

Of the Conflagration of the Universe.

by John Gill

The sermon discusses the universal conflagration, the burning of the world by fire, which will occur at the end of time.

Scripture: Psalm 50:3, Psalm 97:3-5, Isaiah 24:19-20, Isaiah 66:15-16, Nahum 1:5, Malachi 4:1-3, Matthew 13:40-42, Matthew 24:35, 2 Peter 3:10-12, Revelation 21:1

Topics: "End Times", "Judgment and Renewal"

Description

John Gill preaches on the universal conflagration of the universe, emphasizing the literal interpretation of biblical prophecies regarding the end times, particularly the burning of the heavens and the earth as described in 2 Peter 3:10-12. He argues against figurative interpretations that suggest the conflagration refers only to the Jewish church or ceremonial laws, asserting that the destruction will be total and literal, akin to the flood. Gill highlights the preparations in nature for this event and the historical belief in a universal burning, supported by various scriptures. He reassures believers that while the wicked will face judgment, the righteous will be preserved and ultimately inhabit a renewed creation.

Transcript

A Body of Doctrinal Divinity

Book 7--Chapter 6

OF THE CONFLAGRATION OF THE UNIVERSE

The effects of Christ's second coming and personal appearance are many; as the resurrection of the just, of which we have treated at large already; and the burning of the world, and making new heavens and a new earth, and the reign of Christ there with his saints a thousand years; and thou the general judgment: of all which in their order. And to begin with the universal conflagration; which is strongly and fully expressed by the apostle Peter (2 Pet. 3:10,12), where he says, "the elements shall melt with fervent heat; the earth also, and the works that are therein, shall be burnt up": which is to be understood of the burning of the whole sublunary and visible world; signified by the heavens and the earth, taken in a literal and not in a figurative sense. 1.

First, not figuratively, as some[1] interpret them, of the Jewish church, and of the Mosaic elements, the ceremonial laws, and the abolition of them; and who suppose, that the "new heavens" and the "new

earth", in a following verse, design the evangelical church state, or gospel dispensation, which took place upon the removal of the former. But, 1a. Though the civil state of the Jews is sometimes expressed by the heavens and the earth, and the removing of it by the shaking of them (Heb. 12:26, 27), and sometimes by the "world", at the end of which Christ came, and upon whose apostles the ends of it were (Heb. 9:26; 1 Cor. 10:11), yet the Jewish church is never called the world; for, in opposition to that, the Gentiles are called the world; the name of church the Jews took to themselves, that of the world they gave to the Gentiles, (Rom. 11:12, 15) hence the love of Christ in dying for the Gentiles is expressed by this phrase (John 3:16; 1 John 2:2). 1b.

Though the commandments of the ceremonial law are called elements or rudiments, in allusion to the elements or rudiments of a language, to which children are put to learn; under which the Jews were while children; and while under the law, as a schoolmaster (Gal. 4:3, 9; Col. 2:20), yet they are never so called, in allusion to the elements, which belong to the system of the natural world, such as air and earth, which are only capable of being burnt; for surely the burning of a few papers or parchments of the law cannot be meant here. 1c.

The abrogation of the ceremonial law is expressed by other phrases usually; as by the fleeing away of shadows, the breaking down the middle wall of partition, the abolishing of the law of commandments, and a disannulling of it; but never by burning, melting, and dissolving. 1d. The Mosaic elements, or the ceremonial law and its precepts, were already abolished when Peter wrote this epistle; these had their end in Christ, and were done away at his death; signified by the rending of the temple vail asunder; and Peter knew this, who was the first to whom it was made known, by letting down before him a sheet, in a visionary way, with all kind of creatures in it, which he was bid to slay and eat; and from whence he learnt that now nothing was to be reckoned common and unclean, that law which made the distinction being abrogated; whereas the melting of the elements was a future thing in his time, and is yet so, And likewise, 1e.

The new heavens and the new earth, if by them are meant the evangelic state, or gospel church state; that also had already taken place, and Peter was an instrument in the forming of it; he had the keys of the kingdom of heaven given him, and opened the door of faith by preaching the gospel to Jews and Gentiles; and on the day of Pentecost three thousand were converted and baptized, and added to the church, which was the first gospel church in Jerusalem; and therefore this was not a state to be looked for as to be in future time.

But, 2. Secondly, the words are to be understood literally; yet not of a partial bursting of some particular place or city; not of the burning of Jerusalem, the city and temple, and inhabitants of it; which is the sense some[2] put upon them; and which some take into the former sense, and so make a motley sense of them, partly figurative and partly literal; but such a sense of the words cannot be admitted; for, 2a. This would not afford a sufficient answer to the objection to the promise of Christ's coming, taken from the continuation of all things in the same situation as they were from the creation (2 Pet. 3:4), for what change in the system of the universe would the burning of a single city, and of a temple in it, make?

Changes and revolutions in single states, kingdoms, and cities, had been frequent, and these objectors could not be ignorant of them: but nothing less than such a change as was made by the flood could strengthen the answer to the objection and serve to remove it. Wherefore, 2b. The destruction here spoken of is of equal extent with the destruction of the world by the flood; as the world, the whole world that then was, was overflowed by the flood and perished; so the heavens and the earth which are now will

be dissolved and burnt by fire; and nothing short of such a dissolution of the whole frame of nature can answer such a description.

Besides, it may be further observed, as it has been,[3] 2c. That the apostle's quoting a passage in 2 Peter 3:8 from Psalm 90:4 seems to suppose, that the time of Christ's coming might be then a thousand years off, as in fact it was, and much more, and yet be a short time with God, and might be spoken of as such; but to make mention of a thousand years must seem very improper, with respect to an event that was not twenty years to come; and which Christ had assured would be in that generation (Matthew 23:36, 38, 39; 24:3,34). 2d.

No such events as here mentioned happened at the destruction of Jerusalem and the burning of the temple; as the passing away of the heavens with a great noise, a fervent heat in them, to the liquefaction of the elements; with the burning of the earth and all works in it; for even the land of Judea itself was not thus burnt up, with the cities, towns, villages, and inhabitants of them, and all things in them. 2e. Nor was this destruction so desirable a thing as to be looked for with pleasure, and the coming of Christ to effect it, to be hastened to, as in 2 Peter 3:12 whereas Christ's coming to judge the quick and dead, at his appearing and kingdom, will be glorious, and is to be looked for and loved.

To say no more, 2f. The destruction here prophesied of is expressly said to be at the day of judgment, against which day the heavens and the earth are reserved unto fire (2 Pet. 3:7), so that, upon the whole, nothing else can be meant but the general conflagration of the world by fire, in a literal sense. The nature and extent of this burning will be more particularly considered after we have proved that such a conflagration is possible and probable, yea, certain; as will appear, 2f1.

First, from partial burnings, which may be considered as types, emblems, and presages of the universal burning; as, 2f1a. The burning of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities of the plain; which were set forth for "an example of suffering the vengeance of eternal fire"; and why not then be considered as an emblem of the burning of the world at the last day? These cities were destroyed by fire which came down from heaven; and on a day, when in the morning there was no appearance nor likelihood of it, a fine, bright, sunshine morning (Gen. 19:23, 24), and when the inhabitants of it were thoughtless and secure, and indulging themselves in pleasures; and thus, says our Lord, "shall it be in the day when the Son of man is revealed", that is, in flaming fire, to take vengeance on the wicked (Luke 17:28-30), and if God could destroy these cities, and all in them, by fire from heaven, what should hinder but that he can destroy the whole world in like manner? 2f1b.

The destruction of Jerusalem, and the burning of the temple, were emblems of the destruction of the world by fire; hence in answer to the question, put by the disciples of Christ unto him; "What shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?" (Matthew 24:3). Our Lord gives such as were common, both to the destruction of Jerusalem, near at hand, and of the whole world, at the end of it, the one being typical of the other: and so these signs had a double accomplishment; first in the destruction of Jerusalem, and then in the final dissolution of the world.

And so the destruction of the Jews is sometimes expressed in such language as suits with the destruction of the whole world; particularly in Deuteronomy 32:22. "For a fire is kindled in my anger", &c. And, indeed, this conflagration here spoken of may be thought to reach further than the land of Judea, though that seems principally designed; even other parts of the earth, and to terminate in the destruction of the whole world; and so Justin Martyr[4] interprets it of the general conflagration.

And though Jerusalem and the temple were not burnt by fire from heaven, yet the hand of God was so manifest therein, that Titus, the heathen emperor himself, could observe it; who strove, by all possible means, to prevent the burning of the temple, but could not do it; for God, as the historian observes, had condemned it to the fire;[5] as, indeed, it was: our Lord foretold the burning of the city by the Romans (Matthew 22:6) and the blaming of the temple is prophesied of in Zechariah 11:1 there called Lebanon, because built of the cedars of Lebanon. 2f1c.

The burning of the beast, of antichrist, and of the antichristian states. The judgment which will issue in that is described in such manner as if the last and the great day of judgment was intended, and the dissolution of all things at hand; yet nothing else follows upon it, but the body of the beast being destroyed and committed to the burning flame (Dan. 7:9-11), and the destruction of Idumaea, which seems to be a type of Rome and of the antichristian states, is expressed in such language as agrees very well with the dissolution and burning of the whole world (Isa. 34:4-6,9,10) of the burning of Rome, see Revelation 18:8-18. 2f1d.

The destruction of Gog and Magog, or the Turk, will be by fire; which will be at the beginning of the spiritual reign of Christ; and when the Jews are converted, and restored to their own land, which will irritate the Turk to bring his armies against them, the Lord will "rain upon him an overflowing rain, and great hailstones, fire and brimstone" (Ezek. 38:22), this is said of Gog; and the like is said of Magog (Ezek. 39:6). And I will send a fire on Magog: these are different from the Gog and Magog in Revelation 20:8, 9 who are no other than all the wicked dead raised; whereas these are the Turks: and they will appear at a different time; the one at the beginning of the spiritual reign of Christ, as before observed; and the other at the end of the personal reign of Christ, or the millennium; and so the fire that comes down from heaven on the one is of a different nature from that which comes on the other; the one is a material fire, the other the wrath of God.

Now these several partial burnings, as they are types and presages of the universal burning of the world, so they at least make that possible and probable. 2f2. Secondly, the probability of the universal conflagration may be argued from the preparations in nature which are made and making for it; for the apostle says, that "the heavens and the earth which are now", which are now in being, "are by the same word", the word of God, "kept in store", as a treasure, and are treasured up among the stores of vengeance, "reserved unto fire"; for which preparations are making in them; "against the day of judgment, and perdition of ungodly men", when it will break forth and destroy the universe and all things in it.

Preparations are making in the earth for this general burning. Not to take notice of the central fire, supposed by some to be in the midst of the earth, since it is doubtful whether there is such a thing or not; it is certain there are various volcanoes, or burning mountains, in different parts of the world; besides Mount Etna, in Sicily,[6] which has been burning for many ages, as also has Vesuvius, near Naples; and the island of Strombilo, in the sea, which lies between them both, and is thought to have a communication with them under the bottom of the sea; and Lipara, near Sicily: and so far north as Iceland, there are three burning mountains; one of them called Hecla, which oftentimes rages no less than Etna, vomiting out prodigious stones, with a terrible noise; besides hot springs in abundance.

In the East Indies, in the island of Java, not far from the town Panacura, a mountain broke out in 1586, for the first time; discharging such quantities of burning brimstone, that above ten thousand persons in the country round about were destroyed. The mount Gonnapi, in one of the islands of Banda, in the same year, which had been burning seventeen years, broke from the rest, throwing out a most dreadful quantity

of burning matter, and great red hot stones, &c. There is another mountain on the island of Sumatra, which smokes and flames just like Etna.

The earth, in the Molucca islands, casts out fire in several places; as in Sorea and Celebes; especially a mountain in Ternata. In one of the Moorish islands, about one hundred and twenty miles from those of the Molucca, there happen very often earthquakes, with eruptions of fire and ashes. In Japan, and the islands about it, there are many little, and one great burning mountain; nay, it is said,[7] there are eight "volcanos" in Japan, besides many hot springs. In Tandaja, one of the Philippine islands, are found many small fire mountains; and one in the island Mariudica, not far from them.

The like are found in North America, in the province of Nicaragua. And in South America, in Peru, among those mountains that make the ridge of the Cordillera, near the city Arequipa, there flames a mountain continually. There is likewise one near the valley Mullahalo, which being opened by fire, casts out great stones. There are also several burning mountains in the district that lies on the east side of the river Jeniscea, in the country of the Tongesi, some weeks journey from the river Oby, according to the relation of the Muscovites; as also near another water called Besida.

Near the island Santorini, no longer ago than the year 1707, sprung up a new island from the bottom of the sea; in which, about the end of August that year, the subterraneous fires, after a terrible rumbling, burst out with such violent noise as if six or seven pieces of cannon were discharged at once; and frequently a great quantity of ashes, glowing stones, and huge pieces of burning rocks, have been tossed into the air with such a force, that they have been carried seven miles before they have dropped into the sea! [8] Strabo [9] reports somewhat similar to this, as done near this place some hundreds of years ago.

Nor is our island free from symptoms and appearances of subterraneous fires; for by what are the hot waters at Bath and Bristol occasioned, but by them, by which they are heated? Besides, there are eruptions of fire in some places in other parts of the land. [10] And by the above accounts it appears, that not only there have been burning mountains in ages past, in some places, even thousands of years ago; but that new ones, in later times, have broke out: so that the preparation for the general burning of the world is still carried on and is increasing; and which may seem to portend its being near.

And there is not only a preparation making in the earth but in the heavens also, where there is great store of materials fit for this purpose provided; witness the fiery meteors in them, the blazing comets, which sometimes appear and are always in being, though not always seen by us; also those vast bodies of light and fire, the sun and stars, to be made use of on occasion; and the vast quantities of matter which occasion such dreadful thunders and lightnings which, in some parts of the world, are almost continual, and from which they are scarce ever free.

Now when these things are considered, the general conflagration of the world will seem neither impossible nor improbable; but rather it may be wondered at, and thought a miracle, that the earth has not been destroyed by fire long ago. Let the atheist, the infidel, the profane and careless sinner tremble at this. Pliny [11] the heathen, observing the many fires in the earth and in the heavens, and how easily fire is kindled by holding concave glasses to the sun, says, "It exceeds all miracles, that one day should pass and all things not put into a conflagration!" 2f3.

Thirdly, what may make the doctrine of the universal conflagration probable, is, that it has been believed in all ages, and by all sorts of persons. Josephus [12] says, that Adam foretold the destruction of all things, at one time by the force of fire; and at another time by the violence and multitude of water; and therefore the

posterity of Seth built two pillars, one of brick and the other of stone, on which they inscribed their inventions; that if that of brick was destroyed by the force of showers of rain, that of stone remaining, would show to men what was written on the brick: from hence, or, however, from an early tradition, this notion of the burning of the world has been received and embraced by various nations, both Jews and Gentiles: as for the Jews, they might have it, not only from tradition, but might conclude it from the word of God, as they do; who say,[13] that though God has sworn he will not bring a flood of water on the world, yet he will bring a flood of fire; as it is said (Isa 66:16).

"For by fire will the Lord plead", or judge; hence they speak of the wicked being judged with two sorts of judgments, by water and by fire:[14] and this same tradition got among the Gentiles, and was received by them; as by the Indians,[15] the inhabitants of Siam and Pegu, the Egyptians, the Chaldaeans, and the ancient Gauls and Britons, and the Druids among them.[16] And it has been embraced by poets and philosophers, Greek and Latin. Lactantius[17] quotes a prophecy of one of the sybils, that as God formerly destroyed the world with a flood, so he would hereafter destroy mankind for their wickedness by burning.

Justin Martyr[18] observes, that the sybil, Hystaspes (the Persian) and the Stoics, assert, that corruptible things shall be destroyed by fire. Orpheus, that very ancient poet, as quoted by Plato,[19] affirmed, that in the sixth generation, the world, katakausetai, (so it should be read) shall be burnt; and Sophocles, as quoted by Justin,[20] and Clemens of Alexandria,[21] speaks of this burning. The verses of Ovid,[22] concerning this matter, and so of Lucan,[23] are well known.

The philosophers make frequent mention of it; Empedocles[24] says, there shall be sometime a change of the world into the substance of fire. And Heraclitus taught,[25] that as all things are of fire, all shall be resolved into it again; and that as the world was generated out of fire, in a course of years the whole world shall be burnt again; and so say Hippasus,[26] and Phurnutus[27] and Zeno[28] expresses himself almost in the words of Peter, that the elements shall be destroyed, or corrupted, by a fiery eruption; and Plato,[29] in so many words, says, in length of time, or, as some read it, in a short time, there will be a destruction of the things on the earth by much fire.

And it is the observation of many writers, that the Stoic philosophers held an ekpurwsiV, or conflagration of the world by fire; Epictetus[30] speaks of it; and so does Seneca,[31] who says, that fire is the "exitus" of the world; nay, Minutius Felix[32] asserts, that this was not only the constant opinion of the Stoics; but that the same was the sentiment of the Epicureans, concerning the conflagration of the elements, and the ruin of the world; and it has been observed, that of all the heretics under the Christian name, none have risen up who have denied the dissolution of the world by fire.

Now that men of different nations, and ages, and sentiments, should agree in this, makes it probable that so it may be: but we have a more sure word of prophecy, which makes this matter certain to us Christians. Wherefore, 2f4. Fourthly, that the world, and all things in it, shall at last be consumed by fire may be concluded from the sacred scriptures. And, 2f4a. First, from Psalm 3. "Our God shall come", &c. By "our God", is meant Christ, "Immanuel, God with us"; called "the mighty God" (Ps. 50:1), and is one of his names (Isa. 9:6), who, as at his first coming, came out of Zion, (Ps. 50:2), so he will when he comes again (Joel 3:16), of which second coming these words are to be understood; as appears by his order to gather his saints to him (Ps. 50:5), which order will be given to his angels, to gather his elect from the four winds, when raised from the dead, at his coming (Matthew 24:30), and by his appearing under the character of a Judge (Ps. 50:6), to judge his people (Ps. 50:4), and even all the inhabitants of the earth, who will be called from one end of it to the other (Ps. 50:1), and be judged in righteousness; and so the Targum

applies the text to the judgment of the great day,[33] when he will "not keep silence".

His descent from heaven will be with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and the trump of God; when his voice will be heard from the rising of the sun to the going down of it; and reach the dead in their graves, who will hear it and come forth; and then a "fire shall devour before him", and consume all in the way, dissolve the heavens, melt the elements, and burn the earth, and all in it, and be "tempestuous round about him"; which agrees with Peter's account of the conflagration, that the heavens shall pass away with a "great noise", roizhdon, like that of a storm and tempest; and now, in a literal sense, will the Lord rain upon the wicked fire and brimstone, and "an horrible tempest!"(Ps. 11:6). 2f4b.

Secondly, from Psalm 97:3-5. "A fire goeth before him", to make way for him, by destroying everything combustible; "and burneth up his enemies round about", who would not have him to reign over them, reject him as a Saviour, despise his gospel, and submit not to his ordinances; so the fire with which the world shall be burnt is "for the perdition of ungodly men", all the wicked inhabitants of the earth; it will leave none: "his lightnings lightened the world"; such dreadful thunder and lightning will be in the heavens, that the coruscation thereof will blaze all over the world; the sight of which will be so awful and tremendous, that "the earth", the inhabitants of it, will "see and tremble", fearing the flashes of it will consume them: "the hills melted like wax" before the fire, "at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the Lord of the whole earth"; who will now come to judge the world with righteousness, and the people with equity; as at the close of the preceding Psalm, with which this is connected; when "righteousness and judgment" will be "the habitation of his throne", and he will sit on his throne judging righteously; when he will come in the "clouds" of heaven, and be surrounded with them (Ps. 97:2), and when he will take to himself his great power and "reign", which will cause joy and gladness to his people (Ps 97:1), for his judging of quick and dead, will be at his appearing and kingdom (2 Tim. 4:1), for all these things go together; Christ's appearance in the clouds, taking possession of his kingdom, the judgment of quick and dead, and the burning of his enemies. 2f4c.

From Isaiah 24:1-23 which is a prophecy, not of the destruction of a single state and kingdom, but of the whole world; as appears from Isaiah 24:1,3,4,19,20 and which is expressed by a "dissolution" of it, and by "burning the inhabitants" thereof (Isa. 24:19,6), and is spoken of as what will immediately precede the personal and glorious reign of Christ (Isa. 24:23). 2f4d. Fourthly, from Isaiah 66:15,16. "For behold the Lord will come with fire", &c. which perfectly agrees with the account of Christ's coming to burn the world, and take vengeance on the wicked, given in the New Testament (2 Thess. 1:7,8; 2 Pet. 3:10).

"For by fire, and by his sword", which proceeds out of his mouth, "will the Lord plead with all flesh", with all mankind, or "judge" them; for of Christ's coming to judgment must this be understood; for the judgment is universal. In the former part of the chapter are various prophecies concerning the spiritual reign of Christ, the conversion of the Jews, and a large addition to the church from among the Gentiles, and of the great peace and prosperity of it (Isa. 66:7-13), an hint is given of the resurrection of the dead (Isa. 66:14).

"Your bones shall flourish like an herb";[34] compare with it Isaiah 26:19 which will be at Christ's second coming; and after this, mention is made "of the new heavens and the new earth" (Isa. 66:22), which will succeed the old heavens and earth that will perish in the conflagration of the universe. 2f4e. Fifthly, from the various passages in the minor prophets; particularly in Naham 1:3-5 for though the prophecy is concerning the destruction of Nineveh, yet God is described as what he will appear to be, and by what he will do at the dissolution of all things; "the Lord hath his way in the whirlwind and in the storm"; and in such an one the heavens will pass away, according to the apostle Peter: "And the clouds are the dust of his

feet"; in these the Lord of the whole earth, the Son of man, will come to judgment.

"He rebuketh the sea, and maketh it dry, and drieth up all the rivers"; which yet was never done; but will be done at the conflagration of the world; hence John says, "The first heaven, and the first earth, were passed away, and there was no more sea" (Rev. 21:1), being dried up at the general burning. "Bashan languisheth, and Carmel, and the flower of Lebanon languisheth"; the trees, herbs, and flowers, which covered and adorned these mountains, being all consumed by the fire; "and the hills melt, and the earth is burnt at his presence; yea, the world, and all that dwell therein!" than which nothing can more fully agree with the description the apostle Peter gives of the dissolution of all things (2 Pet. 3:10).

Some passages in Zephaniah 1:2, 3, 18 seem to look this way; for though the destruction of the land of Judea is particularly threatened; yet they seem to have a further view, even to all the nations and kingdoms of the whole world, and to all the earth, which shall be devoured with the fire of God's jealousy (Zeph. 3:8), and the time of it is called, "the great day of the Lord" (Zeph. 3:14), the day of judgment, the judgment of the great day, as that is called in the New Testament; against which the fire that shall burn the world is reserved (Jude 1:6; 2 Pet. 3:7), but especially the prophecy in Malachi 4:1-3 in the ultimate completion of it, may be thought to respect the general conflagration; for though it may be applied to the destruction of Jerusalem, and the Jews in it, and to Christ's coming to take vengeance on them, yet only as a type and emblem of this; "for behold, the day cometh that shall burn as an oven"; the day of the Lord, as Peter expresses it, which will burn like an oven indeed, with great fury and fierceness; so that the heavens shall pass away, the elements melt, and the earth, and all therein, be burnt up; and "all the proud", the despisers of Christ and his gospel, "and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble"; fit for such an oven, and which the fire will soon and easily consume; "and shall burn them up, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch"; not one wicked man will escape the conflagration, all will be burnt in it, yet the wicked only; for the righteous dead, who will then be raised, and the living saints, who will be changed, will be caught up together into the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air; and will be carried up far enough to be out of the reach of the devouring flames; and these are they who are meant by such that fear the Lord, to whom "the Sun of righteousness shall arise"; Christ shall appear to them as bright and as glorious, as comfortable and delightful, as the sun; and arise on them "with healing in his wings"; so that they, the inhabitants of the new heavens and the new earth, which will now be formed, "shall not say, I am sick"; these will be the times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord; and "the wicked shall be ashes under the soles of their feet": which words will be literally fulfilled; for the wicked being burnt, and their ashes mixed with that matter which shall form the new earth, and be interred in it, the saints that dwell on it, will, in a literal sense, tread on them; and they will be, not as ashes, but really ashes, under the soles of their feet.

It will be needless to take notice of passages in the New Testament; since the famous one in Peter, which so fully asserts, and so clearly describes the conflagration, has been thoroughly considered, and its sense established; and the text in 2 Thessalonians 1:7, 8 has been often quoted, or referred to; only it may be proper to take notice of what our Lord says shall be at the end of the world, at the dissolution of it, and which plainly suggests it shall be by fire; that "as the tares are gathered and burnt in the fire, so shall it be at the end of the world"; the wicked shall be gathered and separated from the righteous, and be cast into a furnace of fire; and such the world will be when destroyed by fire, and all the wicked in it (Matthew 13:40-42,49,50).

Proof being thus given of the general conflagration, I proceed, 2f5. Fifthly, to answer some queries relative to it; as with what sort of fire the world will be burnt? what the extent of this burning? and whether the earth

will be destroyed by it as to its substance, or only as to its qualities? 2f5a. First, with what sort of fire the world will be burnt? Not with fire taken in a figurative, but in a literal sense; not with metaphorical, but material fire. Fire is sometimes taken figuratively for the wrath of God, whose fury is poured forth like fire (Nah. 1:5; Ps. 18:8; 79:5).

But though the burning of the world will be the effect of God's wrath against sinners for their sins, yet that will be executed by means of material fire: the world will be burnt with such fire as will come from heaven, and break forth out of the earth; with such fire from heaven by which Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities of the plain were destroyed; with which Aaron's two sons were consumed; with which the two hundred and fifty men of Korah's company were destroyed; with which the two captains, and their fifties, perished, who came to take the prophet Elijah; of the same sort with that which fell on Job's sheep, and the servants that kept them, and killed them; and such as very often flashes from heaven, and destroys houses, buildings, men, and cattle: and such fire as breaks out of the earth, of which various instances have been given, in volcanoes, and other eruptions; and like that which the historian[35] speaks of, which many hundreds of years ago broke out of the earth in Germany, and burnt towns, villages, and fields everywhere, and was with great difficulty extinguished.

So that the world will be destroyed by fire much in the same manner as it was by water: the flood was brought upon it partly by the windows of heaven being opened above, which let down rain; and partly by the fountains of the great deep being broke up below, which sent forth great quantities of water; and both meeting together, drowned the world: so the stores of fire in the heavens being opened, and great quantities issuing out of the bowels of the earth, these joining together will set the whole world on fire, heavens and earth, and bring on their speedy dissolution.

Some have thought the stars will have a great influence in this affair. Berosus, an ancient writer, says,[36] that it will be according to the course of the stars; and that all earthly things will be burnt up, when all the stars shall meet in Cancer: and one Serarius,[37] in the last century, because of the conjunction of all the planets in Sagittarius, a fiery sign, conjectured that the burning of the world was near; and Mr. Whiston,[38] of the present age, fancied the world will be burnt by the near approach of a comet to it; so the Brahmins.[39] But for such conjectures there is no foundation; the manner seems to be as before described.

This fire will be but temporary, it will last but for a time; how long the world will be burning cannot be known; fire usually makes quick dispatch, and consumes presently; and so it is to be distinguished from that fire in which the wicked will be tormented, that is called everlasting fire, fire which cannot be quenched, the smoke of which ascends for ever and ever (Matthew 25:41; Mark 9:44; Rev. 14:10,11). 2f5b. Secondly, what will be the extent of this burning? or how far, and to what will it reach?

To the heavens, the elements, the earth, and all the works in it. 2f5b1. To the heavens; not to the third heaven, into which the apostle Paul was caught up, and heard and saw what it was not lawful to utter; for this is the throne of God, the habitation of angels and glorified saints, and now the residence of the glorious body of Christ; but the fire will not reach the palace of Jehovah; nor at all annoy any of his courtiers and friends: it is a question, whether it will reach the starry heaven, or at all affect the luminaries of the sun, moon, and stars; for though the city of the perfect saints, the inhabitants of the new heavens and earth, will stand in no need of the sun and moon to enlighten them, it does not follow that these then will not be; but rather it is implied, that they will be, though the saints will not: need them.

Things that are durable, are said sometimes to endure, as the sun, and moon, and stars, for ever and ever; and it seems as if these will be always continued, as monuments of the power, wisdom, and goodness of God. But it will be the airy heaven,[40] that will be the subject of the conflagration, the atmosphere about us, the surrounding air, and the meteors in it. Some have thought this burning will reach no farther than the waters of the flood did, which verged the highest hills, and it may be reached fifteen cubits higher; but that is no certain rule to go by: however, as the fowls of the heaven or air, were destroyed by that, so they will by this (Gen. 7:23; Zeph. 1:3). 2f5b2.

To the earth, and all the works that are in it; to the whole terraqueous globe, both land and sea: it may seem a difficulty, how that part of the globe which contains such vast quantities of water, as are in the main ocean, in other seas, and in the rivers, should be consumed hereby; yet this will be none, when the omnipotence of God is considered, and what the prophet says of him with respect to this affair; "He rebuketh the sea, and maketh it dry, and drieth up all the rivers" (Nah. 1:4), which will be the case, represented to John, in a vision, who saw the first heaven and earth pass away, and new ones succeed; and "there was no more sea", that being dried up; see Amos 7:4.

This fire will reach to all the living creatures in the earth, land, and sea, the works of God's hands: as the fowls of the air, so the fishes of the sea, and "the cattle on a thousand hills"; all the beasts of the field, and all men found on the earth; all wicked of the earth, who will be all burnt up root and branch, not one will escape. This fire is reserved for the perdition of ungodly men. It will extend to all the works of nature, mountains, hills, and rocks, metals and minerals in the bowels of them, and all that cover and ornament them, trees, herbs, plants, and flowers; for, as the prophet says in the above place, "Bashan languisheth, and Carmel and the flower of Lebanon languisheth", being stripped of all their glory; the same will be true of all other mountains and hills: It will consume all the works of art, towers, palaces, and stately buildings, which it was thought would have continued for ever; all the utensils and instruments of various manufactories; and all the curious things wrought by the hands of men.

Likewise all literary works, the archives and records of kingdoms, states, and cities; the treaties, covenants, and agreements of princes; compacts between men; bonds, bills, deeds of conveyance of right to estates, lands, possessions, and inheritances; all the writings of men, good and bad: all that good men have written for the use of the church, which will be continued to this time, will now be destroyed, there being no further need of them, and use for them. Some think that moral works and actions are included, and that these are the works that will be burnt up, and this the fire the apostle speaks of in 1 Corinthians 3:13-15 but such works are not the subjects of fire: nor is it such fire the world will be destroyed with that is there meant: the "day" that shall declare every man's work, is the bright day of the gospel, in the spiritual reign of Christ; the light of which will be as the light of seven days, when the people of God, ministers and others, will see eye to eye; every truth will be seen in its true light, and be easily distinguished from error: and the "fire" designs the gospel, which will then burn bright and clear, and burn up everything contrary to it; and so by "works" are meant doctrines, some comparable to gold, silver, and precious stones, which will bear the test of this day, and the fire; and others like wood, hay, and stubble, which will not be able to stand before them: and it should be observed, that the apostle is speaking of good men and ministers, who were on the foundation themselves, and laid the foundation, Christ, ministerially; but laid different things on this foundation, some very good, others good for nothing, and a mixture of both; which, when the day, the time comes spoken of, will be declared and distinguished; such as will abide the scrutiny and test, shall be rewarded in the kingdom state; but such as will not, will be condemned, as not agreeable to the word, though the ministers of them, as to their persons, shall be saved, being on the foundation, Christ.

Here let it be observed, for the comfort of the saints, that there are many things which will escape the general conflagration; as the "book of life", in which the names of God's elect are written; the "covenant of grace", which contains the "magna charta" of their salvation; the "word of God", as it is the engrafted word in their hearts; their "title" to the heavenly inheritance; the "inheritance itself", which is incorruptible, and reserved in the heavens: nor shall they themselves be destroyed in it; the wicked will be all burnt in it, not one will escape that will then be found on the earth: but as for the saints, the dead bodies of all who have died from the beginning of the world will be raised, and their souls being brought by Christ along with him, will be reunited to them; and they, with the living saints then on earth, who will be changed, shall be caught up together into the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air; and shall be carried up high enough, and be with him out of the reach of this fire;[41] so that it may be said of them, as of Daniel's three companions in the furnace, that not an hair of their heads shall be singed, nor the smell of fire pass upon their garments. 2f5c.

Thirdly, the next query is, whether the earth shall be dissolved by fire, as to its substance, or only as to its qualities? There are persons of great note on both sides of the question; and the arguments of each are not despicable: but I rather incline to the latter, that the world will only be destroyed with respect to its qualities; those who are for the destruction of the world as to the substance of it, argue both from reason and scripture. 2f5c1. From reason: they urge, that as the world was made out of nothing, it shall be reduced to nothing again.

But this reasoning will not hold good; for there are some beings which are produced out of nothing, which shall not be annihilated; as angels, and the souls of men, neither of which are formed out of any pre-existent matter, but out of nothing; and so being immaterial, are immortal, and shall never die, nor be reduced to nothing. They argue also, that there will be no further use of the world hereafter, and of the things of it; and as God does nothing in vain, therefore it will not be continued any longer, as to its substance, men ceasing to be upon it, for whose use it was made.

But it is more than we are able to say, that it will be of no use hereafter; there are some things that will be in a future state, that we are not able to assign the uses of; as some parts of the human body, when that shall be raised, as no doubt it will be, with all its parts, some of which are not suited to a state in which there will be no eating nor drinking, nor marrying, nor giving in marriage; yet be raised with the rest, both for the perfection of the body and the ornament of it: and besides, if for nothing else, this world, as to the substance, may be continued as a standing monument of the power, wisdom, and goodness of God; to which may be added, that there will be men to inhabit it, even all the righteous ones, at least for the space of a thousand years.

It is further observed, that God usually proceeds from things less perfect, to things more perfect; and so from things temporal to things spiritual and eternal. To which may be replied, that this will be the case, by renewing the earth as to its qualities; it will become more perfect, and be suitable to men in a perfect state, and whose bodies will be raised spiritual and immortal. 2f5c2. They also argue from scripture; as even from the text in 2 Peter 3:10 and observe, that the heavens are said to pass away, the elements to melt, the earth, and all therein, burnt up; which they judge, can intend no other than a substantial destruction of the world.

But the phrases are not strong enough[42] to support this; the heavens may pass away into another state and form, as the fashion of the world will, and yet not be dissolved as to their substance: things may be melted, as wax, and other things; which, though they lose their form, do not lose their being; and things

being burnt, may be reduced to ashes, yet not annihilated; ashes are something. They urge the text in Psalm 102:26. "They", the heavens, "shall perish, but thou shalt endure; they all shall wax old as a garment, as a vesture thou shalt change them, and they shall be changed".

But those on the other side of the question, urge the same text in favour of their sentiment; since the perishing of the heavens is explained by changing them; and all change does not suppose a destruction of substance; and a garment that is waxed old, may be refitted, and put into a new form, and be for more and after use; and besides, the author of the epistle to the Hebrews, interprets this change by a folding up a vesture, which is done in order to be laid up, and made use of hereafter.

A similar place is produced by them, in Isaiah 51:6. "The heavens shall vanish away like smoke"; but then smoke is something, and that vanishes into air, and that air is something; "And the earth shall wax old like a garment"; but that, as before observed, may be fitted up in another manner, and be for the better; "And they that dwell therein shall die in like manner": but if the heavens and the earth perish in like manner as men do, they do not perish as to their substance, neither with respect to body nor soul; the body, at death, returns to the earth and dust, from whence it was, and the soul to God that gave it.

They instance also in Isaiah 65:17. "Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth"; and therefore the old heavens and earth must be destroyed, as to their substance, since the new ones are not formed out of them, but are created; and creation is a production of things out of nothing. But it may be observed, that the word "create" does not always so signify; but sometimes only the renovation of what already is; as in Psalm 51:10. They likewise make use of all those scriptures which speak of the heavens, and the earth, and the world, passing away (Matthew 5:18; 24:35; 1 John 2:17), in what sense they may be said to pass away, as in (2 Pet. 3:10 has been observed already.

The first of those scriptures only says, "till heaven and earth pass", which will never be; and so not one jot or tittle of the law shall pass till all be fulfilled: the other indeed asserts, that "heaven and earth shall pass away"; but then the sense may be only comparatively, that sooner shall heaven and earth pass away, as they never shall, than that "Christ's words shall pass away": the last of them refers to the fashion of the world, and the lusts in it, which shall pass away, and have no place in the new earth; in which, not worldly and sinful lusts, only righteousness shall dwell.

All such passages of scripture, likewise, which speak of "the end of the world", are brought into this argument: but these, some of them, have only reference to the end of the Jewish state: as 1 Corinthians 10:11 and Hebrews 9:26 and others only refer to the present state of things in the world; but not to the destruction of it; as Matthew 28:20 and such passages which only respect the mutability of the things of this world, and the temporary enjoyment of them, can be of no use in this controversy; as Hebrews 13:14 and 2 Corinthians 4:18.

So likewise, when the Angel swore "that time shall be no more", it can be understood only of antichristian time, or of the time of the reign of antichrist; of the holy city being trodden under foot by the Gentiles; of the witnesses prophesying in sackcloth; and of the church being in the wilderness; which will be finished at the period referred to: but then all time, in every sense, is not then to be no longer; for not only after that, but after the first resurrection, and the general conflagration, there will be a time of a thousand years at least, in which the saints will dwell with Christ on earth.

Those who suppose that the world will be only destroyed, as to the qualities of it, argue also from reason and scripture. 2f5c2a. From reason: they observe that the old world which perished by the flood, was not

destroyed as to its substance; for after the waters were removed from off the earth, Noah, with his family, and all the creatures with him in the ark, went out of it upon the earth; and he built an altar on it, and sacrificed; and he and his sons repeopled the earth.

And in like manner, the earth will not be destroyed by fire, as to its substance; but renewed, so as to be inhabited again. They further observe, that man, who is a microcosm, a little world, a world in miniature, when he perishes by death, it is not a destruction of him as to his substance, neither of soul nor body, as before observed. Besides, if God meant to annihilate the world, he would not make use of fire; for fire, though it divides and separates the parts of matter, it does not destroy it; it purges, purifies, and refines; but does not reduce the substance of anything to nothing.

Besides, bodies raised, must have a place to be in, to stand before God in, at judgment; and to be either in a state of happiness or misery afterwards; for which there would be no place found, if the world, as to the substance of it, was dissolved. 2f5c2b. They likewise produce passages of scripture, and argue from them, against the substantial destruction of the world, and for the change of it only, as to qualities. That the earth, as to the matter and substance of it, shall always abide, they urge (Ps. 104:5; Eccl 1:4).

They argue from some of the places brought by others for the utter destruction of the world; as Psalm 102:26; Isaiah 51:6 on the former of which they observe, with Jerom on the place, that the words do not express the utter destruction of the world, but a change of it for the better: and on the latter, that the words suggest, that the heavens and the earth will perish in like manner as men do at death; which is not a destruction of their being, but a change of them into another form and state.

They reason from all those scriptures which speak of a new heaven and a new earth; that these signify renewed ones, not new as to substance, but quality: as a new heart, and a new spirit, do not design a new soul of man, new powers and faculties; but a renewing of the same as to qualities. They observe what the apostle says, "The fashion of this world passeth away" (1 Cor. 7:31), the scheme, the figure, and form of it, in its present situation; not the matter and substance of it.

And they further observe, that the state of the world at this time, is expressed by a "regeneration" of it (Matthew 19:28), and by a "restitution of all things" (Acts 3:21), which signify a forming and restoring them to a more pure and glorious state. I take no notice of (Rom. 8:19, &c. commonly made use of on this subject, because I think it belongs to something else,[43] and to another time; and from the whole, those on this side the question conclude, that the dissolution of the world by fire, will be only a purging, purifying, and refining it, as to its form and quality, and a removing from it everything included in the curse, which the sin of man brought upon it; and so will become an habitation fit for the second Adam, and his holy, spiritual, and perfect offspring. But of this more in the following chapter. ENDNOTES: [1] Lightfoot's Works, vol. ii. p. 626, 1074. And Owen. Theologoumena, l. 3. c. 1. p. 153.

[2] Hammond in Loc.

[3] See Ray's Dissolution of the World, p. 244, 245.

[4] Apolog. 2. p. 93.

[5] Josephus de Bello Jud. l. 6. c. 4. s. 5, 6.

[6] Pliny speaks of the burning of Etna in his time, and says of it, that nature not only raged in it, but that it threatened and denounced the burning of the world; and he makes mention of several places then always

- burning, as in Phaselis, Lycia, Bactria, Media, Persia, Ethiopia, Babylonia, &c. Nat. Hist. l. 2. c. 106, 107.
- [7] Philosoph. Transact. abridged, vol. 3. p. 621.
- [8] See Nieuwentyt's Religious Philosopher, vol. 2. contempt. 21. s. 18. p. 621, 622. Philosophical Transact. abridged, vol. 2. p. 391-394. and vol. 5. part. 2. p. 196, &c.
- [9] Geograph. l. 1. p. 39. vide Justin. e Trogo, l. 30. c. 4.
- [10] Of a burning spring at Brosely in Shropshire; see Philosophical Transactions abridged, vol. 4. part 2. p. 195.
- [11] Ut supra, c. 107.
- [12] Antiq. l. 1. c. 2. s. 3.
- [13] T. Bab. Zebaehim, fol. 116. 1.
- [14] Zohar in Gen. fol. 50. 4. & 51. 1.
- [15] Ross's View of all Religions, p. 51, 52.
- [16] Strabo, l. 4. p. 136.
- [17] De Ira Dei, c. 23.
- [18] Apol. 2. p. 66.
- [19] In Philebo, p. 406. vid Plutarch. de Oracul. Defect. p. 415.
- [20] De Monarchia, p. 105.
- [21] Stromat. l. 5. p. 606.
- [22] "Esse quoque in fatis", &c. Metamorph. l. 1. fab. 7.
- [23] Pharsalia, l. 7. v. 812, &c.
- [24] Apud Clem. Alex. Stromat. l. 5. p. 599.
- [25] Laert. l. 9. in Vita Heracliti. vid. Hesychium de Philosoph. p. 35.
- [26] Plutarch. de Placit. Philosoph. l. 1. p. 877.
- [27] De Natur. Deorum, p. 39.
- [28] Laert, l. 7. in Vita Zenonis.
- [29] In Timaeo, p. 1043.
- [30] Arrian. Epictet. l. 3. c. 13.
- [31] Nat. Quaest. l. 3. c. 13. vid. Consolat. ad Marciamm, c. 26.

[32] Octav. p. 37.

[33] So Austin de Civ. Dei, l. 20. c. 24.

[34] Ubi Resurrectionem Corporum Strinxit, Aug. de Civ. Dei. l. 20. c. 21.

[35] Tacit. Annal. l. 13. c. 57.

[36] Apud Senecae. Nat. Quaest. l. 3. c. 29.

[37] Apud Heidegger. Dissert. 24. de Signis Coelest. s. 8.

[38] New Theory of the Earth, b. 4. c. 5.

[39] Bedang, c. 1. apud Dow's Hist. of Hindostan.

[40] So Augustin. de Civ. Dei, l. 20, c. 18, 24.

[41] "Futuros eos esse in superioribus partibus, quo ita non ascendit flamma illus incendii", Aug. de Civ. Dei, l. 20, c. 18.

[42] "Sed puto quod praeterit, transit, transibunt, aliquando mitius dicta sunt quam peribunt", Aug. de Civ. Dei, l. 20. c. 24. "Mutatione namque rerum, non omnino interitu transibit hic mundus----figura ergo praeterit, non natura", ibid. c. 14.

[43] See my Exposition of Rom. viii. 19, &c. See Gill on "Romans 8:19".

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