



These Last Days

A Christian View of History

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P U B L I S H I N G

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To Kenneth R. Wynne,

brother in Christ
and exemplary steward in these last days,
with gratitude

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6

Partakers of the Age to Come

D. A. CARSON

[Christ is seated] far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. (Ephesians 1:21)

THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT eschatology. Our English word comes from the Greek word *eschatos*, which simply means “last.” Eschatology, then, is what the Bible says about last things. But Christians know that the subject is a little more complicated than that! As we study eschatology, I would like for us to begin our study in Ephesians 1:15–23, and I want to make some preliminary observations regarding eschatology

in general before going in depth into this passage. Read what God says:

For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

By way of preliminary observation, notice that the New Testament says that it is already the last hour. We are already in the last days, according to the Bible. Moreover, the New Testament shows how Christians are squeezed between the “already” of what has arrived and the “not yet” of what is still to come. Let me give you some examples: we already have the forgiveness of our sins, but we do not yet have the consummation which Christ’s death and resurrection have secured. We already grow in sanctification, but we have not yet been glorified. We are squeezed between the already and the not yet; already it is the last hour of this age which is decaying and will pass away. But it has not yet passed away, and the new heavens and the new earth have not yet dawned.

Over- and Under-Realized Eschatologies

It is clear, then, that we live in this tension of the already and the not yet. Furthermore, the New Testament shows how Christians can go sadly astray by getting this balance wrong. This leads to what is sometimes called an “over-realized eschatology.” That is, you think that you have more of the blessings from the future now than you actually do. Or one can suffer from having an “under-realized eschatology.” That is, you really don’t appreciate what you have in your possession. The New Testament witnesses to both sorts of errors.

For example, Paul writes to the Corinthians, in 1 Corinthians 4:8–11, somewhat sarcastically:

Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you! For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. We are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless.

Do you see that? The Corinthians sound not a little like some contemporary health, wealth, and prosperity gospel people, do they not? Isn’t the reasoning today the same as the Corinthian reasoning back then? “After all,” some surely said, “you are the child of the king; doesn’t your dad want you to have everything?” Well, yes, we could say that—but he also wants you to be disciplined. He also wants you to learn something of suffering like his Son, before everything is opened up in the new heavens and the new earth.

But did you see here that over-realized eschatology leads to a kind of triumphalism that seems to think that everything that you are going to get in the future you get right now? Healing, transformed personalities that approach sinless perfection, perfect love, perfect marriages, perfect wealth, perfect satisfaction, perfect contentment—it's all yours right now! Name it; claim it! After all, Christ has secured it.

By way of reply, we could say, well, yes, all the blessings that we will ever enjoy, Christ has secured. But we are squeezed between the already and the not yet. And if you have an over-realized eschatology, you will imagine that you have some things that are actually reserved for the final healing in the final transformation and the final glorification of God's people on the last day.

On the other hand, if you have an under-realized eschatology, you will fail to appreciate what you actually have in Christ Jesus now. You not only have the forgiveness of sins and the joy of being once and for all declared just before God because of what Christ has done, but also have ongoing cleansing from sin! What a blessed relief that is for God's people day by day. He has poured his Spirit out upon us, so that we begin to love what we didn't love and hate what we didn't hate. Our personalities are changed, our goals are changed, our values are changed, and our direction is changed. All of this is because the gospel is the power of God for salvation to those who believe (Rom. 1:16). It is not merely some declaration of a status and that's all. It is also *power*.

This power works itself out in transformed relationships in the community of the saints. So many blessings come to us from God! We must appreciate them, live in the light of them, and grow in them in anticipation of the final transformation that still lies ahead. So part of Christian maturity turns on grasping exactly what it means to be partakers of the age to come. It turns, in part, on getting this balance right.

Now, we shall approach Paul's thought in three steps. I warn you, we are going to go right through Ephesians! Here are our three headings: First, how people become partakers of the age to come. Second, how Paul prayed for the partakers of the age to come. Third, and finally, how God provides for the partakers of the age to come.

Partakers of the Age to Come

Let us look, then, first of all, at how people become partakers of the age to come. That's the burden of the earlier verses in the passage from Ephesians that I quoted above. To do this, we need to go back to the verses immediately prior, verses 3–14. Our section begins with these words in verse 15: "For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints." To find out what "this reason" is, we have to read the preceding lines. Those lines turn out to be a spectacular Trinitarian grounding of our salvation. It is helpful, if you read through verses 3–14, to look for the play of several themes.

The first theme is the fulfillment of times; that is, something has taken place in Christ that has fulfilled an antecedent prophecy. We are now at a turning point in history, in other words. Second, there is the theme of the centrality of the cross. Third, Paul gives us the theme of the linking together of Jew and Gentile—in principle, of all races in a new humanity. Fourth, there is a tension between what we already have in Christ and what is still to come. Let me run through some of this quickly.

Paul begins by pointing us, first, to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,

who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation

of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. (vv. 3–6)

Here Paul explains the work of the Father in his sovereign plan of predestination, worked out in the gift of his Son to capture us and make us his.

Paul continues in verse 7: “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace.” Now we have the work of Christ on the cross. Our redemption turns on what Jesus has done—dying on our behalf, bearing our sins in his own body on the tree. We have been redeemed because of what Jesus has done, and as a result we enjoy the forgiveness of sins in accordance with the riches of God’s grace,

which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time. (vv. 8–10)

The apostle is telling us that this was God’s plan all along, though it was hidden in some ways, but now is unpacked, revealed, and disclosed in Christ Jesus, at this turning point of the ages. Christ has come, and we see how his plans laid out in eternity past, before the creation of the world, have come to pass in one short weekend in Jerusalem.

Rising from the dead, ascending to the right hand of the Majesty on high, this Son pours out his Spirit, for we go on to read this:

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things

according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit. (vv. 11–13)

Thus, the entire triune God is working out our salvation. This is how people become partakers of the age to come. Did you notice that? When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal. I do not know about you, but this seems alien to me! But lift your heart heavenward and cry to God, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!” This is God’s means of bringing people into the spectacular tension between the ages, by which we become partakers of the age to come.

How Paul Prays

In the second place, let us examine how Paul prays for the partakers of the age to come. We will now focus on what I quoted at the beginning of this chapter, verses 15–23. Let me draw your attention to two details in the text before we follow its flow.

Sometimes people speak of the “Pauline triad,” by which they mean faith, hope, and love. It is stunning how often these three show up at the same place in Paul’s writings. Occasionally just two of these three are mentioned, but very often all three are given together. The passage I suspect we all know that displays these three together is the last verse of the so-called “Love Chapter,” concluding in 1 Corinthians 13:13: “So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” Returning to Ephesians 1, here is what we find in verse 15: “For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus

and your love toward all the saints.” So there are two members of Paul’s triad. The third is found in verse 18, where Paul prays that “having the eyes of your hearts enlightened . . . you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints.”

How these three play out in different passages varies hugely. For example, in Colossians 1:5, hope becomes the grounding of the other two. In that passage, we find the apostle saying that the hope and anticipation of the future is what draws out our faith and gives us motive and incentive to love one another in Christ even now.

In Ephesians, however, Paul speaks of what he has already heard about the Ephesians, namely, their faith in Christ and their love for one another. Now he prays that their eyes might be opened up and enabled to see, so that they may know the hope to which God had called them—and us. The idea, here, is that we cannot be mature Christians unless we are future oriented. By future oriented, I don’t mean merely the next ten minutes or even the next ten years. I mean eternity oriented.

I recall, a number of years ago, leading the Bible study at the Bell Labs in Chicago. The Christian I knew there observed that at the lunch break various clubs were formed, so he thought, “If they can start clubs, I can start one too.” So he organized a Bible club, and it was just for the scientists in his unit, around thirty-seven of them. The format was simple enough: for eight weeks, I would teach something from the Bible for about twenty minutes, while they ate their lunches. After that, they would ask questions for thirty minutes or so.

The man who got this whole thing started was the only Christian in this group, besides me. There were also a failed Buddhist, a failed Hindu, a failed Catholic, a failed Lutheran, and

the rest were unbelievers. So we had a fairly biblically illiterate group, and I was trying to unpack the Bible for them.

On about week five or so, I was dealing with Matthew 6:19–21:

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

I noted that this passage does not tell us to guard our heart; it tells us to choose our treasure. I noted further that the reason for this was that what you treasure most is where your heart will go.

One of the group members, a Hindu chap, said, “Do I understand you right?” I asked him, “What do you think I have said?” “Well,” he began, “this is a pretty good research establishment. There are several Nobel laureates amongst us, we have a good budget, excellent projects, and most of us are really glad to be here. We have worked hard to get where we are, and we have our lives pretty well mapped out. Who knows, but maybe two or three more of us will get Nobel prizes in the next few years. We will work hard and advance, and at the age of sixty-five we will retire. We’ll continue on as consultants and hire ourselves out in this or that way, write a couple of books that we were unable to write while working, and then produce some more technical papers. We will slow down a wee bit and then play with our grandchildren, and after that it gets a bit fuzzy. But you are saying that Jesus says we shouldn’t plan for the next thirty years. We should plan for the next fifty billion or so. Is that right?” I replied, “That sounds exactly right to me. That is what Jesus is talking about.”

Did you see that? Remember that Paul has prayed that “having the eyes of your hearts enlightened . . . you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints” (Eph. 1:18). He then unpacks what these riches are in the next verses: “the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places” (vv. 19–20). Paul wants them to know that the incomparably great power for us who believe is the same power that God exerted when he raised Christ from the dead.

We quote often enough the statement that the gospel is the power of God for salvation. But what kind of power? Well, the same miraculous power that raised Jesus from the dead. What kind of divine power was that? Jesus was not just brought back to ordinary life, like Lazarus was, but transformed into resurrection existence with capacities that are beyond anything we know and experience here. Oh yes, Jesus could be touched, he could eat food, he could be recognized, and the wounds were still there, but now he was so utterly transformed that he belonged to both time and eternity. He appeared and disappeared at will. We don’t understand this resurrection body very well, but I do know that the power that transformed Christ and brought him back is the power already at work in us, which will then transform us with resurrection bodies on the last day. That’s what Paul prays for.

Notice again the Trinitarian references that run right through this text. “I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him” (vv. 16–17). All of this focuses on Christ. This is how Paul prays for the partakers of the age to

come. What we need to understand is the practical outworking of what it means to be partakers of the age to come.

If you have been a Christian in a Bible-teaching church for a long time, you will know that Christians are caught between the already and not yet. Already we have the Holy Spirit as the guarantee of the promised inheritance. But how does this truth work itself out in our lives? What does it look like? In fact, much of the rest of Ephesians is devoted to answering questions like that.

How God Provides

So, third and finally, let us examine how God provides for the partakers of the age to come. We will do this by briefly noting six things. Of necessity, I will need to spend more time on the first three—not because the last three are unimportant; they are hugely important. Rather, the first three are more introductory, if you like, and thus require more time.

First, God provides for partakers of the age to come in our utter transformation in anticipation of the end. Ephesians 2:1–10 shows us this. In this passage, we are reminded that we were dead in our transgressions and sins and were all by nature children of wrath. That is, we were not merely out of sorts with ourselves or suffering the inevitable consequences of moral decay. Rather, we were actually standing judicially under God's wrath and sentence of death. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ. God provides for our utter transformation out of sheer grace, received through faith alone. This whole salvation is itself a gift from God.

But it's not just a matter of getting a certain status, of simply being right with God and declared righteous in his eyes, even

though it is scarcely imaginable that anything could be more wonderful than that! But God's provision is even richer than that, for he transforms us into those who do good works. It's true that we are saved by faith alone, but genuine faith, as the Reformers used to say, is never alone.

In the second place, God creates a new humanity in anticipation of the end. We see this in Ephesians 2:11–21. The particular focus here is on Jews and Gentiles. All kinds of cultural barriers between the two have existed, but now one new humanity has been brought into existence. This theme is seen elsewhere in the New Testament. We are given a panoramic view of the ultimate new humanity, with men and women drawn from every tongue and tribe and people and nation. All gather around the throne on the last day.

In the past, I had the privilege of working with the World Evangelical Fellowship, and I presently work with the Gospel Coalition, so I seem to get around to a few countries. The diversity of heights and weights, and colors, and cultural forms is great. I keep traveling and keep “sticking my foot in it,” as the saying goes. Wherever I go, I manage to break some local taboo.

But others break mine as well. For instance, in Australia no ten-year-old addresses me as “Dr. Carson”; rather, they call me “Don.” But in China, no one would dare refer to me as anything less than “professor” or “doctor.” I am not saying that one is better than the other. I am just saying that these kinds of things reflect different cultures and how they do things. But all of us are, in Christ, seen as one new humanity. This is secured by Christ, and already it is started. That is what the church is about. It is also why racism is so repulsive in the New Testament; we are a new humanity: men and women drawn from every tongue and tribe and people and nation, born again with

a common anchoring in Christ on the cross. He creates a new humanity in anticipation of the end.

Third, God provides for the partakers of the age to come in that he discloses his concealed purposes in anticipation of the end. We see this in Ephesians 3:1–13. Paul begins with a sentence that he doesn't finish. In fact, he picks it up again further on in verse 14. But Paul begins this way: "For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—". Paul is almost certainly dictating, and, borne along by the Spirit, he remembers that there is something else he wants to say before he takes that thought to its conclusion in verse 14. First he pauses and says, in effect, "Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, regarding the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly." Paul is telling these people that as they read this letter they will be able to understand his insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.

The word *mystery* is used some twenty-seven or twenty-eight times in the New Testament. In almost every instance, it does not mean *mystery* in the sense that we talk about a "thriller" or a "whodunit." Rather, the term, as Paul uses it, regards mysteriousness as referring to the final incomprehensibility of God. Very simply, *mystery* refers to what God has kept secret in the past, but has now revealed.

Now let me step aside from the text for a moment and address something in contemporary evangelicalism. At the risk of making a huge overgeneralization, I will say that those from the dispensational end of eschatology constantly talk about what is "new" in the new covenant. Those of us from the Reformed tradition tend to talk about all the continuities between the

old and new covenants. So we must avoid playing up what is new to the exclusion of the continuity it has with the old. The Scriptures insist that although these things have been hidden, they have not been hidden absolutely. They are there in the text, but people didn't see them.

Let me give a few examples. Think of the Passover sacrifice—before Jesus came, how many people saw that the ultimate Passover would be the Lamb hanging on a cross, signifying that God's wrath passed over his own people? Or consider Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. On that day, the high priest would enter the Most Holy Place with the blood of sacrifice. How many people saw that Jesus would be the ultimate high priest, that his blood would be taken before the heavenly tabernacle, to use the language of the author of Hebrews? And again and again, as we move from the old covenant to the new, we are reminded how people did not see that which we claim is actually there in the Scriptures.

But it goes further. Even Jesus' own band of apostles had trouble with this. For example, after Jesus had died and was buried, the apostles themselves were not in the upstairs room saying, "I can hardly wait till Sunday!" Why not? Hadn't Jesus told them again and again that he would rise again? But you know what they were thinking, perhaps: "There's another deep, enigmatic utterance from the Master." They didn't have a clue, and yet the New Testament writers show us passage after passage in the Old Testament that anticipates a crucified and resurrected Messiah. But it is all in veiled language, typological language, a language of patterns and types. It's there, but you don't see it until after the coming and glory of Christ.

Let me also briefly address another contemporary issue on which there is some confusion. It relates directly to what we have been studying. As you read the Bible carefully, and you

come across a passage in the New Testament that quotes the Old Testament, you may take the time to look up the Old Testament passage. But upon finding it, you sometimes think, “Good grief, what’s going on here? I don’t see how Paul got that from that!”

Now, I have devoted a lot of the last thirty years of my life to addressing precisely those kinds of questions. When I first began, I wondered to myself how I would have done it, if I had been organizing the Bible. And, in my arrogance, I thought maybe Isaiah 53 should sound something like this: “And it shall come to pass in those days, says the Lord, that there shall be a Roman emperor by the name of Caesar Augustus.” Then I would place this in a footnote: “Yes, I know we are still in the grip of the Assyrians. But after these Assyrians come the Babylonians, and after the Babylonians come the Medo-Persians, and after that the Greeks. Eventually what are now seven little villages on the left bank of the Tiber will come together and form the city of Rome, and the Romans will beat up the Greeks and what is left of their empire. The particular Roman ruler that I am talking about is Caesar Augustus, but this is about seven hundred years down the track.” I would here direct the reader back to the main text, and have the prophet say something like, “And this Caesar shall issue a decree that the entire Roman world should be enrolled.” Then I would unpack the whole biblical narrative, naming dates and places and times and so on.

Now, wouldn’t that be great prophecy? Who could deny its truth at this point, with every little detail named seven hundred years in advance? Mind you, across those seven hundred years there would be many parents who would name their daughter Mary, and many boys with the name of Joseph running around. And if Pilate actually came on the scene and had some knowledge of the specific prediction concerning him, I can imagine him saying, “I will not wash my hands!” What then?

Well, then God's prophecy would fail. My point is simply that the fulfillment of prophecy would actually be more difficult under such circumstances.

But, in fact, God has, through the prophets, predicted many of the crucial things about Christ and his coming and everything else, but in his infinite wisdom he has done so through types, patterns, dynasties, events, and sacrificial systems. And in our moral blindness, in our decay, in our folly, in our inability to see how wonderful this all is, we did not see. But now, in the fullness of time, God has disclosed the mystery in Christ. So when the apostles preached, they did not say, "Well, you have to wait around and have a private revelation." What they did say was, "Go back to the Scriptures. If you understand them properly, you will see that it is actually there." Again and again, they point to the Scriptures. The whole Bible has a deep continuity, embedded right in the structure of everything.

Now, to return to where we left off: Paul tells the Ephesians that they have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to him for them; that is, the mystery made known to him by revelation, as he has already written briefly. Amongst the things thus disclosed was the coming together of Jews and Gentiles in one body. All the pieces were there to see this coming; after all, already in the Abrahamic covenant there was the promise of a seed through which all the nations of the earth would be blessed. Now this is unpacked in its fullness. God creates a new humanity in anticipation of the end.

Fourth, God does more than we ask or imagine and thereby elicits prayer from us in anticipation of the end. We see this in Ephesians 3:14–21. This is a prayer that God would work in us to make us grow in holiness and in depth of appreciation for his love for us, because we cannot be mature without such increasing depth of appreciation of his love for us. A child tends

to be emotionally secure when he comes from a family that is full of love. In the same way, we must grow in our appreciation of God's love for us. Paul's prayer ends with the words, "Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us" (3:20). God has promised to do more than we ask or imagine.

Fifth, God builds truth and unity into his body in anticipation of the end. I think this theme runs all the way through from 4:1 to 6:9. There God tells us in practical passage after practical passage that, for the partakers of the age to come, how you live, how you speak, how you love, how you deny yourself—all of this is in anticipation of what will be on the last day. And yet at the same time we still remain in this old age; we still remain in this dying age. We are living in the last days (Paul could say this when he was writing!), and because of this we will be in conflict.

Thus, sixth and finally, God equips and arms his people in anticipation of the end. So we are told in 6:10–20. The devil is filled with rage because he knows his time is short, as Revelation 12 tells us. We are still going to struggle. And Paul says our struggle is not against human beings. It is not against flesh and blood, so you don't win this struggle with carbine rifles. No, our struggle is against the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places, the spiritual forces of evil. Therefore, put on the full armor of God, which he so richly provides to his saints, as he equips and arms his people in anticipation of the end.

When you read the biblical story line and unpack it, you discover that from the fall onward there are certain descriptors of our condition. On the one hand, we are guilty before God and have attracted his curse. This calls for a solution. We ourselves have become corrupted. We have lost our relationship with God, and we are under sentence of death. And out of our

broken relationships, because of *the* broken relationship with our Creator, come bitterness and hate and rape and war and all the rest. And as if this weren't enough, the entire created order is under the same curse, sentenced to death and not operating as it ought.

But, in closing, we must see that the salvation that God has brought us in Christ Jesus addresses all of what I just mentioned. In justification, we are brought back to and accepted by God. He declares us just, not because we are, but because Christ has borne our sins in his body on the tree. But he has given us more than justification. He has given us new birth, made us the sons of the living God, with the power of God already pulsating within us to transform us. Not only so, we are pressing on toward the climax of all things; the entire created order groans in travail, waiting for the final adoption. Paul tells us here that already we have been made partakers of the age to come. Thus, we must be anticipating the future, hungry to join the church in every generation when it says and has said, "Yes, even so, come quickly Lord Jesus" (cf. Rev. 22:20).