OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

He's Standing at the Door

David Anguish

In a previous study from James 5.1–11, we noted Peter Davids's statement that eschatology is the book's context, not its burden (Davids 1982, 39). We also saw how the idea of the "last days" (v. 3) was understood by Jesus's followers in light of the expectations about the age to come in the Old Testament and Second Temple Judaism. Texts including Acts 2.17–21 and Hebrews 1.1–2 declare that the last days commenced with Jesus's glorification and sending of the Spirit and will culminate in the coming "day of the Lord," another Jewish idea that Jesus's disciples interpreted in light of his identification as Lord and Christ (cf. Acts 2.36). The Jews expected that when the new age arrived, their enemies would be judged and a faithful remnant of them would be delivered (cf. Isa 61.1–2; Zech 12—14; Mal 4.1–6).

The disciples spoke of the culmination of the last days with variations of the phrase, "the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (cf. 1 Cor 1.8; 2 Cor 1.14; Phil 1.6, 10; 2.16). Acts 3 gives us a glimpse into the significance of their understanding. After declaring that the suffering of the Lord's Christ fulfilled what the prophets had foretold (Acts 3.17–18), Peter called on his hearers to repent and be converted, reassured them that following Jesus would lead to "times of refreshing" that would "come from the presence of the Lord," and told them that the refreshing would occur when the Lord sends Jesus who was appointed for them as the Messiah.

> Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing

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> may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago (Acts 3.19–21).

The Coming of the Lord

To better appreciate Davids's point that eschatological expectations were the context, not the burden of James and other New Testament writings, we should take note of the repetition of coming/appearance language in their exhortations to faithful service. The word "coming" (παρουσία, *parousia*), used in James 5.7, is used repeatedly in the New Testament to refer to the culmination of the last days, often in texts designed to reassure Christians that their endurance of trials and persecution would be worth the trouble (cf. 1 Thess 2.19; 3.13; 4.15; 5.23; 1 Cor 15.23; 1 John 2.28; etc.). Synonymous terms reinforce the point: φανερόω (*phaneroō*), to make known, to show (1 Pet 5.4; 1 John 2.28; 3.2); ἐπιφάνεια (*epiphaneia*)**,** appearance, manifestation (2 Thess 2.8; 1 Tim 6.14; 2 Tim 1.10; 4.1; Tit 2.13); ἔρχομαι (*erchomai*), to come (Acts 1.11; 1 Cor 4.5; 1 Thess 5.2; Rev 1.7; 3.10–11; 22.7, 12, 20); μαρανα θα (*marana tha*), to come (1 Cor 16.22); and ἀποκάλυψις (*apokalypsis*), revelation, disclosure, manifestation (1 Cor 1.7; 2 Thess 1.17; 1 Pet 1.7, 13). [Note that, in the verses where *apokalypsis* appears, the relevant texts also refer to things that will accompany the revealing of the Lord, e.g., judgment (Rom 2.5), the sons of God (Rom 8.19), and glory (1 Pet 4.13). The same is true in texts where the cognate verb ἀποκαλύπτω (*apokalyptō*) appears, e.g., glory (Rom 8.18; 1 Pet 5.1) and salvation (1 Pet 1.5).] (For elaboration on the above terms, see Kreitzer 1997, 858.)

First Thessalonians 3.11–13 illustrates how the expectation of his coming was used to encourage believers in their conduct:

> Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

A more elaborate example of *parousia*-centered exhortation appears in 1 John 2.28–3.3:

> And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears [*phaneroō*] we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming [*parousia*]. If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him.
>
> See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared [*phaneroō*]; but we know that when he appears [*phaneroō*] we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

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His Coming is Near

Enhancing their anticipation of the Lord's coming was the understanding that it could occur at any time, that is, that it was "at hand" or "near" (NIV) (ἐγγίζω, *engizō*; Jas 5.8). James uses the perfect tense form of this verb, indicating that the Lord's coming had been and remained near. *Engizō* appears forty-two times in the New Testament, twenty-eight of which are Luke (18), Matthew (7), and Mark (3), where it refers to the nearness of God's reign (cf. Matt 3.2; 4.17; 10.7; etc.) and generally to things being near in space (e.g., Matt 21.1; 26.46) and time (e.g., Matt 21.34; 26.45).

Keeping both space and time in mind helps us make sense of what has been called "the delay of the παρουσία" (cf. Kreitzer 1997, 873), the postponement that has led some to argue that James and the other writers were mistaken in their expectations about the proximity of the coming. James provides a clue for resolving this question in verse 9 where he says that "the Judge is standing [ἵστημι, *histēmi*] at the door." Again, he uses the perfect tense of the verb: the Lord has been and remains standing at the door.

The spatial aspect of that image is as important as the time component for understanding the early believers' anticipation of the Lord's coming and belief that it was near. To illustrate, for several years, the school classroom in which I taught was a portable trailer that housed two rooms. The other room's teacher and I agreed that if one of us was delayed in arriving for class, the other would not allow our students to enter the room until we arrived (making exceptions for bad weather). One sunny spring day, I was running a little late and was surprised to discover as I approached my room's entrance that my students were already inside. Certain that my colleague had not opened the door for them, when I entered, I asked how they had gotten in. One young man confessed that he had climbed through an open window and opened the door for the others. Had I arrived a minute or two sooner, I would have probably caught him in the act.

Like many of our efforts to illustrate a theological concept, this illustration limps. But it does serve to show both aspects of the *nearness* of the Lord's coming. My proximity to the room and my students was both a matter of *space* (how many steps away was I?) and *time* (when would I arrive?). In fact, the space likely mattered more than the time. But either way, as my students were entering the room, they were unprepared for my arrival which happened in a moment in time and immediacy of space.

Is it possible that we have placed so much emphasis on *when* the Lord will come that we have minimized the reality that the Lord is always standing at the door, ready to enter? As Kreitzer observes,

> Passages in the NT which stress the imminence of the Parousia of Jesus Christ may be much more concerned with *theological* relationship between the present reality and future hope than they are with the *chronological* relationship between them (Kreitzer 1997, 873).

Our concern, then, should be that since "Christ's return lies close at hand, right at the threshold of

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the doorway … we ought to behave as people ready for a judgment that has already begun in this life and will culminate quickly at his return" (Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 238).

Summation

The New Testament's view of the last days that will culminate in the coming of the Lord should inspire, reassure, motivate, and comfort Jesus's followers. It should also remind us that, even as we live in this vale of tears, we do so best when we remember that we are not built for the world that now is.

Works Cited

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Additional Thoughts on James

"In the environment of James's audience, this focus on individual responsibility (each one enticed by one's own desires [1.14–15]) was not universally acknowledged. People of pagan background often regarded themselves as pawns in the hands of supernatural forces. Further, the moral focus and unit of responsibility frequently was the family, the tribe, the nation, the community. In the modern West the opposite has been the case, and responsibility has until recently been overly individualized. But now, in the twenty-first century, James's focus on the individual may again be worth emphasizing. Contemporary enthusiasm for focusing on corporate responsibility should not obscure that individuals, as individuals, are responsible for the consequences of their moral choices, as also for their choices in belief."

~ Dan G. McCartney. 2009. *James*. Baker Exegetical Comentary on the New Testament. Baker Academic, 107

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