

A LASTING FAITH FOR THE LAST DAYS

PRACTICAL MEDITATIONS ON ESCHATOLOGY FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD ¹
Part 2 of 5

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THE AGE OF THE SPIRIT IN THE LAST DAYS

When Jesus is leaving his disciples in this world to be ascended to God's right hand, he tells them three important truths about himself. The first two are linked—He gives them a message to declare and a mission to perform until he returns. Lastly, he comforts them with the reality of his authority and presence with them *until the end of the age*.

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20).

Jesus sends the apostles out founded upon two realities: All authority has been given to him, and he will be with his apostles until the end of the age. What age is Jesus speaking of? The age he is speaking of is the *present age* that the Apostle Paul will elaborate upon more fully in his letters when he interprets the resurrection and ascension of Christ for the churches then, and for us today—both who live in the Last Days, and also in this present age. Jesus is referring to the Last Day when he will return in a glorified body to make his people as he is! That is why he encourages his apostles that he will be with them in this present age.

The Apostle Paul speaks similar language in Ephesians chapter 1, as he prays for the Church at Ephesus and encourages them to persevere in their faith in Christ. Notice the comparison again between Christ's authority, or the "incomparably great power for us who believe" and the promise of his present by the Spirit "not only in the present age, but also in the age to come."

[I pray that you may know] his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from

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the dead and seated him at his right hand in heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the age to come (Ephesians 1:19-21).

Perhaps this passage from the Apostle Paul's pen can be understood more clearly in light of the Biblical teaching of two ages: this age and the age to come—"This age", or "the present age" is described and characterized by sin, the fall, death, and the devil's dominion over the age (that is why Paul calls the devil the "god of this age"). Quoting 2 Cor. 4:4—

The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

In contrast to the present age characterized by sin, death and the devil, "the age to come" or the "future age" is described as the time of the reign of Christ, the completion of his saving work for his people, and the sending forth of His Holy Spirit. The "age to come", "future age", or "Age of the Spirit" has intruded upon the present age in the coming of Christ and His Kingdom, thus the reason why it was important for him to face the devil in his temptation in the wilderness as well as to cast out demons and to heal the sick.² In Christ's Kingdom, the beginning restoration of all things had begun in his Person and Work on the earth. The "Age of the Spirit" has dawned in the present age, as the present age passes away, as we see in 1 John 2:15-17.

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

The contrast in this passage from the Apostle John shows the impermanent, defeated nature and character of this present age, or world-order. This world literally *is passing away*. It is not here where Christian's should have their hope—but in the world that is to come in Christ. These two ages overlap now, since Jesus came into this world to redeem sinners, defeat the devil in his life and death, and to undo what Adam did.

² As an exercise contrast "This age" or "the present age" (sometimes translated "this world" but better translated "this age") as it is described in Mt. 12:32; Rom. 12:2; 1 Cor. 1:20; Gal. 1:4, with "that age" or "the future age" or "the age to come" described in Mt. 12:32; Luke 18:30; 20:35; Eph. 2:7; Heb. 6:5.

OUR COMPREHENSION OF THE ESCHATOLOGICAL TENSION

Because these two ages overlap, Christians presently experience joy, but we also experience persecution; we experience strength from the Spirit, but also experience weakness; we have the life of Christ within, but unless Christ returns first, we will die and our bodies return to dust; we have confidence of being renewed, but we still suffer. The overlapping of the present age characterized by sin, death, and devil, and the age to come with the dawn of a new creation, a new age, and we as new creations experience the conflict of these two ages as we live by the Spirit each day of our lives.

In light of these two ages, Paul tells us to live putting on the full armor of God so that we might be able to stand upon Christ's victorious resurrection, living by His powerful Spirit, so that we might continue to journey in the present age, even though we know we are citizens of the age to come (Ephesians 6:10-18; cf. Philippians 3:20,21). We are presently saved and the Devil has been defeated (Heb. 2:14-18; Col. 2:13-15), but we will be ultimately saved and the Devil will ultimately be defeated when Christ returns and all things will be restored in the New Heavens and the New Earth, the full revelation of the Age to Come (cf. Rev. 19-20).

Our hope is that when Christ returns, the present age will be completely in the past and we will live fully in the Age to Come, or the New Heavens and New Earth in the very presence of the Living God. Then there will be no more persecution, conflict, death, suffering, or a sin whatsoever. From all of the pain we have experienced in the overlap of the two ages, God will wipe our tears from our eyes as he promises in Revelation 21:1-7 (KJV).

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth are passed away; and the sea is no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of the throne saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he shall dwell with them, and they shall be his peoples, and God himself shall be with them, *and be their God*: and he shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and death shall be no more; neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain, any more: the first things are passed away.

And he that sitteth on the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he saith, Write: for these words are faithful and true. And he said unto me, They are come to pass. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will

give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely. He that overcometh shall inherit these things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son.

What hope for the people of God in this present age! This explains the conflict, as well as the joy in the Christian life between the First Coming of Jesus and his completed work on our behalf and our living in the Age of the Spirit as the Church with the indwelling Spirit of which was spoken by the prophets Jeremiah (31:31-34) and Joel (2:28ff) (which indicates that the two ages are not only a New Testament concept but were insinuated in the Old Covenant, cf. Rom. 16:25-27).

This teaching of the two ages includes the real tension of being a true believer, passing from death to life, yet still mortifying, or dying to our sin. In other words, this helps to understand the way the Apostle Paul teaches the real tension between offering our bodies to our new LORD (and Master) who is Christ, opposed to our old lords (and masters) who were sin and the devil. For instance, Paul speaks of justification by faith in Romans 4. He proceeds to establish the once and for all character of our justification as Christ having reconciled God to us and therefore we have peace with God in Romans 5. In addition, we are united with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection in 6, but we still struggle with real sin in this life according to chapter 7 (cf. with the conflict between the flesh and the Spirit in Gal. 5:17-18). However, our hope is in chapter 8 where we clearly see that although there is a tension between this present age and the age to come, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:28ff), because he who began a work in us if faithful to bring us into his presence (Phil. 1:6).

OUR ESCHATOLOGICAL UNION WITH THE RISEN CHRIST

We should keep in mind that in speaking of eschatological living and faith in the Last Days we have in mind what the Apostle Paul calls being “in Christ” throughout his letters, and understand our union with Christ as central to our understanding of who we are as Christians. Our union with Christ helps us to understand that we are united to the Living Christ by His Spirit and he is a “man of two ages”. That means that Christ became a man in the present age in order to defeat the devil, redeem his people, and to receive the Holy Spirit as a glorified man so as to be the first man of the Age to Come (Heb. 2:14-18; John 7:37-39; Acts 2:33)! That is why the Apostle Paul, when speaking of Christ’s resurrection into the Age to Come, speaks of him as the *firstfruits* of those he will resurrect on the day he returns.

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be

made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

As Christians we are united with Jesus Christ in his resurrection. The Apostle Paul uses other language as well describing this close Holy Spirit union. Paul says we are seated with Christ in the heavenlies (Eph. 1:3, 20; 2:6; 3:10; 6:12). Our life is also *hidden in Christ* and this reality encourages us to set our minds on where Christ is and where we are, as well as to meditate or reflect upon *who we are* as Christ's Last-Days-People who await the glory to be revealed (cf. Romans 8:17-24).

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory (Colossians 3:1-4).

The eschatological focus of Paul, as well as all of the NT writers is that Christ's work has been accomplished in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension (Acts 2:14-41). This means that we are already now realizing the promises of our salvation by the application of His Spirit as Paul teaches in Ephesians 1:3-14. Notice the work God has done for us in Christ and the *present tense reality* of this gracious work!

Blessed be the God and 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.

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his 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, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. 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, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

WE ARE A PEOPLE LIVING IN THE LAST DAYS WITH A VIEW TO THE LAST DAY

Practically, this means that we should have an eschatological faith. This present age is characterized by walking by sight, but as partakers and citizens of the "Age to come" we must learn by grace to walk by faith (2 Cor. 5:5-7). This is an eschatological faith that is centered on the Person and work of Christ in our behalf as we look by faith to his return. Jesus is the Author, better the Pioneer and Perfecter of our faith (Heb 12:1-3). He is our champion and all of his blessings by the Spirit are a reality NOW (Heb. 12:1ff; cf. 1 Peter)! In Hebrews 11, the "cloud of witnesses" who looked to the promises of God by faith had an eschatological faith, that is why they are effective witnesses to us. This is our great hope knowing that we live our Christian life not by sight, but by faith in the promises of God because of his accomplishment in Christ, the down payment of the Spirit in our lives, and the ability to live according to God's commandments, with an eschatological faith that Christ will return for us on the Last Day.

Again, we live in the Age of the Spirit now. That is, we live in the Last Days prior to the Last Day when Christ will come and judge the wicked and renew all things. The believer's hope and life should be lived with this constantly in mind. It is an eschatological faith that does not look within, but looks to Christ and his righteousness, sanctification and redemption (1 Cor. 1:30). It is an eschatological faith that knows God is faithful and as he has fulfilled his promises in the past, so he will ultimately deliver us and bring us into his presence forever! What great hope for the Christian! Although we do not see him, we love him with an eschatological faith—a faith that looks to his work on our behalf because he first loved us and looks constantly for his return, working now to please him in the calling that he has given us to perform in this life.

NO TIME FOR REST AS THE PILGRIM PEOPLE OF GOD IN THE LAST DAYS

Another way of understanding our living by faith in the last days is to consider how the Book of Hebrews teaches we as a people to think eschatologically (that is, as a people who understand they live in the last days between the time of Jesus' first coming in grace and his second and final coming to judge the world and renew all creation). In Hebrews 4, the author tells us that we can rest in

Christ's work on our behalf NOW, but the author encourages us to persevere by His grace in the covenant community in order to enter into God's ultimate rest. Hebrews 4:3 says: "Now we who have believed enter that rest..." In the context, the contrast is between Israel entering into their physical rest in Canaan by faith (some did not enter in by faith), and we who enter into "salvation-rest" by faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened.

For we who have believed enter that rest, as he has said, "As I swore in my wrath, 'They shall not enter my rest,'" although his works were finished from the foundation of the world. For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: "And God rested on the seventh day from all his works." And again in this passage he said, "They shall not enter my rest."

Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, again he appoints a certain day, "Today," saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his. Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

The author of Hebrews wants us to continuously fix our eyes on Jesus, the Author and Pioneer of our faith that has gone before us to be with the Heavenly Father. The author of Hebrews wants us to continue to persevere by his grace and strength, while resting in Christ Jesus' completed and perfect work on our behalf! Even though we have entered into our "rest" in the sense that Christ has "sat down" at the right hand of the Father (Heb. 1:3; 10:12), he wants us to understand as a covenant people living the Last Days that our faith must show

itself to be genuine by keeping our eyes on Jesus who will be revealed on the Last Day. Then, we as his Last Days people, shall fully enter into his rest (4:9-11).

The author of Hebrews wants us as the children of God to be reminded that just as good works are characteristics of a true and saving faith, so perseverance is a characteristic of faith as well. As children of the Living God who are citizens of heaven, we are to fix our eyes on Jesus who sat down at the right hand of the throne of God when he fully accomplished our salvation. In light of this reality of the ministry of Christ and the giving of his Holy Spirit, we are to remember to be obedient to his Living and Active Word (4:12-13).

No matter what your challenge or difficulty today, *you can persevere by faith*, by fixing your eyes on He who completed his work on your behalf; Who is ever interceding for you (Heb. 7:25); Who will never leave you nor forsake you (Heb. 13:5); and Who is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13:8)! His victory and strength is our encouragement as well as our endurance in the Christian race!

In the Book of Hebrews we are taught to think like pilgrims, sojourners who have entered into our rest by faith in Jesus, but to remember at the same time that we have an eternal city built by God, and have yet to fully enter the Heavenly City described in chapter 12.

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:22-29).

Notice in the above verses that we await the Heavenly City of the Age to Come to be fully revealed. Notice how we have a great and perfect Mediator in the

New Covenant. God has not changed; he is still a consuming fire just as he revealed himself to be in the Old Covenant (Heb. 12:29), yet the Mediator has changed. We have a better, more perfect Mediator in Christ who shed his precious blood once-and-for-all for our sins and therefore as his Last-Days-People, no matter how difficult the circumstances or temptations we face, we are to listen to his voice revealed in Scripture! By listening to His voice, we are to be encouraged, as well as warned, that we must not rest now (save in the work of Jesus Christ), but we should continue to journey with our eyes on the Heavenly and Unshakable Kingdom of the LORD God.

The author of Hebrews also encourages us as Last-Days-People that our High Priest has entered the Most Holy Place in heaven and has made atonement for our sins—NOW, according to chapters 7-9. We have been released from the power of death and the devil (Heb. 4:16-18) and have access to God, but we still await the triumphant return of our High Priest. In Hebrews 9:24-28 we should appreciate the completed work of Christ, while we “eagerly await” his second appearance, not to take away sin, but to save fully those who are waiting upon him (v. 28).

For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him (Hebrews 9:24-28).

The teaching of Hebrews is to help us to think eschatologically as a pilgrim people in the wilderness, a people on the way that have yet to arrive, a holy nation and people of God (1 Pet. 2:5ff). Our salvation has been accomplished but we are waiting the day when we enter into the full and glorious presence of the Lord. Sin no longer has dominion, but it still remains in us. We have passed from death to life NOW—but we still wait to fully pass from the remaining elements of death to the full eternal state.

The author of Hebrews completes the book with the greatest encouragement imaginable for those who are sinners, yet at the same time are citizens of the Heavenly City who still must persevere in the difficult wilderness of suffering found in this fallen world. He says:

MAY THE GOD OF PEACE, WHO THROUGH THE BLOOD OF THE ETERNAL COVENANT BROUGHT BACK FROM THE DEAD OUR LORD JESUS, THAT GREAT SHEPHERD OF THE SHEEP, EQUIP YOU WITH EVERYTHING GOOD FOR DOING HIS WILL, AND MAY HE WORK IN US WHAT IS PLEASING TO HIM, THROUGH JESUS CHRIST, TO WHOM BE GLORY FOR EVER AND EVER. AMEN.