belonging to former cannibal tribes, to celebrate the first Christian government of Tonga, Fiji and Samoa.

3.3. Jonathan Edwards and revival in Massachusetts: In 1735 and 1740 Jonathan Edwards was seeing revival in Northampton, Massachusetts. He was a scholar, philosopher, pastor and evangelist and has since been called the theologian of revival. He embraced the Puritan hope and spoke of the certainty of an era of great success for the gospel. *"Now shall the promise made to Abraham be fulfilled, that in him and in his seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed; and Christ now shall become the desire of all nations.. Now the kingdom of Christ shall in the strict and most literal sense be extended to all nations, and the whole earth. There are many passages of Scripture that can be understood in no other sense. What can be more universal than Isaiah 11v9. 'For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.' So there shall be no part of the world, of mankind, but shall be covered with the knowledge of God."*

3.4. George Whitefield on both sides of the Atlantic: By 1763 George Whitefield (a friend of Edwards) had seen thousands on both sides of the Atlantic come to faith in Jesus Christ, but this simply made him anticipate more. He wrote that in the Scriptures, *"we are encouraged to expect, hope, long and pray for larger and more extensive showers of divine influence than any former age hath ever yet experienced. For, are we not therein taught... to wait for a glorious epoch, 'when the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the seas.'"*

3.5. William Carey and India: At the height of the Revival in New England Jonathan Edwards sent out his famous appeal to Christians in all lands, to *"unite together to pray for a world-wide awakening and return to primitive apostolic Christianity."* Later a copy of this fell into the hands of a Baptist shoemaker called William Carey and stirred him to his depths. He gathered a group of friends to pray. Then in 1792 he preached his famous sermon on Isaiah 54v2 with its great call: *"Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God."* One year later the Baptist Missionary Society was formed and Carey sailed to India, where he worked for the next 40 years. The obstacles were immense. Through the first 5 years there was not one convert, but the great prophetic promises of success for the gospel among the nations kept his faith alive.

3.6. Scottish missions: During Carey's first years in India a famous debate took place at the Church of Scotland Synod in 1796. William McBean pleaded the cause of taking the gospel to the nations, saying *"Scripture prophecy*

points our faith to the accomplishment of this promised event, and while we anticipate it, it ought also to be our endeavour to hasten the time when the knowledge of the Lord shall cover the earth "as the waters cover the sea." His appeal was countered and then out-voted by the Synod after another clergyman replied; *"To spread abroad the knowledge of the gospel among barbarous and heathen nations seems to me highly preposterous... the apostle Paul preached, not to naked savages, but to the inhabitants of cultured cities."* But it was a temporary setback and Scots were in the vanguard of pioneer mission. In 1823 one of the first Scottish missionaries, Donald Mitchell, landed at Bombay. Just eight months later he lay dying, but his last words were: *"The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord. Amen and Amen."*

3.7. David Livingstone in Africa: Another Scot, David Livingstone, walked some 29,000 miles across uncharted Africa with a burning passion for the gospel, between 1841 and his death in 1873. Great biblical prophetic promises like our text kept him motivated through discouragements. In one journal entry he writes: *"A good and attentive audience, but immediately after the service the Chief had retired into a hut to drink beer.... A minister who had not so much pioneer service as I have done would have been shocked to see such little effect produced by an earnest discourse concerning the future judgment"*. But then he recalls God's promise: *"The earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord"* and writes *" – that is enough. We can afford to work in faith, for Omnipotence is pledged to fulfil the promise..."*

3.8. William Wilberforce and social change: Meanwhile, back in England, William Wilberforce's lifetime's passion to abolish the slave trade was being fuelled by this same theology of mission. He wasn't just focussed on the British slave trade. In a Commons debate in June 1813 he spoke passionately for three hours and *"enthralled the House with the cause of Christian missions in India"*, writes John Pollock. The gospel was *"Glad tidings to the poor"*. His speech won the day, resulting in the East India Company Charter guaranteeing liberty to propagate the Christian faith.

3.9. The growth of the church in the twentieth century: Throughout the 20th century the worldwide church grew at an unprecedented rate in nations which were resistant to the gospel not long ago. There were great advances in Latin America, Africa and Asia. The growth of the church in China in our own lifetime represents the largest movement of the Spirit of God in history.

- ⌘ 94% of the world peoples now have access to a New Testament in their own language.
- ⌘ By the 1990's weekly Christian radio broadcasts were being broadcast in 372 "mega-languages", plus 115 others. The potential audience is now 99% of the world's population.
- ⌘ By 2000 the 'Jesus' film had been seen by around 3 billion people and had yielded 128 million enquirers. The script was translated so that over 99% of the world's population are able to view the film in a language they know.
- ⌘ The SAT-7 satellite has enabled TV coverage into the Middle East.

- ⌘ It is estimated that only 6.3% of the world's population now lives in a culture without a witnessing church.
- ⌘ *Alpha* has reached millions with the gospel. In 1992 there were just 5 registered courses in UK with only 100 attending. Currently 7,000 organizations in UK alone offer *Alpha*; 33,500 courses worldwide. Of 119 universities in UK, 60 now offer *Alpha*. Of 158 HM Prisons in England & Wales, 129 offer *Alpha*. It is now running in 163 different countries and has been translated into 33 different languages

The theological impetus behind this new missionary era came from the Puritans of the 17th century with their conviction that there would be a spread and a success for the gospel all over the world before Christ returned. They believed that God had promised that “the knowledge of the glory of the Lord” would spread all over all the earth before Jesus returned, and this is what has been happening.

Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, there is still plenty to do. Despite the spread of the gospel, some 15-25% of the world's population have still never heard the gospel. And the vast majority of those who have not been reached with the gospel are in the so-called 10/40 window - nations dominated by Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. This area also sees severe opposition to the gospel. This week Gayle Williams, a worker for the charity ‘Serve Afghanistan’, was shot dead by the Taleban because she was “spreading Christianity”. While the gospel has advanced in Africa, Asia and Latin America – Europe has seen a serious decline.

But while there may still be some distance to go, the spread of the gospel around the world has been extraordinary. I believe this is a direct fulfilment of this great prophetic promise. “The earth will be full of the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.” I don't think it exhausts the promise. I believe this text speaks of other things too.

4. It challenges us to be global Christians

How can this great prophetic promise galvanise you and me? We know that some people are specifically commissioned to travel to new nations with the gospel; but what about the rest of us? The majority of us stay in our home country. So how do we play a part in world mission? John Piper writes: *“Not every Christian is called to be a missionary. But every follower of Christ is called to be a world Christian. A world Christian is someone who is so gripped by the glory of God and the glory of his global purpose that he chooses to align himself with God's mission to fill the earth with the knowledge of his glory as the waters cover the sea.”*

This is so important for us with our County mission and vision. This is part of world mission. But the world is bigger than Northumberland. God wants to catch us up in his global purposes. So let's be practical and specific. How can we develop a World Christian mentality and play our part in filling the earth “with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord”?

4.1. We can pray for nations. To stimulate this follow the world news with different eyes. Use the internet to broaden your horizon; it is the *World Wide Web* after all. Operation World's website will give you a focus for each day. God may ignite in you a passion for a nation or a people group. e.g. the Islamic World, the "10/40 Window". For Hudson Taylor it was China.

4.2. We can use visits to other nations - to widen our vision and change our thinking - going not just as tourists or on business; e.g. find out about the nation, praying for it; seeking out local believers; taking literature.

4.3. We can share our faith and show God's love to those who come to the UK from different nations. Have a different perspective on foreign students; demonstrate a different attitude towards immigrants and asylum seekers. This is the nations coming to us. It represents a glorious opportunity to demonstrate the grace of God. Some will find Christ among us and return to their home nations.

4.4. We can develop direct church links overseas. Many of us have living links with family members or Christian workers in other nations; and we have some international diversity among us in county church. Or God may link us up personally with a family in another nation; this is what *Compassion* does through child sponsorship.

4.5. We can tap into the global opportunities opened up through our Newfrontiers family: e.g. financial support for missions; short term and retirement mission opportunities. I have been able to travel to India, China, Russia, Romania and Morocco because "*newfrontiers is a worldwide family of churches together on a mission*"

There are so many ways in which we can play our part in filling the earth "with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord." God has poured out His Holy Spirit and given us a great commission. "*Go and make disciples of all nations.*"

But there is another dimension to this great prophetic promise that deserves our attention. What our text describes is something utterly overwhelming – something which far surpasses all our best efforts at global mission and transcends the greatest revivals and seasons of blessing from heaven.

It is a picture of the total and final victory of God on planet earth. "The earth will be full of the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea." This points us forward to God's eternal plan for planet earth.

5. It points forward to God's eternal plan for the earth

Inevitably this subject draws us to other Bible texts which address the same issue. We will have to factor these into our thinking. So what are we told about God's future purpose for planet earth?

5.1. Planet earth has a future because God will fill it with His glory. It is the earth that "*will be full of the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the*

waters cover the sea.” The Bishop of Durham, Tom Wright ponders on the unusual language here and writes: “As it stands this is a remarkable statement. How can the waters cover the sea? They are the sea. It looks as though God intends to flood the universe with himself; as though the universe, the entire cosmos, was designed as a receptacle for his love. . . it is designed to be filled, flooded, drenched in God; as a chalice is beautiful not least because of what we know it is designed to contain, or as a violin is beautiful not least because we know the music of which it is capable.”

The world as we know it has a beauty and wonder that sometimes takes our breath away; but it is nothing compared to the purpose for which it was created. It was made to contain the “*the knowledge of the glory of the Lord.*”

The opening of the floodgates for this final deluge of glory will be the appearance of Jesus in all His splendour. Every eye will see Him. Everyone will acknowledge Jesus as Lord. Kings and rulers will fall before Him. His beauty and glory will light up this dark world. Whether you believe in a literal millennium or not, ultimately Christ’s eternal reign on planet will signal the final and total fulfilment of this prophecy. “*The earth will be full of the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.*”

5.2. Planet earth as we know it will be transformed. If it is flooded with “*the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea*”, it can’t possibly stay the same. It is going to be transformed.

This is what the earth itself is longing for according to Romans 8v19-22. Behind this is some basic theology. In the beginning God’s design was for creation to be ruled wisely by humanity but because of sin creation itself became enslaved and subject to disintegration and decay. So now creation itself longs for the coming of Christ and those He has redeemed, to rule over it with life-giving wisdom. It is on tiptoe waiting in expectation and yearning for this day. But it is also “*groaning*”, like a woman in childbirth, as it waits for this great moment. Is this what earthquakes, floods, droughts, volcanoes, tsunamis and hurricanes are about?

The good news at the heart of the Christian faith is that the decisive first step has been taken towards redeeming creation. Jesus’ own resurrection points ahead to the final renewal and rebirth of the whole of creation.

Another key text is Isaiah 65v17-25 where God speaks of creating a new heavens and a new earth, and new Jerusalem.. This is a theme that is repeated in both Old & New Testaments and especially Revelation 21v1-4.

5.3. But before the earth is finally and perfectly filled with God’s glory **there will be cataclysmic events on planet earth.** Habakkuk uses the imagery of a global deluge. “*The earth will be full of the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.*” This is reminiscent of the Great Flood in Noah’s day - only this time the earth will be flooded by God’s glory!

The apostle Peter employs the imagery of fire in 2 Peter 3v10-14: Whatever this means, any description of fire in the heavens and on the earth is all too possible in this nuclear age. Then he says, *“the earth and everything in it will be laid bare”*. Is this awesome laying bare of planet earth by fire an act of judgment and annihilation? Or is it more about its purification? Is the earth to be destroyed completely and replaced or will it be changed and renewed - a *“fiery reconstruction and renovation”*. (Archibald Hughes) We can easily slip into speculation at this point. Whichever it is, the end result will be the same – a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

So this great prophetic promise tells us that the earth has a future. But what has God got in mind for this transformed planet? Out text helps us here again.

6. It indicates that our future home will be planet earth

6. 1. Planet earth will be inhabited by the redeemed people of God. *“The earth will be full of the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.”* Reference to *“knowledge”* mean that minds are involved. The new earth, filled with glory, will not be empty of people. It will be inhabited by intelligent, thinking people.

We know from other Scriptures that, not only will Christ return to earth - so will His saints. Revelation 21v1,2: *“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.”* The City and the Bride here are the Church, the redeemed people of God. They will come down from heaven. There is no suggestion that they will be lifted off again. The Bible teaches that your future and mine will be on planet earth.

This will ruffle some feathers. Many who don't claim to be Christians but who believe in an after-life, almost always think of it as being somewhere “up there”. Tom Wright quotes a book for children by Maria Shriver, Arnold Schwarzenegger's wife. She writes that Heaven *“is a beautiful place where you can sit on soft clouds and talk to other people who are there. At night you can sit next to the stars, which are the brightest of anywhere in the universe. If you're good throughout your life, then you get to go to heaven. When your life is finished here on earth God sends his angels down to take you up to Heaven to be with him.”*

The majority of Christians probably also believe that their life in eternity will be spent somewhere *other than* earth. This is because of two Bible passages in particular. First, Jesus' words to the disciples on the eve of his death: *“In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”* (John 14v2-4) Then there is Jesus' assurance from the cross to the dying thief: *“Today you will be with me in paradise.”* (Luke 23v43) But do these texts really refer to our *eternal* dwelling place? Or do they speak of a *temporary* place for believers between death and the final resurrection? In

theological terminology, do these texts describe the “intermediate state of the regenerate dead”?

If so, then they describe a place of conscious enjoyment and anticipation, a place where the saints wait for the final day of resurrection, something like a royal residence such as Buckingham Palace – with many rooms and a wonderful garden. “Paradise” is the Persian word for a garden, after all. This is a glorious place of rest and delightful fellowship with Jesus Himself, who strolls around the royal garden. Then at the last day, the trumpet will sound; we will be given our resurrection body and we will come to dwell with Christ as our King in a new heaven and a new earth.

This is a wonderful part of our future hope as redeemed men and women. The apostle Peter writes: *“We are looking forward to the new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.”* (1 Peter 3v13) And what a place it will be!

6.2. Knowledge of the glory of the Lord will permeate life on planet earth.

“The earth will be full of the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.” We can only peer through the mist at what it might mean to live in a realm where everything is full of divine knowledge. Where there are no dark corners where cruelty and deceit and malice and impurity despoil our minds. Where there is no ignorance or guess work and where no question goes unanswered. And at the same time this knowledge satisfies us and there is never any lack of wonder. And throughout eternity we go on absorbing this fullness of knowledge of the glory of the Lord. Because God’s glory *is* infinite we will never exhaust it and never fail to be delighted by it. Archibald Hughes says, *“In the new heavens and the new earth” everything is perpetually new and can never lose its appeal or satisfying power.”*

And don’t miss this fact – that we will still have intellects. That is what “knowledge” means. This will be a crucial dimension of your resurrection body. David Prior writes *“These physical bodies of ours simply are incapable of coping with the glory of God. If we are going to be resurrected in Christ, we need also to be transformed into his likeness.”* Your resurrection body, and *your mind*, will be ideally suited for life in the new heavens and new earth. In fact it will be like Jesus’ resurrection body - a real body, but without the present limitations.

I wonder what my resurrection mind will be capable of when it is totally renewed and working at full capacity. Occasionally we get glimpses of the possibilities e.g. the extraordinary mental abilities of some. Imagine the multi functions of the latest, sophisticated, state-of-the-art computer being used by someone who simply knows how to play games on it. This is how we are now. But imagine what your mind will be capable of when the earth is full of the knowledge of the glory of the Lord.

6.3. The knowledge of God’s glory will affect every creature on planet earth.

Isaiah 11v1-10 tells us that one result of Christ’s righteous rule on earth will be peace among all living creatures. All fear will be banished and even the most vulnerable will feel safe. *“The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will*

lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea."

Is this figurative or literal? While some things are made clear for us, I must say other things cautiously, because Michael Green wisely reminds us that, *"We have no means whatsoever of conceiving what a resurrection body or what a restored universe will be like. Those who think they can map out a detailed programme of what will happen at the second coming should remember that, despite the prophecies of Scripture, nobody got the details of the first coming right!"* Green goes on to remind us that much of what the Scripture says *"is an attempt to convey in the language of this world something of the wonder of the next."*

Nevertheless, whatever the detail, I am convinced - and I hope you are too, that planet earth has a future, because God has promised that, **"The earth will be full of the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea."**

John Wilthew. October 2008.

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