The New International Version reflects a far too materialistic perspective in its rendering this passage “laid bare.” In choosing this rendering it allies itself with the biased Jehovah’s Witness’ New World Translation, ignores the context of the passage, and the full witness of Scripture regarding the fate of the earth. The Christian can have a hope that is tangible and substantial, but that hope does not rest to any degree in this earth, but in “new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13).

* A detailed and yet concise explanation of this may be found in Bruce Metzger’s Textual Commentary of the Greek New Testament (New York: United Bible Societies, 1971).

Welcome Visitors

We are so glad that you joined us today. Please come again.

Let us know if you have any questions.

Second Peter 10 reveals in sobering words the fate of the current universe on the Day of Judgment. It declares plainly, “The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up” (NKJV). Readers of the New International Version will notice at once a far different promise. Rather than declaring that the earth will be “burned up,” it renders the last part of this passage, “the earth and everything in it will be laid bare” (NIV). This leads the reader to imagine that the earth will still exist but be refined by fire and shown in its real essence. This has long been the doctrine preached by Jehovah’s Witnesses, who argue that the earth will not be completely burned up but rejuvenated by fire. This is reflected in their own biased New World Transla-
tion, which renders this verse, “and earth and the works in it will be discovered” (NWT). What is behind such different translations of this phrase, and which reading reflects the true force of this promise?

I recently heard a preacher inaccurately try to explain the issue by saying “burned up” is just a “bad translation.” That is not the issue! Unfortunately, there are some textual variants of the last word of this verse within the Greek manuscripts which have survived. The majority of manuscripts have the word katakoio which does mean “burn up.” This is the same word used in Matthew 3:12, in John’s promise that the Messiah will “burn up (katakoio) the chaff with unquenchable fire.” Most translations follow this majority tradition and accurately translate katakoio “burned up” (e.g. KJV, ASV, RSV, NASB, NKJV).

The renderings from the New International Version and New World Translation come from a variant found in some manuscripts. Instead of katakoio, some have the word hurisko meaning “find, discover, come upon.” Does that mean that these manuscripts advocate a rejuvenated earth? Not necessarily. Even in those manuscripts which have this variant, its sense is unclear. While the majority of manuscripts (including some early ones) have katakoio, those which do not may suggest a much different focus. P72, the oldest papyrus which contains Second Peter uses the word hurisko but adds the word luo “to loose, dissolve” (translated “dissolve” or “melt” in 3:10, 11, 12 as seen below). That means that P72 could be translated that the earth “will be found dissolved.” One early manuscript has an even different word, aphanistesontai meaning, “will disappear.”

This is echoed by early Coptic and Syriac translations which use an equivalent of hurisko but add the negative “not”—thus claiming that the earth “will not be found.” Even if we were to accept hurisko as the original reading, that doesn’t necessarily mean that the idea is that the true essence of earth is what is revealed. The English Standard Version accepts hurisko as original but renders the passage, “the earth and the works done on it will be exposed” (ESV). That stresses the idea of judgment of deeds, not the condition of the earth.

What does all this show? It shows that it is not an issue of bad translation but which word to accept. Beyond this, the context helps explain what the last verse is saying. Peter tells us the world that now exists is “reserved for fire” (3:7), at which time the heavens will “pass away” (3:10a) the “elements will melt (luo) with fervent heat” (3:10b) thus making it such that “all these things will be dissolved (luo)” (3:11). This is more than just a refining or rebirth by fire, it is an absolute destruction in which “the heavens will be dissolved (luo), being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat” (3:12). The hope of the Chris-