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# OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

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## Living in the Last Days

### Background Study

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James's interest in the theology of final things (eschatology), or the judgment, is evident in more than twenty of his 108 verses. We think immediately of 5.1–11, especially verses 7–11, but there are also other direct references (2.12–13; 3.1; 4.11–12), an indirect reference using different terms (1.12), and implied reminders designed to motivate Christian behavior (1.9–11, 21; 2.5; 4.9–10; 5.15, 19–20). He uses the idea to exhort and warn his readers to such an extent that we are tempted to say that James is, at least partly, *about* last things. But as Peter Davids explains, the idea is in fact bigger than that.

Yet eschatology is not the burden of the book; it is the context of the book. James shares a thought-world with his readers, so there is no need to give detailed instruction. This community, like Paul's (cf. 2 Thessalonians 2), has seen to it that the apocalyptic teaching is among the basics of the faith. Without an appreciation of the foundational role this teaching played in the Christian world view of James's church, one could hardly understand the joy referred to in 1:2, 12. This is ... anticipated joy in the face of trials because of the reward which one knows is fast approaching. It is no wonder that the reward in 1:12 is expressed in the same terms used in Rev. 2:10. Whatever the date of the final form of James, the work is solidly within the tradition which Schweitzer saw in Jesus and which later flowed into the book of Revelation (Davids 1982, 39).

David's summary helps us begin to clarify how we talk about last things from a biblical perspective. While we can correctly speak of it as the last in a series of redemption events, the New Testament takes a broader view, integrating eschatology with all the major concepts of Christian faith in a way that gives direction to believers' hope and ethics. As L. J. Kreitzer writes,

The Parousia is important in that it serves as an intersection of Christian understandings of christology, eschatology and soteriology: as the supreme moment of revelation of Jesus Christ as Lord for all the created order to see, as the culmination of God's eternal purposes as they are worked out in human affairs and as the time at which the world is judged and believers are granted resurrection existence and are ultimately united with their Lord (Kreitzer 1997, 856).

To better understand their sense of joyful hope and Christ-directed life, we should seek to understand their eschatological thought-world.

### Living “in the Last Days”

In the context of the New Testament, the phrase, “the last days” (ἐν ἐσχάταις ἡμέραις; *en eschatais hēmerais*; Jas 5.3) summarizes an important assumption about the Christian era. The Hebrews writer, for example, begins his discourse by emphasizing the contrast between the former days and the last days: “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but *in these last days* [ἐπ’ ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν τούτων; *ep’ eschatou tōn hēmerōn toutōn*] he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world” (Heb 1.1–2). Paul, Peter, and John use similar terminology (cf. 2 Tim 3.1–2; 2 Pet 3.3; 1 John 2.18).

In the teaching of the early church, the idea originates in Peter's Pentecost explanation of the outpouring of the Spirit when he says that the crowd was witnessing what the prophet Joel had said would occur “in the last days” (ἐν ταῖς ἐσχάταις ἡμέραις, *en tais eschatais hēmerais*; Acts 2.17; cf. Joel 2.28) and that those days were connected to “the day of the Lord” (Acts 2.20; cf. Joel 2.31). Thus, contrary to the way many now use it to refer exclusively to “the end times,” the New Testament's understanding is that “the last days” commenced with the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus and will continue through his coming.

The disciples' use of “the last days” “derived from similar expressions in the OT and extracanonical Jewish literature [where it] refers to the expectation of God's final judgment on the ungodly *and the liberation and restoration of his people in the age to come*” (Webb 1997, 264; emphasis added). Prior to the exile, “the last days” conveyed an expectation that the Lord “would come to judge the foreign nations and, at the same time, to deliver and bless his people Israel” (cf. Amos 5.18–20; etc.). Amos and other pre-exilic prophets broadened that understanding to warn that the day of the Lord/last days would also include the judgment of unfaithful Israel. After the exile, the expectation was “that Israel's enemies would be judged and the faithful remnant experience God's salvation in a future age (e.g., Is 61:1–2; Zech 12–14; Mal 4:1–6).” The post-exilic understanding was developed more during the Second Temple period (above from Webb 1997, 264).

The New Testament understanding of “the last days” incorporates the Jewish focus on both judgment and salvation. The writers also understood “the day of the Lord” in terms of Jesus, referring to “the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1.8; cf. 2 Cor 1.14), “the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil 1.6, 10; 2.16), “the day” (Heb 10.25), “the great day” (Jude 6), “the great day of wrath,” and “the great day of God Almighty” (Rev 6.17; 16.14) (Kreitzer 1997, 858). These texts reinforce the idea that Jesus is now the agent of God’s judgment which will occur in concert with his “coming” as the culmination of “the last days.” The word *παρουσία* (*parousia*) is associated with that expectation in several of the relevant texts (e.g., Matt 24.3, 39; 1 Cor 15.23; 1 Thess 2.19; 3.13; 4.15; 5.23; 2 Thess 2.1, 8; Jas 5.7–8; 2 Pet 3.4, 12; 1 John 2.28), but other words are also employed as functional equivalents: e.g., *φανερῶ* (*phanerō*), *ἔρχομαι* (*erchomai*), *ἀποκάλυψις* (*apokalypsis*) and *ἐπιφανής* (*epiphanēs*; Acts 2.20). When the various nuances represented by these words are interwoven, the coming (*parousia*) of the Lord is seen to be multifaceted, referring to

an act of vindication, a time of visitation, a decisive moment of judgment, a time of deliverance and the climactic event of consummation. The boundaries of these ideas are difficult to define.... Collectively they constitute the multi-dimensional nature of Christian proclamation about the Parousia, the advent of Jesus Christ (Kreitzer 1997, 858).

### Summary and Significance

We begin to see the significance of the above for the life of the early church in the early chapters of Acts. We’ve noticed Peter’s statement that the last days had begun with events that will culminate in the day of the Lord (Acts 2.17–20). His subsequent sermon in Acts 3 shows its importance for faithful living in the expectation of the Lord’s coming. Repentance and conversion are necessary to secure forgiveness, putting one in position to experience “times of refreshing” from the Lord. The result will be the fulfillment of the prophetic expectation to see all things restored, a reality to be realized when “the Lord ... send[s] the Christ appointed for you, Jesus” (Acts 3.19–21).

We also see the theme in the ministry and writings of Paul, whose “theology and self-understanding cannot be properly understood without reference to his expectations of the partial presence and imminent expectation of a new age” (Rowland 1992, 168) (e.g., Acts 17.31; Rom 6.1–14; 8.18–25; 1 Cor 15.20–28; 2 Cor 1.14; Phil 1–3; Col 3.1–4; 1 Thess 2.5). For example, in 1 Thessalonians 5.1–11, he reminds his readers that, although they did not know when the Lord’s coming would occur (vv. 1–3), they should not allow their ignorance to dampen their hope as “children of the day” (vv. 4–7). Instead, they should live faithfully in order to “obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus” (v. 9), knowing that he “died for us so that we might live with him” (v. 10). Based on these ideas, verse 11 exhorts them to faithfulness: “Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.” Clearly, Paul is not only urging them to look forward to the Lord’s coming, but also to draw on that expectation as a motivation for right living and hope even as they endured persecution and other trials.

## Conclusion

The New Testament idea of the last days is much richer than this brief introduction can convey, but we've seen enough to understand that we continue in the last days that commenced with Jesus's exaltation, that they could culminate at any time, and that knowing these things should strengthen our resolve and encourage our hope.

## Works Cited

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## Additional Thoughts on James

"'The implanted word' [Jas 1:21] is probably a mistranslation. The common idea of the word is 'in-born' or 'innate' (cf. Wisd. 12:10, 'their wickedness is inborn'). The word is occasionally used for second nature or secondary ingrowth (Hort). The word is sown, not grafted and so, 'rooted' seems to be the meaning here (Mayor). See also Romans 6:5, 'united with him in the likeness of his death.' The figure is that of the seed sown in the heart and taking root and growing there. So Jesus spoke of the man who had no root in himself (Matt. 13:21)."

~ A. T. Robertson. n.d. *Studies in the Epistle of James*. rev. & ed. Heber F. Peacock. Broadman Press, 65

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