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# Harried Paul and the Elusive Eschaton: Eschatology and Ministry in 2 Cor 4:13-5:10

JOHN R. JACKSON

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Eschatology” conjures up for most of us a sense of urgency, escapism, impending cataclysm. The world will pass away in conflagration, and a new one will be brought into being. Thus, ministry with an eschatological dimension is regularly associated with doomsday preaching, moving to mountaintops, and withdrawing from society. And in that sense, most of us lack an eschatological or, better, an apocalyptic kind of ministry. We’re entrenched for the long haul: preparing many years for a life of ministry, establishing long-range plans for church growth, and so on.

But “eschatology” properly understood is about ultimate ends and purposes, decisive acts of God that transform life as we know it. For example, the Old Testament “day of the Lord” was not a single moment in history (or beyond history), nor was it “the end of the world” as we usually conceive of it. It was a decisive moment—in the Old Testament always, or almost always, a moment within history—when God would act decisively to bring peoples and nations to account for their actions.<sup>1</sup> The eschatological “day” was a time in which decisions had to be made, when actions of peoples and nations would be called to account, when God would bring death and life (Ezekiel 37), when God would forever alter the world.

For Paul the “end” has its roots in the past. God altered the world as it was known. In the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God acted decisively to defeat sin and death, and a new aeon has been inaugurated.<sup>2</sup> Salvation and “the end” are “already” but “not yet.” *Already* the new age has come, *already* Christ rules as king, *already* the “last days” have commenced. But the world continues. Sin persists, and human beings, even disciples of the risen Lord, still die. We have not yet reached the final consummation, not yet achieved the perfection for which God in Christ has destined us and all things. The challenge to the early church and to the church today is how we can most faithfully live in the interim, in the time between these

two decisive actions of God. To live cruciform lives in view of what God is doing and is about to do is eschatological living.<sup>3</sup>

Paul’s introduction of eschatological themes in 2 Cor 4:13-5:10 is not a disembodied theological discourse but is part of the larger document we call 2 Corinthians. The passage 4:13-5:10 is a part of Paul’s defense of his apostolic credentials that runs from 1:3 to 7:16. From the very beginning of the letter, Paul hones in on the issues of his sufferings and the sacrifices he has made in his ministry for the Corinthians (e.g., 1:3-7), themes with which this unit also concludes (7:5-16). From his responses, it appears that, among other things, he has been accused of being physically weak (4:



7-9, 16-17; 6:4-5; 10:10), untrustworthy (1:17-18), and uncaring (6:11-13). He contends that some judge him only by outward appearance (5:12), accusing him of being a hindrance rather than a help to the faith of the Corinthians (6:3, 7:2).<sup>4</sup>

The accusations seem to derive from the eschatological outlook of some, whether from Corinth or outside agitators, who have overstressed the “already” dimension of the Christian life. They believe Christians, especially apostles, are or ought to be beyond the sufferings of the old order. In Christ, all has been made new, so believers have been “freed from the prison of the body.”<sup>5</sup> Paul’s obvious weaknesses call the legitimacy of his ministry into question.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, Paul’s detractors emphasized their own spiritual experiences. Clearly, they saw their ecstatic experiences as proof of the superiority of their version of the faith (see 2 Cor 12:1-12).

In fixating upon Paul’s physical weaknesses and sufferings and their own spiritual experiences, particularly visions, these troublers of the church had become obsessed with appearances, with “what is seen.” More than once, Paul counters that his own actions were not *kata sarka*, motivated by the flesh (1:17, 5:16, 10:2). In each instance, his response is part defense and part accusation. Those who accuse Paul have themselves so focused on lesser forms of glory that they are unable to see the true glory of God in the face of Christ (3:10-18). They boast in outward appearances (5:12), whereas Paul evaluates no person “from a human point of view” (*kata sarka*, 5:16). They boast in their power and seeming accomplishments and superiority (10:8-18). They put on a show to gain credence as “apostles of Christ” (11:12-15).

#### FIXING ATTENTION ON THE UNSEEN

At least part of Paul’s argument in this text, 2 Cor 4:13-5:10, is aimed at his critics’ belief in their entry into spiritualized existence in the present and their fixation on their “spiritual” acts. 2 Cor 4:18 and 5:7 state and restate the major focus of Paul’s thought here: “We do not fix our attention on the things that are seen but on the things that are unseen; for the seen things are temporary, but the unseen things are eternal . . . we walk by faith, not by appearance.”<sup>7</sup> In contrast to his critics, Paul’s ministry is not based on appearance, on the fleshly standards that characterize his detractors’ *modus operandi*. Instead, his fixation is on other things: not current, transitory suffering but eternal glory; not the trappings of contemporary life but eternal dwellings; not mortality but life; not disembodied spiritual existence but on being clothed over with the heavenly body.

Building on Karl Plank’s rhetorical analysis of the language of affliction in 1 Corinthians,<sup>8</sup> Jerry McCant analyzes Paul’s use of irony in addressing the attacks of his opponents. McCant proposes that Paul’s defense, particularly in 5:1-10, is thoroughly ironic: things are not as they appear to be. His analysis is quite simple. Paul repeats in various forms the kinds of accusations the Corinthian opponents have hurled at him (his physical weakness, his untrustworthiness, etc.). He then concedes all these things. *Yes*, he has hurt them (1:16-21, 2:1-4) and *yes*, he is weak (1:3-9; 4:3, 7-12, 16-17; 5:1-4). He then responds that the irony in all this is that his very weakness is what allows the power of God to be seen in starkest relief (4:7-11, see 12:9, 13:4). His life may be characterized by death, but that death produces life in them (4:12). In spite of his weaknesses, he is bold because it is God who is at work through him (2:14; 3:4, 12; 4:1, 13, 16; 5:6, 8). The fact is, Paul’s sufferings *prove* his apostolic credentials rather than refuting them (3:1-3). Although some seek his credentials in shows of power, it is Paul’s sufferings, particularly his sufferings *for them*, that prove his calling (6:4; see 1:15, 17, 24; 3:2-3; 4:5, 12, 15; 7:3; 8:6).<sup>9</sup> The ironies that pervade Paul’s ministry and fill his rhetoric hit a peak in 6:8-10. Though he is considered (by appearance) an imposter—unknown, dying, punished, sorrowful, poor, having nothing—he is really genuine, well-known, alive, rejoicing, one capable of making others rich, possessing everything.

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2 Cor 4:13-5:10, like much of Paul's defense in chapters 1-7, revolves around a series of contrasts or antitheses. The key theme in these pairs of opposites is the contrast between "things that are seen" and "things that are unseen" (4:18). Each of the items can be subsumed under these two categories. Each item enumerated is not synonymous with the others but belongs to the categories of "seen" or "unseen."

## THINGS THAT ARE SEEN

4:16	Outer nature is wasting away
4:17	Present tribulation is insignificant
4:18	Things seen are temporary
5:1	Our earthly tent is destroyable
5:2	In this (tent?) we groan:
5:3	To be found naked
5:4	To be unclothed
5:6	To be at home in the body/away from the Lord
5:7	Appearance
5:9	Away(?)
5:10	Evil

## THINGS THAT ARE UNSEEN

4:16	Inner nature is being renewed
4:17	Eternal weight of glory
4:18	Things unseen are eternal
5:1	Our building from God, a house not made with hands, is eternal in the heavens
5:2	We long:
	For a heavenly dwelling
5:3	To clothe ourselves
5:4	To be clothed over ("further clothed")
5:8	To be away from the body/at home with the Lord
5:7	Faith
5:9	At home(?)
5:10	Good

**IRONY OF APOSTLESHIP**

This series of contrasts serves Paul's rhetorical purpose by demonstrating the irony of his apostleship. The cumulative impact of this series of antitheses is more important than being able to reconstruct Paul's understanding of the future state of believers and the time frames revolving around death and the *parousia*.<sup>10</sup> His life (and the lives of believers in general) exhibits weakness, but that weakness is trumped by the power God exhibited in Jesus through the cross and the resurrection. Because of this greater truth, Paul conducts his ministry on a basis other than the one used by his critics (faith vs. appearance).<sup>11</sup>

This timing is central for Paul. The significance of the present and the future has been determined by God's actions in the past: he raised Jesus from the dead (4:14). That action has forever altered the meaning of Paul's present sufferings; that action anticipates the future for which he longs. But the goal of Paul's life and ministry is not merely found in overcoming death or in receiving an eternal body. The goal and purpose of his work are that he and those to whom he declares the message of the cross may together enter into the eternal presence of their Lord (4:14). Paul's focus on the end of God's work is relational and communal: to be in the presence of the Lord and to enter that presence together with fellow believers. His life and ministry are bound up with them. Indeed, his ministry is "for them." But, for Paul, there is a goal that transcends even this. The reconciliation of human beings to God and to one another ultimately results in increased praise of God: "that grace may cause thanksgiving to overflow through ever more people to the glory of God (4:15)."<sup>12</sup> For Paul, the glory of God or "the praise of his glory" is a major eschatological concept. This is the highest goal, that God's purposes be accomplished so that all creatures will come to praise and honor God as God.<sup>13</sup>

Paul offers at least four ways here that the Corinthian believers are to live between the inauguration of the new age (through the death and resurrection of Jesus) and the future moment in which humanity enters the presence of God—when the crescendo of the praise of God’s glorious grace hits its peak. First, Paul relativizes the very sufferings onto which his opponents have latched (4:16-18). He concedes the decay of the body (“our outer nature is wasting away”) but asserts a more significant reality—ongoing spiritual renewal into the image of Christ (“our inner nature is being renewed day by day,” see also 3:18). He overstates the nature of his present condition—“this insignificant momentary affliction,”—to blunt their criticism of his situation. In comparison with the enormous weight of glory that God has in store, the present is not overwhelming. Paul says this not to trivialize human suffering but to place his own trials in a larger perspective.

Second, Paul faces the present with confidence because of what God has done and will do. He knows that God raised Jesus from the dead (4:14). He does not lose heart in the face of physical decay (4:16). He knows that there is an eternal dwelling with God beyond his current existence (5:1). Third, the present experience of the Spirit provides God’s guarantee of the future realization of life and wholeness (5:5). But we are to remember that the Spirit is a downpayment of something not fully realized until Christ’s return. And finally, Paul adds a strong ethical note to the present. Our aim, no matter what the state of our existence, is to please God (5:9). And the apostle’s deeds will be subject to the evaluation of Christ in judgment, as will the actions of his opponents (5:10). Paul is not simply asserting a future judgment of all peoples (or even of all believers) but is expressing his confidence in the faithfulness of his own ministry. He is confident that what he has done in his body, frail as it is, will be found to be faithful, “good.”

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### THREE METAPHORS

Paul then employs three metaphors to set up his contrast between the present and the future: building, clothing, and homeland (5:1-10). He mixes the metaphors of building and clothing and the sense in which he uses them, as in 5:2: “longing to be clothed by our heavenly dwelling.”

#### *Outer/Inner Person*

He contrasts the “outer person,” the body, with the “inner person,” the spiritual self who is being transformed into the image of Christ (4:16). That notion of inner transformation is evident as well in the next pericope (5:11-21): “Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation” (5:17). That newness is already experienced by those who are “in Christ” but does not reach its fullness now.

#### *Building and Clothing*

The language of building and clothing in 5:1ff refers to the two bodies—the present earthly body and the heavenly body to come. The introduction of the theme of death points to a concern with the end of human decay and its defeat, “so that what is mortal is swallowed up by life” (5:4). Paul parallels the mortality of which he speaks with his desire to be “clothed over.” Such clothing over is similar to the transformation of the physical body into the spiritual body of which he speaks in 1 Corinthians 15:53: “this mortal body shall put on immortality.”

And so Paul’s desire not to be “unclothed” (5:4) is a polemical attack on the position of his critics. Although those critics yearn for the time of release when they have thrown off their bodies and entered into a purely spiritual existence, Paul states that he does not long for such “unburdening” at all. Instead of this

bodiless existence, Paul's desire is to be "further clothed" (*ependysasthai*)—to "put on immortality" in the language of 1 Corinthians. Paul's line of argument is concerned more with the context of the attacks on his ministry than any effort to define the nature of existence at the various points in time between death and *parousia*.

On the other hand, the "nakedness" of 5:3 seems to point to something different.<sup>14</sup> Paul's concern here is that he not be "found naked" (*ou gymnoi heurethēsometha*). Although this could refer to the loss of the body, Paul nowhere suggests that he views death or persons in that way. What he says in verse 4 (about being unclothed) does not anticipate that such a thing could actually happen but is a refutation of his opponents' position: he would not want such a thing to happen. David Wenham has suggested that "being found"

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might derive from the eschatological parables of Jesus that refer to the master of the parable returning to find his servants in varying states of readiness (Matthew 24:26; Luke 12:43; Mark 13:36; Luke 12:37, 38).<sup>15</sup> In Rev 16:15, the Christ who is coming "like a thief" blesses those who are "clothed" when the Lord returns rather than going about "naked and exposed to shame." This is the person who is spiri-

tually exposed, a life lived apart from the will of God, one whose "inner being" has not been transformed daily into the image of Christ. This is Paul's real fear for himself and his hearers and his warning to those opponents who would lead the Corinthians away from the glory of Christ.<sup>16</sup> In 5:9-10, Paul recalls these ethical concerns.

So Paul mixes the clothing metaphor. On one hand, his desire and expectation is that this body, this existence, will receive a new and eternal covering. The mortal will be swallowed up, and he will enjoy the body of immortality. On the other hand, Paul will face God confidently because he will not be naked but will be clothed with Christ. His life and his ministry will exhibit the glory of God and the death of Jesus.

### *Homeland*

The final metaphor appears to intrude at the end of this section. It is the metaphor of "homeland," *endēmeō* and *ekdēmeō* (5:6, 8). This word group (which appears only here in the New Testament) refers to that place where "one rightfully or normally belongs."<sup>17</sup> It is being in one's home country rather than being an outsider, an alien. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor argues that the language here, especially in verse 6, is that of Paul's opponents. They desire to be "away from the body."<sup>18</sup> "At home" and "away from home," however, are irrelevant for Paul. What matters is to live a life that pleases the Lord. Again, the relational and ethical dimensions of Paul's eschatology are highlighted.

### **LIVING WITH ESCHATOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

To live and minister with an eschatological perspective is not the same as living apocalyptically. Are we to live on the edge, expecting any moment that the heavens will be opened and the Lord will break through? I am not convinced either that Paul expected that or that he lived in such a way. No one would settle into work and ministry in a single city for two or more years if that were the case. But his ministry was thoroughly eschatological. He believed a new age had dawned and that human existence has changed in tangible ways. But he and his hearers were always painfully aware of the provisional nature of this change. The new age had already begun, but it was not yet consummated. Paul framed his ministry and his theology around this new era and the tension implicit within it. Paul's eschatological response to his critics in 2 Cor 4:13-5:10 offers us a glimpse of the way eschatology can and ought to frame our ministries and lives.

*Something New Has Come*

It begins with God's work in Jesus. With the resurrection, "something new has come." For Paul, the resurrection of Jesus was an eschatological act that altered forever the way we ought to perceive ourselves and the world we inhabit. His opponents evaluated the adequacy of Paul and his ministry based on their perception of his condition: he suffered. Though they denied the value of the physical body, the opponents were actually obsessed with it and made its condition the lens by which they interpreted reality, whether that condition be physical decay or acts of physical power. Paul argues that the standard by which they evaluated the body and deeds done in the body was incorrect. Indeed, for Paul, the body is significant, and what is done in the body is meaningful: "We will receive recompense for what was done in the body." In his body, Jesus ministered and died. In the body, Paul had served the needs of the Corinthian believers.

*Seeing the Newness*

We need the ability to see the "already." We who have been in the faith a long time often focus too much on the "not yet." We see the flaws and the failures, the imperfections in ourselves, others, and the church. We fail to enjoy the newness. The newness of the era that Jesus has inaugurated, which the early church saw and which gave them their boldness. The newness in conversion, what it is to experience a real change, a "new creation." We need to appreciate the experience of the new convert. I remember how exciting it was to try and enter the world of my first child as he experienced everything for the first time: his first snow, his first thunderstorm, and—in his particular case—his first professional baseball game. He is renewed every year when baseball season rolls around. To get out for the first time and swing a real bat, to play with a team—his face lights up. That's the newness we need to experience more often.

*Experiencing Salvation Together*

Paul's view of salvation and the Christian life is more than the fate of the individual soul before the tribunal of God. He emphasizes the communal nature of salvation. God will "bring us with you into his presence." We experience resurrection and eternity together. Paul's life is closely tied up with those to whom he ministers. And so it is with us. Throughout this issue of *Leaven*, authors are discussing the stake Paul has in the Corinthian church and his relationship with the believers there. He is not a disinterested messenger; reconciliation with these fellow believers is essential to the fulfillment of his ministry—his and theirs. There are three deadly attitudes in a church:

- when church members and leaders view ministers as employees rather than as fellow believers and fellow members of the body of Christ;
- when embattled ministers disconnect emotionally from their members—"I'm going to give those people what they need"; and
- when members speak of their own church as "they" and "them:" "over at that church they . . ."

*Placing Value on Substance*

Paul's eschatological outlook also relativizes the things we tend to value. Paul places his own hardships in perspective by contrasting them with the "eternal weight of glory." In the same way, he critiqued his detractors who placed too much value on things that were temporary, more appearance than substance. We have to guard against the same tendency. We have lost the edge of urgency, the sense of newness with which Paul still viewed the dawning of the new age in Christ after twenty years. We expect to be around awhile and have come to have a greater stake in our culture. In our ministries, we can fall into the trappings of appearance. We are conscious of what we wear when the church gathers, wanting to make the "right kind of impression." We are aware of the impression that our facilities make. And in such preoccupations, we too easily become consumed with the health and success of the institution, whether or not that success is tied closely with living out the life of Jesus in our communities. We will not draw people to the Jesus of the

cross with a ministry that focuses on appearance. Our way of valuing things in life is based on a standard quite different from that of “appearance.” We live by our confidence in God, who defines for us “life” and “success” and “happiness.”

### *Making Bolder Choices*

The eschatology that Paul proclaims invites us to bolder choices. When our lives are limited to the things that we experience and can hold onto now, we tend to live defensively. We have to protect what we have because that is the substance of our lives. Aging and death become defeats. Opposition from others, whether it includes physical suffering or not, is a tragedy. But when these things that are normally of such great value are relativized because of the new age into which we have entered, we no longer have to live as slaves to fashion or ego or status or wealth or even security. We have less to lose—really, nothing to lose—so we can be bolder in our choices about life. We can reach across racial lines unconcerned about the impression that such a move might make. We can make career choices that do not fit any contemporary paradigm of success. We can conduct our business and other affairs concerned with what is right and what models the image of Christ rather than on what works. We can choose intentionally where to live and where our children go to school so we can be more faithful servants.

### **CARRYING ON THE MINISTRY OF JESUS**

But such boldness is not a denial of the world in which we live. In fact, it can free us to live and engage the world more fully. We do not have to be limited by the normal fears and prejudices that tend to define modern life. What happens in our lives and in the world is of real significance: “We will also receive recompense for the deeds done in the body.” Paul had confidence that God would find his ministry to be faithful, even as he had called his opponents’ ministry into question. What he did on behalf of the Corinthians and others whom he served was of great significance. Not just because lost souls were saved but also because human beings were reconciled to God. Divisions between peoples that characterized life around the globe were defeated by those who walked the way of the cross.

What believers do in their bodies is significant because it is a carrying on of the ministry of Jesus, a reincarnation of the Lord through his body. To heal the sick, to abolish lines of division, to proclaim good news to the poor—these are acts that signal the continuing advance of the rule of God. And they all lead to the greater glory of God. And as God is honored and the glory of God is increased, the end for which God made all things is realized in increasing measure.

That “end” is still partial, still yet to be completely realized. But even in these “bodies of decay,” the highest goal of both creation and redemption is increasingly realized. When the kingdom of God is the center of our lives and the lens by which we evaluate all reality, we live eschatological lives. For, after all, the kingdom of God that we are called to proclaim is an eschatological reality.

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### **ENDNOTES**

- 1 Although anticipated by some in Israel as a time of deliverance (as in Amos 4:18-20), it was more often a threat of judgment and a call to repentance (Amos 4:21-24).
- 2 “Paul’s gospel was eschatological not because of what he still hoped would happen but because of what he believed had already happened.” James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 465.
- 3 This is not to suggest that any of us lack an eschatological orientation to our ministries and lives. The eschatology that formed the faith of many of us when we were young has at least three characteristics. First, it is radically individualistic—our focus has been on “saving the lost and keeping the saved, saved.” On an evangelistic trip I took while a student at Abilene Christian University, our “method” was to knock on folks’ doors, introduce ourselves, and then ask, “If you died today, would you go to heaven?” Second, there is urgency, but not an urgent expectation of the return of Christ or of some



mighty act of God. It was the urgency of the white-knuckle invitation offered after every sermon. Third, it is essentially other-worldly—salvation is about “later” and not now. This life is but a test, a training ground. There is no direct connection between what we do on earth and our eternal condition, save to see whether or not we pass the divine test. Our eschatology has certainly had a major impact on the direction our churches and our ministries take.

- 4 Jerry W. McCant, “Competing Pauline Eschatologies: An Exegetical Comparison of 1 Cor 15 and 2 Cor 5,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 29 (1994): 33.
- 5 Ralph P. Martin, “The Spirit in 2 Corinthians in Light of the ‘Fellowship of the Holy Spirit’ in 2 Corinthians 13:14,” in *Eschatology and the New Testament*, ed. W. Hulitt Gloer (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), 121.
- 6 McCant suggests that “they could not reconcile a ‘weak’ apostle with the ‘power’ of the Spirit in Paul.” McCant, 43.
- 7 In 5:7 Paul does not say we walk with our eyes closed, that we can’t see where we are going (but that someday we will). Rather, we don’t base our walk on the way people and things appear but on faith—trust and confidence in God and in his evaluation of what is true and real.
- 8 Karl A. Plank, *Paul and the Irony of Affliction* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987).
- 9 McCant, 32-48.
- 10 McCant, 41.
- 11 Plank, *Irony of Affliction*, 79, argues that the use of such “antithetical irony” is designed to expose and to challenge the assumptions against which one is writing. So Paul here exposes those elements of life to which his critics have attached themselves so that he can assert his own focus on those things that are most real and meaningful.
- 12 Victor Paul Furnish, *2 Corinthians*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: 1984), 260.
- 13 See especially, Eph 1:6, 12,14; 3:21; see also 2 Cor 4:15; 8:23; Rom 15:5-9; 1 Cor 6:20; 10:31.
- 14 I accept here the reading of the majority of texts, *endysameni*, “having put it on,” rather than *ekdysameni*, “having taken it off.”
- 15 David Wenham, “Being ‘Found’ on the Last Day: New Light on 2 Peter 3.10 and 2 Corinthians 5.3,” *New Testament Studies* 33 (1987): 477-79.
- 16 In 2 Cor 11:3-15, he expresses concern about his opponents in even stronger language, “their end will match their deeds.”
- 17 Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), I:726.
- 18 Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, “Being at Home in the Body We Are in Exile from the Lord’ (2 Cor. 5:6b),” *Revue Biblique* 93 (1986): 2217-18. He notes that Paul changes prepositions from verses 6 to 8: “in the body” and “away from the Lord” (verse 6), “(moving) out of” and “(moving) toward” (verse 8) (“*ek* for *en*, *pros* for *apo*”). He concludes that Paul alters their static view of existence for one that is dynamic. But the real key to the image is verse 9 and suggests that Paul is using the language of his opponents here.

