

World Without End – Amen?

I was confused. From my earliest memories of ‘going to church’, this phrase had been repeated many times. As I grew a little older and began to sing in the school chapel choir, I found that I was singing this ‘doxology’ on the end of each and every psalm. (Yes, we used to **sing** the Psalms in old-fashioned Church of England style – it **was** the 1960’s!)

*“Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost.
As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be,
World without end. Amen.”*

I suppose I thought that this was a quotation from some part of the Bible, so it must be OK but, as a young Christian believer of only a very few years’ standing, I had started to hear about something which was the exact opposite. People were talking about ‘the end of the world’ and quoting passages from the Bible that seemed to say that a great cataclysmic finale was coming and that only those who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ would come out of the other side of it unscathed.

Whom should I believe?

Well, as it turns out, this doxology never was a quotation from the Bible, but rather a formula which was established in AD 380, though it had probably been set up several years before. It came out at least in part as a strong statement of the divinity of Jesus Christ, countering what is known as the ‘Arian heresy’ which claimed that he was merely a created being.

In its original form, written in Greek, it was quite an effective statement, encapsulating the truth about the Son of God in an easily repeatable form. Like any formula, of course, it automatically became something to be repeated by rote, not necessarily involving proper understanding, let alone actual personal faith!

That early Greek form translates like this: “Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, both now and always, and into the ages of the ages. Amen.”

It is easy to see the differences which have come in as it has suffered at the hands of translators, first from Greek into Latin and then from Latin into English.

The Latin ‘translation’ inserted “as it (or ‘he’) was at the beginning”. The Latin form¹ makes no distinction between ‘it’ and ‘he’, and it seems likely that this phrase was inserted to further emphasise that **he**, the Son, was at the beginning, underlining his divinity and consigning the Arian interpretation to heresy. The rest of the phrase was accurately translated as “both now, and ever, and into the ages of the ages”, again emphasising his divine nature, from eternity past and into eternity future.

So, come the English translation, ‘he’ becomes ‘it’ and seems to imply that either 1) the glory is to continue as it was at the beginning or 2) that things in general are to continue now and shall ever do so, as they always have done since the beginning of time.² That second interpretation is certainly what this young choirboy thought as he was singing! Nothing about the Jesus whom he had started to follow!

And then “world without end” ! Where did that come from? It wasn’t in either the Greek or the Latin. Each of those repeated what seems like a poetic overstatement of everlasting time, “into the ages of the ages”. Much more expressive than ‘for ever and ever’! Apparently, this is a ‘Hebraism’, a lovely example of Jewish hyperbole, overstating truth in order to underline it.³

¹ *‘sicut erat in principio, et nunc, et semper, et in sæcula sæculorum’*

² This attitude is condemned and warned against by the apostle Peter in **2 Peter 3:3-6**.

³ ‘Into the age(s) (of the ages)’ is the usual Greek phrase translated ‘for ever (and ever)’ in the New

Jesus's reference to a camel passing through the eye of a needle and his suggestion that disciples should 'hate' their parents by comparison with their love for him are often quoted as other examples.¹ There are others in both Old and New Testaments.

But "world without end" – who invented that? Was it just someone's idea of expressing eternity? It seems to have first turned up in the 1540s, by the hand of Henry VIII and/or Thomas Cranmer, and has appeared in the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* ever since, no doubt confusing many people along the way, not just choirboys! And were my young Christian friends right when they told me about 'the end of the world'?

There does seem to be a contradiction running through it all – an 'end' is prophesied, but also an 'unending' kingdom on earth. Can we find the resolution to this?

In his first letter to Corinth, Paul writes about 'the end', but it doesn't sound very final. Much more the end of one framework in order to make room for a new one:– *"For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at His coming, **then comes the end**, when He hands over the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death."* (Read the whole passage, **1 Corinthians 15:20-28**.) The word translated twice here as 'abolished' is significant; its true meaning is 'put out of action'. A clear statement of Jesus making a total end of Satan's world system.

That certainly describes an end, but also a beginning. One of the most dramatic 'end of the world' passages in Peter's second letter initially sounds totally final and destructive, but then again we can see newness emerging as the purpose behind the 'end':– *"the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up* (some Greek texts say 'discovered' or 'revealed'). *Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells"* (**2 Peter 3:10-13**). Peter is looking **beyond the end**, not merely to survival of the cataclysm but to the completely new order that will be ushered in.

Even with this level of positive direction, my younger self made the immediate assumption that this was describing the complete end of the world and that Christian believers would then spend eternity in 'heaven'. Somehow, I seem to have missed that little phrase 'and a new earth', along with any understanding of the coming of the 'kingdom of the heavens' **on earth**. All those years ago, no-one seemed to be considering that! The orthodoxy at the time seemed to be summed up in the idea that Christians went to heaven when they died, and that was it; that's where we would be for eternity. Those believers who were alive when Jesus returned would simply go the same way but without dying first. Any reference to 'the kingdom of heaven' was often limited to Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount and was normally seen to be just another expression for 'being a Christian' or 'following Jesus'. Maybe I just didn't 'get it', but actually I don't think anyone was saying very much about Jesus coming back to reign on the earth.

Once we have an idea stuck in our heads, we tend to try to fit other things around it. What Testament:– **Matthew 6:13, 21:19, Luke 1:33,55, John 6:51,58, 8:35, 12:34, 14:16, Romans 1:25, 9:5, 11:36, 16:27, 2 Corinthians 9:9, 11:31, Galatians 1:5, Ephesians 3:11,21, Philippians 4:20, 1 Timothy 1:17, 2 Timothy 4:18, Hebrews 1:8, 5:6, 6:20, 7:17,21,24,28, 13:8,21, 1 Peter 1:25, 4:11, 5:11, 1 John 2:17, 2 John 1:2, Jude 1:13,25, Revelation 1:6,18, 4:9,10, 5:13, 7:12, 10:6, 11:15, 14:11, 15:7, 19:3, 20:10, 22:5**. It is also used MANY times in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint), which was made in about the 3rd Century BC – too many to list here!

¹ **Matthew 19:24, Luke 14:26**

about those things that Paul wrote about physical resurrection in **1 Corinthians 15** ? How could that possibly fit with a disembodied spiritual state in ‘heaven’? How about Jesus saying that he would not drink of the fruit of the vine again until he drank it ‘new with you in my Father’s kingdom’ (**Matthew 26:29**) ? Was that just a turn of phrase, merely an idiom for the delights of ‘heaven’? And what about that amazing prophetic glimpse in **Revelation 11:15**: *“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ; and he will reign for ever and ever.”* – ? We can’t really get around that last one.

It was not until the early 1980’s that I began to understand that many references to ‘heaven’ in the New Testament (and apparently ALL in the Old) actually say ‘the heavens’ in the original languages. This was very different, and I am ever grateful to C.S. Lewis’s science fiction story *Out of the Silent Planet* for the first chinks of light which it began to open up to me. I no longer needed to try to imagine a place called ‘heaven’ where God made his headquarters; I began to see that he ‘dwells in the heavens’ – that apparently unlimited arena that we feebly call ‘space’ – but that even that limitlessness cannot contain him. He **made** it all, it is smaller than he is!

Solomon got it right: *“But will God indeed dwell with mankind on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain you; how much less this house which I have built?”* (**2 Chronicles 6:18**).

This may all sound very theoretical. Interesting to some, maybe, but theoretical nonetheless? Not so! It all begins to focus very clearly when we look at the message that started the ministry of both Jesus and John the Baptist: “Repent, for the kingdom of the heavens has drawn near!” Yes, that is what it actually says, and the word ‘kingdom’ doesn’t mean some sort of organisational arrangement, it means **rule**! They were proclaiming the imminent arrival of God’s direct rule **on earth**. At least some of their audience knew exactly what that meant; it had been prophesied for centuries. God’s Anointed One (Hebrew ‘Messiah’, Greek ‘Christ’) would come and *“then the sovereignty, the dominion and the greatness of all the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be given to the people of the saints of the Highest One; His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all the dominions will serve and obey Him.”* (**Daniel 7:27**)¹

Did you see that? ‘Under the whole heaven’. Where can that possibly be? There is only one option: here on earth. Can we see the plan beginning to come together?

Who would be ‘the saints of the Highest One’? The Jews assumed that it was themselves; they had the Law and the prophets; they could prove ancestry from Abraham; they had the temple and the priesthood. John and especially Jesus blew a hole – lots of holes – in that idea. They called the people to confession, repentance and baptism and said that proven ancestry had no value with God. If we look again at the Sermon on the Mount, we can see that Jesus is talking about a very different ‘kingdom of the heavens’ from what most Jews were expecting. Here was no automatic inclusion by human birthright. Spiritual qualifications were essential, standards that were impossibly high, far beyond the demands of the Law.

Jesus told a prominent Jewish teacher that he needed spiritual rebirth – actually that he needed to be ‘re-fathered’ – to even see the kingdom of the heavens, and that could only come by the Holy Spirit (**John 3**). His words to a despised Samaritan woman were on the same lines (**John 4**). At least the beginnings of spiritual transformation were the clear requirements to be part of the kingdom.

We know now what neither the Jews nor the disciples knew: that the necessary spiritual rebirth could only come about through the sacrifice of the Son of God on the cross. Trusting in the power and value of that sacrifice for our forgiveness and regeneration has been the basis of every life that has been – and is being – transformed by the Spirit of God.

¹ In fact, as Peter says in **Acts 3:24**, all the prophets since Samuel had spoken of the coming kingdom. Check it out!

And the result? A generation of true children of God, whose lives now are being gradually moulded by the Holy Spirit to be more like Jesus, and who share the expectation of a tremendous inheritance in the future. Yes, at what we might once have called 'the end of the world'. Perhaps now we can see better what it really will be, the dawning and revelation of the very real and very visible kingdom of God on this earth . . .

Paul gives us a beautiful insight into two closely linked processes which will take place at that time:

"I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our body." (**Romans 8:18-23**)

Creation will be released. Creation as it is now is all that any of us has ever known, though we have definitely seen how the natural world has declined under man's abuse. Vividly demonstrated by extinction of species, loss of habitat, pollution of land, water and atmosphere, with the ever-encroaching change of climate. These things are terrible, but they are only the surface symptoms of the fact that creation has been 'subjected to futility'.

What does Paul mean? Simply that God placed all of creation under the rule of mankind, a rule that was intended to be benign and enriching in every possible way for all aspects of creation, from the smallest atom to the largest mountain, from the tiniest microorganism to the largest creature. What Paul calls 'futility' was ushered in through mankind's rebellion against God. Man 'fell' and all of creation 'fell' with him. The beautiful symphony became odious dissonance. Whether you believe it to be allegorical or actual history, the early chapters of **Genesis** clearly tell the story. **1 John 5:19** shows the result: ". . . the whole world lies in the evil one." Little wonder that the whole of creation is longing to be 'set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God' ! That all hangs on the second process . . .

Our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. There are enough clear statements in the New Testament to let us know that, when Jesus returns to the earth in glory, there will be some dramatic changes: Those of his followers who have died will be resurrected and those who are alive at the time will find their bodies changed to be like Jesus' own resurrection body. Paul is especially clear about it in such passages as **1 Corinthians 15** and **2 Corinthians 5**. The word translated 'redemption' in **Romans 8** is *apolutrōsis*, literally 'a loosening away', implying the payment of a ransom. So our bodies will be 'loosed away' from sin, death, failure and decay. And we know who paid the ransom, and how he paid it!

In fact, the whole natural tendency of all things to break down and deteriorate, what the scientists call entropy, will come to an end, permanently. Instead of being in thrall to rebellious mankind, the whole of creation will now find itself under the control of God's 'born ones', released into their glorious freedom – **our** glorious freedom!

'World without end' – ? Well yes, maybe we could call it that, but it's nothing like what I imagined before. More like a new dawn!

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