

A New Heaven and a New Earth: Community Restored

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The Place of Never Again

I rode by that place every day on my way to high school in downtown Buenos Aires, never suspecting the horrors hidden beyond the manicured lawn and the white walls of the stately building. During the military dictatorship (1976-1983), almost 5,000 people were illegally detained and tortured there at the Escuela Superior de Mecánica de la Armada (School of Mechanics of the Navy). They were then killed by firing squads and cremated, dumped from planes into the Río de la Plata, or buried in mass gravesites. It was a place of death, a land marred by human greed and violence.

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Similar for ancient Israelites was the place their ancestors had named the Valley of Achor, the valley of trouble. It was there that Achan's sin of greed and deceit had threatened to destroy the people's relationship with God. There Achan and his family had been stoned to death and buried with the silver he had stolen from the Lord (Jos 7:24-26). It was a place of death, a land marred by human greed and violence.

The Cry of the People, the Cry of the Earth

Death has many faces for the beleaguered exiles who have recently returned to their land after years of captivity in Babylon. Their high hopes have been dashed. The land is slow in yielding its fruit. Their rulers are hard of hearing, and the self-appointed holy men serve only themselves. Oppression bites deeper when imposed by countrymen. Tables are set for pagan idols while the poor go hungry. Pagan practices crowd out any thought of the God of their ancestors. Their land itself is affected: it is now a Valley of Achor, a place of death.

Out of the desolation of this valley of death, some of the people cry to God as recorded in Isaiah 64:¹

*Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down.
(v. 1)*

The people remember God's power in their midst and obvious in nature itself:

*When you did awesome things that we did not look
for,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your
presence. (v. 3)*

The people acknowledge God's uniqueness and involvement in history:

*From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear,
no eye has seen a God besides you,
who acts for those who wait for him. (v. 4)*

In light of that awareness, the people confess the extent of their sin and its alienating consequences:

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references in this article are from the English Standard Version.