



Lesson 9: The Once and Future Kingdom

"We are nearer now than when we first believed." *Romans 13:11*

Dear friends,

I cannot vouch for the timing of the End, but it is certain at least that the end of this short study of biblical eschatology is almost upon us. I hope that it has proved beneficial; even more, I hope that it will stimulate you to think in new ways, ask new questions, form new associations, and make new discoveries in the years ahead. I seldom know what a book means to me until months or even years after I first read it, that is, after it has been thoroughly factored into my thinking. I sincerely hope that the time and effort that you have invested in *In God's Time* will be amply repaid in the future.

Chapter Seven is a bit of an odd duck, I admit. It is the most conceptually oriented part of the book and therefore the chapter that I most wish that I could discuss with you face to face. It began life as a paper delivered at a meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature. Actually, its origins go back much earlier, to my year as a visiting professor at Indiana University. While teaching a class on Paul, I became aware of the linkage in Paul's thought between the cross of Christ and a future eschatology. (In fact, I vividly remember the day that I suddenly "got it.") Jesus was not the Messiah that Paul had expected; His kingdom had not already come in power. Indeed, if Jesus the crucified is the Christ, then God is active in the world in ways that Paul had not recognized formerly—in weakness, foolishness, suffering, and humility. This was an exciting discovery that helped me to make a lot more sense of Pauline theology, especially as found in the Corinthian letters.

A year later I taught another course on Paul. This time, I started noticing the elements in Paul's letters that did not fit my new paradigm. How was it possible that Paul at some points had such a strongly future eschatological orientation (God's reign is yet to come), while at other points his eschatology was so startlingly realized (God's reign is already here)? On further reflection, I saw that much (not all, but much) of the "realized eschatology" in Paul is related in some way to the issue of Gentile admission. The eschatological hope of Isaiah that Gentiles would be incorporated into Israel was being fulfilled now in Paul's own ministry. This was not a future hope; it was a present reality, confirmed in Paul's own churches.

I also came to realize that all Christians, knowingly or unknowingly, have a similar tension in their thinking. The shape of this thinking depends upon many factors, not least being personal experience. The manner in which we believe God is present in the world is heavily informed by our individual experience. Like Paul, there are areas of our lives in which God seems particularly active, where much seems to have changed already because of Christ. A dramatic example would be a person miraculously healed of a fatal disease. Such an individual might well have different ideas about God's presence today than another whose earnest prayers for healing have gone (or at least seem to have gone) unanswered. Also, like Paul, there are other areas where we say "the reign of God is yet to come." Christians still sin, for example, and it is obvious enough that all humans still die.

These ideas have helped me over the years to understand how beliefs are related, why certain people tend to think in certain ways, and so on. I hope that they will be of use to you, too.

Grace & peace,

Craig