

## *The Last Days: When?*

I start with the key scriptural phrase – ‘the last days’. What does Scripture mean by it? Believers not infrequently use the phrase – what do they understand by it? Are the two the same? Often – nearly always, in my experience – they are not. When, bemoaning the dire spiritual straits in which we find ourselves today, many believers will solemnly wag their head and mutter: ‘Well, it’s the last days, you know!’ What they mean is that they think that Christ is about to come again, and that Scripture tells them that the final days before his appearing will be appalling – this is what we are to expect, and that’s where we are. Is that what Scripture means by ‘the last days’?

No!

On the day of Pentecost, Peter, quoting Joel, applied the prophet’s words to what was happening at that very moment in Jerusalem. He clearly saw the events of the day of Pentecost as signalling ‘the last days’:

...this [that is, that which was happening as he spoke, that very day] is what was uttered through the prophet Joel: ‘And in ***the last days*** it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh...’ (Acts 2:16-17).

For Peter, ‘the last days’ had begun with the outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

He was not alone in that view.

The writer to the Hebrews regarded the public ministry of Christ as signalling the start of ‘the last days’. I do not concede that when he spoke ‘these last days’ he simply meant ‘recently’. We know that the writer’s purpose was to set out the contrast between the old age and the new, the old covenant and the new, with the superiority of the new over the old. For the writer, the appearance of Christ in the world marked the watershed between the two ‘times’. The writer of Hebrews was setting the

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tone for his entire treatise – the superiority of the new covenant over the old – when he wrote:

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in **these last days** he has spoken to us by his Son... (Heb. 1:1-2).

And he could not have put it any stronger when he wrote:

[Christ] has appeared once for all at **the end of the ages** to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself (Heb. 9:26).

And the same goes for Peter's letter:

[Christ]... was made manifest in **the last times** for the sake of you... (1 Pet. 1:20).

John was clear:

It is **the last hour**, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is **the last hour**. They [apostates, that is] went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us (1 John 2:18-19).

I break in to draw attention to the link John made between 'the last hour' and the appearance of antichrists. John – and his readers – knew it was 'the last hour' because of the appearance of antichrists.<sup>1</sup> I will return to this.

To continue: Paul could tell the Corinthians that the details of Israel's failures and sins during the days of the old covenant:

...were written down for our instruction [that is, for the instruction of the apostle and his fellow-believers], on whom **the end of the ages** has come (1 Cor. 10:11).

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<sup>1</sup> Many believers limit 'antichrist' to a man who will appear at the end of the age – 'The Antichrist'. Such a man – 'the man of lawlessness' – will come (2 Thess. 2:1-12). But as Paul stated in that passage: 'The mystery of lawlessness is already at work' (2 Thess. 2:7).

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The point is surely established: there are two ages, two times – before the first appearance of Christ and after his first appearance; the two times being – speaking broadly – the time of the old covenant and the time of the new. When Christ appears a second time, of course, ‘the last time’ will be swallowed up in the eternal age. The material point, however, is this: whatever Scripture tells us about the state of the gospel in the world, and the condition of the *ekklēsia*, during (that is, throughout) ‘the last time’, ‘the last days’, it is telling us about things today. Moreover, when Scripture speaks of ‘the last days’ it tells us what things were like yesterday – right back to Pentecost – what they are like today, and what they will be like tomorrow – until Christ comes. ‘The last days’ are this present age, ‘this present time’ (Rom. 8:18), the age of the new covenant, the time in which we are living. In short, now. It is quite wrong to limit ‘the last days’ to the few months just before Christ returns.

This is no small point. It will play a major role in what follows.