



# These Last Days

*A Christian View of History*

ALISTAIR BEGG

D. A. CARSON

J. LIGON DUNCAN III

SINCLAIR FERGUSON

MICHAEL S. HORTON

JEFFREY K. JUE

RICHARD D. PHILLIPS

PAUL DAVID TRIPP

CORNELIS P. VENEMA

EDITED BY RICHARD D. PHILLIPS & GABRIEL N. E. FLUHRER

# These Last Days



# These Last Days

A Christian View of History

EDITED BY

RICHARD D. PHILLIPS

*and* GABRIEL N. E. FLUHRER



P U B L I S H I N G

P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

© 2011 by Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—except for brief quotations for the purpose of review or comment, without the prior permission of the publisher, P&R Publishing Company, P.O. Box 817, Phillipsburg, New Jersey 08865-0817.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from *ESV Bible*® (*The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*®). Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology (36th : 2010)

These last days : a Christian view of history / edited by Richard D. Phillips and Gabriel N.E. Fluhrer.

p. cm.

Papers from the thirty-sixth meeting of the Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology held in the spring of 2010.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-59638-251-0 (pbk.)

1. Eschatology--Congresses. 2. Reformed Church--Doctrines--Congresses. I. Phillips, Richard D. (Richard Davis), 1960- II. Fluhrer, Gabriel N. E., 1978- III. Title.

BT821.3.P52 2010

236--dc22

2010053328

To Kenneth R. Wynne,

brother in Christ  
and exemplary steward in these last days,  
with gratitude



# Contents

- Editors' Preface ix
1. The Christ of History 1  
SINCLAIR FERGUSON
  2. This Present Evil Age 17  
D. A. CARSON
  3. The Age of the Spirit 39  
ALISTAIR BEGG
  4. The Resurrection Hope 53  
MICHAEL S. HORTON
  5. The Eternal Glory 71  
J. LIGON DUNCAN III
  6. Partakers of the Age to Come 89  
D. A. CARSON
  7. The Four Main Millennial Views 107  
CORNELIS P. VENEMA
  8. A Pastoral Guide to Life after Death 125  
RICHARD D. PHILLIPS
  9. Evangelical Eschatology, American Style 149  
JEFFREY K. JUE
  10. The Radical Implications of Eternity 169  
PAUL DAVID TRIPP

## 2

# This Present Evil Age

---

D. A. CARSON

---

*She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule  
all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was  
caught up to God and to his throne.  
(Revelation 12:5)*

WHEN MY SON was about three years old, I asked him one day where he had gotten his deep, blue eyes. He responded (with all the authority that he could muster) that he had received them from God. Of course, he was right. If he had been twenty-one and a biology student, he might have answered that he had them because, although neither I nor his mother had blue eyes, both of us must have passed on to him the necessary recessive gene for blue eyes!

I tell this story only to provoke a question: which answer is more true? We can ask the same question when we look in the

Bible at what caused the destruction of the southern kingdom of Judah in 587 BC. One could mention the rise of the regional superpower Babylon, combined with the decline and decay of the Davidic dynasty. Or we might talk about the criminal stupidity of Zedekiah, despite Jeremiah's warnings. Or we might look at the sins of the people, sins that attracted God's judgment. Or we could simply say that God caused it. Which of these answers is the most true? Well, they are equally true.

Thinking in terms of contemporary Christianity, we could ask what causes the church around the world her greatest difficulties, sufferings, and troubles. The answers would be different in different parts of the world. For example, the church in Africa struggles against militant Islam and the AIDS epidemic. One could similarly move to Latin America, Europe, or North America and see different struggles. There is the rising secularization of all these places—philosophical pluralism, moral indifferentism, and hedonism. In the church, we see doctrinal indifference, carelessness, and a lack of love.

But I have noticed that all the categories for problems today are sociological, psychological, or related to demographics. Do not misunderstand me, for I am certainly not saying that there is nothing to be learned from sociological analysis. There is a huge amount to be learned from the discipline. But trouble arises when all of our descriptions of what is right or wrong in the world follow only those paradigms. This causes us to look for solutions from places like sociology, and that is a huge mistake. Moreover, this analysis doesn't penetrate behind the sociological and cultural phenomena to the God who still remains in charge. It disregards the God whose word we have to help us understand the phenomena that are taking place around us.

## The Rage of Satan

In the book of Revelation, chapter 12, God gives us a deeper analysis of the difficulties and sufferings of the church on this side of the coming of Christ. Before the final display of wrath in the seven plagues of chapter 16, chapters 12–14 mark a major division in the book. Here we find the underlying cause for the hostility and suffering that will fall upon the world. They also explain the conflict between the world and the church. Thus, if we are going to understand this present evil age, this is a very good place to begin.

First, John outlines the occasion for the satanic malice that characterizes this chapter. He traces all the problems that Christians now face to Satan's rage. The devil is filled with fury because he knows his time is short. John outlines this rage in verses 1–9. The scene opens with a sign. As he does in other places, John here uses the language of a sign to point in some way to the consummation, the content of the spectacle itself. But let us look at what Revelation 12:1–2 says:

And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth.

The question naturally arises: who is this woman? Many have argued across the centuries that she is married, because she gives birth to a male child who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter (vv. 5–6). Now, that transparently refers to Jesus, but this woman is not married. Rather, John is here referring to the messianic community, whether under the old covenant or under the new. Just as Zion or Jerusalem is the mother of the

people of God in the Old Testament, so in the New Testament the Jerusalem above is our mother (Gal. 4:26). The Messiah comes out of this messianic community.

This community began with the calling of Abraham and the constituting of the nation. Now it continues in a new form, under the terms of the new covenant. This becomes obvious when you get down to the end of the chapter, for the offspring of the woman are those who keep God's commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus. These cannot be married! So this is a reference to the church, the church of the living God, which is the ongoing messianic community.

John further tells us that she is utterly radiant. The imagery of her feet on the moon suggests dominion of some sort. We are also told that she has on her head a crown of twelve stars. The number twelve is vitally important to the book of Revelation. Jesus himself links the twelve apostles with the twelve tribes, which constitute the entirety of God's holy covenant people from the old and new covenants.

The description continues in verse 2, as she is described as being pregnant and in great travail. She is undergoing what Jews came to refer to as "the birth pains of the Messiah." This notion was rooted in the Old Testament. For example, in Isaiah 26:17 we read, "Like a pregnant woman who writhes and cries out in her pangs when she is near to giving birth, so were we because of you, O LORD." So what we have here is the true Israel in an agony of suffering and expectation as the Messiah is born.

The second sign in the spectacle is an enormous red dragon. Look at verses 3 and 4:

And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven

diadems. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it.

Now, in case we are in any doubt as to the identity of the serpent, John removes it in verse 9: “And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan.” The apostle here picks up the language of Genesis 3 and tells us that the dragon is in the guise of the serpent. Satan is also identified with Leviathan or Behemoth in the Old Testament. Satan has many guises, and he uses them all. These forms or representations are all symbolic of, and connected with, all that opposes God.

Think of Peter in Matthew 16:14–23. Right after he gives the apostolic confession concerning Christ’s identity, Jesus announces that he must go to Jerusalem and die. Peter, thinking that since he has scored once theologically he should try again, says, “Never!” But Jesus wheels on him and says, “Get behind me, Satan!” This passage is not saying that Peter is demon-possessed. What the Bible is telling us is that this was not really Peter speaking. His judgment is so mistaken that he actually serves as Satan’s mouthpiece. So Satan himself can stand behind nations, regional empires, world orders, and even an apostle.

Here in Revelation 12, he is a red dragon, probably indicating murderousness. He has seven heads like Leviathan in Psalm 74:14, which is a way of signaling the universality of his power. The ten horns recall the fourth beast of Daniel 7. He has crowns on his head, crowns of authority usurped from him who is described in this book as the Lord of lords and King of kings, the one who has the right to rule with a rod of iron.

The drama itself begins in verses 4–6:

His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it. She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days.

The scene is meant to be grotesque. The woman, symbolizing the messianic community, has her feet up in the straps, so to speak, pushing to bring to birth the Messiah that she has carried. There is this hideous monster standing between her legs, waiting to grab the baby as it emerges from the womb and eat it. That is the picture here.

### **The Woman and Her Worthy Son**

But then there are two further symbolic elements that need to be unpacked. We are told in verse 6 that the woman flees into the wilderness for 1,260 days. She has given birth to a male child who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter, and her child has been snatched up to God and his throne. So, in one verse, we move from his birth to his childhood to the onset of his public ministry to the years of public ministry. This finally issues in his death, burial, resurrection, and ascension to the right hand of the Majesty on high. There he already reigns at God's right hand. We begin to say to ourselves, "Why is the author skipping over all the important parts?"

But he has covered them! You must read chapters 1–11 to see this. Already in chapters 4 and 5, the significance of the Son has been set forth. Chapter 4 is to chapter 5 what a setting is to a drama. In chapter 4, we are given a picture of the transcendence of God in highly symbolic terms. His “otherness” is set forth as the one who is the sole Creator. He is the one before whom even the highest angels bow down and cover their faces, not daring to gaze on the holiness of his majesty. They cry, “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty,” picking up the language of the great vision in Isaiah 6.

Once this is established, the drama begins in Revelation 5. In the right hand of him who sits on the throne is a scroll, and this scroll is sealed with seven seals. As the book of Revelation unfolds, it becomes transparent that this book contains all of God’s purposes for judgment and blessing. And, in the symbolism of the day, to take a scroll and break its seals was to bring to pass whatever was written on the scroll. That’s how these things come to pass in what we call history.

Then a loud-voiced angel cries to the entire universe, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” (Rev. 5:2). And now the significance of the setting is clear: this is not a God before whom you just saunter on in, saying, “Oh, God, let me just volunteer for you.” Here is the God before whom even the highest angels cover their faces and dare not to look at the blazing glory. Who is going to saunter into his presence and volunteer?

The answer, we are told, is that no one was found who was worthy—not an angel, not an earthbound dweller, not a necromancer, not one from the abodes of the dead. So John weeps, and he weeps because he wants to take a peek into the future. But God says no. He weeps because, in the symbolism of the vision, he sees that unless the seals of that book are opened, all

of God's purposes for judgment and blessing will not come to pass. Thus, the church would be suffering for nothing. There is no guarantee of any just end to all of this. There is no guarantee that the balances will be set aright on the last day. There is no assurance that justice will be done and will be seen to be done. The whole thing is meaningless. History is meaningless. Suffering is meaningless.

But the interpreting elder taps John on the shoulder and says to him, "Stop your crying. Look, the Lion of the tribe of Judah has prevailed to open the scroll" (see Rev. 5:5). So John looks and sees a Lamb. Now, you must understand that apocalyptic literature loves to mingle its metaphors. You are not to think of two animals parked side by side, a lion and lamb. The Lion *is* the Lamb—that's the point. The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the messianic figure from David's line, is also a sacrificial Lamb. Yet, at the same time, he is a Lamb with a perfection of seven horns, which symbolizes all kingly authority. Furthermore, this Lamb doesn't come from the outside and have to approach this terrifying God. He himself comes to the throne. He is one with God and, as a result of his sacrifice, he calls together men and woman from every tongue and tribe and people and nation. He gathers around the throne those singing to him who sits on the throne and to himself, the Lamb. This is not merely a song of creation, but a new song, a song of redemption.

Now, remember that all of this is taking place before chapter 12, so that when we reach 12:5, all of this must be in the back of our minds. We are now focusing on the church, this woman who has brought to birth the Messiah and who is still left here with her children. But the Messiah himself is now at God's own right hand. So John wants us to focus on what happens to the woman next.

We are told that she flees to the desert for 1,260 days. What does that mean? Consider the desert, first of all. In Old Testament symbolism, the desert, the wilderness, has two foci, which complete and sometimes complement each other. The desert is the place of wilderness before entry into the Promised Land. So there is a sense in which we, as the church, are now in a kind of desert before the consummation takes place. We are still not in the consummation; that happens in the new heavens and earth.

Also, in the prophecy of Hosea, the desert is given wonderful and rich symbolism. Hosea is the prophet who pictures God as a betrayed husband. He is betrayed by his own people, and yet this God is so tender, so loving, so inherently faithful to his own covenant promises, that he thinks of his people. He says, “Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her” (Hos. 2:14). He does this because the wilderness was also the place where God, in preparing his people for the land of promise, cared for and protected them, providing them food—quail, even, and all the manna necessary. There God disclosed himself in glory over the tabernacle, leading them and protecting them. So the wilderness is the place where there is opposition and terror. It is also the place where God carefully nurtures and prepares his people before the dawning of the messianic age.

### **Trial and Triumph in the Wilderness**

What about the 1,260 days? In fact, there are four expressions that occur in chapters 12, 13, and 14. The 1,260 days are the equivalent of forty-two idealized months of thirty days each. Forty-two months is the same as three and a half years, which is

the same as one time (year), two more, and half a time. These, then, are all the same way of expressing the same thing: (1) time, times, and half a time, (2) three and a half years, (3) forty-two months, and (4) 1,260 days.

What does this mean? The primary controlling figure, I suspect, is the crucial three and a half years of pagan tyranny led by Antiochus Epiphanes. In the history of many countries, some period of time or some date is so bound up with their self-identity that any citizen of that country hearing of that date or that period of time calls to mind all of the associations. Thus, if you hear the phrase "Four score and seven years ago," is there any American reader who doesn't know what I am referring to? If you have been brought up in the American school system, you know that I am referring to Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, that famous speech that captured so much and so little. Or, if you are British, if I speak of the year 1066, you know what I am referring to. That was the year when the Normans won at the Battle of Hastings, when the entire direction of the British Isles changed.

So, here, three and a half years was by this time figuring hugely in Jewish self-consciousness. After Alexander the Great died, his mighty Greek empire extended from Greece all the way to the borders of India. It was then divided up amongst four generals. One was called Ptolemy, and he took over Egypt. A little farther north was the Seleucid Dynasty that took over what is now Syria. So little Israel was squashed between the Seleucids to the north and the Ptolemies to the south. It thus became the plaything of both, really a no-man's-land.

Eventually the Seleucids took over, and there arose in their dynasty Antiochus IV, also known as Antiochus Epiphanes. He decided that little Israel had to be paganized. So, in 167 BC, he marched in with his troops and slaughtered pigs in the temple. He then made it a capital offense to observe the Sabbath. He

further made it a capital offense to own any copy of the Torah. He determined to slaughter all the priests.

But in the hill country there was an old man with three sons. He killed the first of the emissaries sent by the Seleucids. After this, his older son Judas started conducting guerrilla warfare. We have pages and pages of information about these events from the first-century writer Josephus. Judas came to be called “the Hammer.” His name, then, was Judas the Hammer or Judas Maccabeus, and hence we come to what is known as the Maccabean revolt.

For three and a half bloody years, they kept fighting the Seleucids until they won the war. The temple was then rededicated. Hence, the span of 1,260 days (or three and a half years, or time, times, and half a time, or forty-two months)—became a symbol in Jewish consciousness of a period of time when one faces great suffering and struggle, but with the assurance that God will triumph in the end.

So it is here in Revelation 12. John is speaking of the church—of you and me. We are in that time of suffering and struggle. We are living through a compressed time, a concentrated time. This time will be cut short for the sake of the elect, but there will be persecution and opposition and antagonism from this beast until the consummation takes place.

Now, let us look at verses 7–9:

Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, but he was defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

Here also we find, again in highly symbolic language, the struggle that takes place in heaven. What happens down here has its counterpart in heaven. The devil himself has now been defeated in the light of Christ's death and resurrection. He has been thrown out of heaven. He can no longer stand before God as the accuser of the brothers and sisters. How could he stand before God in this way? After all, these brethren have now been justified, vindicated by Christ's own death. Hurrying on to verse 10, we read of the salvation and the power in the kingdom of our God. We see the authority of the Messiah, who has thrown down the accuser of our brothers and sisters. How they triumph over this one is described in verse 11. Now look at verse 12: "Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!"

Having outlined the occasion for satanic rage, John in the second place identifies the reasons for this rage.

But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle so that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time, and times, and half a time. The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with a flood. But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth. (Rev. 12:14-16)

There are several reasons for Satan's rage. First, the devil knows his time is short (vv. 10 and 12). Second, he knows that the fear he is able to induce is restricted. He has been cast out of heaven. He has no more access to God in the way, for example,

that he has access to God in the book of Job. Third, his success is limited. In verses 14–16, the ongoing conflict between Satan and the church is described.

Interestingly, there is a lot of exodus typology in these verses. The woman is given the wings of an eagle, which recalls Exodus 19 and Isaiah 40. The attempt to drown the people of God in a flood is reminiscent of the way Satan attempted to get rid of Moses. The opening of the earth brings to mind the judgment that fell in Numbers 16. All of these sorts of things are called to mind in this ongoing symbolism of aid and struggle. One remembers the words of Isaiah 43:2, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.”

Now throughout the history of the church, Christians have frequently disagreed on whether things are getting better or getting worse. But allow me to be bold and tell you what’s going to happen.

There is a wonderful parable reported in Matthew 13:24–30 about the wheat and the tares, or weeds. The disciples want to pull out the weeds that an enemy has sown in God’s own field. The master simply replies, “No, let both grow until the end.” In the last two thousand years, there have been conversions to Christ—and there have been murders. This is, in part, what Jesus means when he says, “Let both grow to the end.” Furthermore, if the Lord Jesus doesn’t come back for another one or two hundred years, let me tell you what will happen: there will be spectacular times of gospel growth that will be hugely encouraging, and millions and millions of people will be converted. Bibles will be printed, and preachers and teachers will arise, and the whole society will be changed. Culture will be transformed by the preaching of the gospel.

But there will also be persecution and violence and antagonism. This is what Jesus means when he says, “Let both grow

until the end.” And this is exactly what we see here in the book Revelation as well. Christ has risen. Christ is triumphant. Satan is already a defeated foe; he is gone, banished from heaven. His fear is restricted, and he knows his time is short. This is precisely why he is filled with fury.

This reminds me of one of the momentous events of World War II. In June 1944, the Russians were pushing the Germans back in the east. The Western Allies had already cleaned out North Africa. They had made a little foray into southern France and were pushing up the boot of Italy as well. They were holding their own in the Balkans.

But then in June 1944, in three days on the beaches of Normandy, the Western Allies dumped over one million men and many tons of war material. Anybody who had a brain in his head could see that the war had been decided; in terms of manpower, productive capacity, energy supply, technological efficiency, perseverance, and money, it was simply over. All that the Germans had going for them was the fact that at least Germany had not yet been invaded.

So did Hitler give up and sue for peace? Not at all. Instead, some of the bloodiest fighting of the war was still to come. In the Battle of the Bulge, the Germans pushed toward the coast—and would have made it if they hadn’t run out of fuel. Then there was the battle for Berlin, which was perhaps more bloody than any other. Why did these things happen? Because Hitler was filled with fury.

The same goes for Satan today. He is filled with fury, not because he thinks he can win, but precisely because he knows he cannot. He is filled with fury because he knows his time is short, and so his malice runs deep against God and all of God’s people. Locked out of heaven, locked even out of his ancient function as the accuser of the brothers and sisters, Satan rages.

This ought to be a huge part of how we think about this evil age. Of course, there are many other facets to it. It is possible to talk about the ongoing presence of God manifested in creation. It is possible to talk about the goodness of God and the streams of common grace in the arts and sciences. It is possible to talk about the way, even before we are Christians, that we are human beings made in the image of God. There are many things that we enjoy, and one does not want to paint a simply negative picture, in which there is nothing but antagonism. It is much more complicated and subtle than that, to be sure.

Satan himself is sometimes portrayed as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8). At other times, he is portrayed as an angel of light, deceiving the very elect, if that were possible (2 Cor. 11:14). So sometimes he may be unleashing his arsenal so as to cause the deaths of a multitude of believers, as recently has happened in Sudan. At other times, he may be sending out false teaching that very subtly undermines the truth. He will not come right out and say, “Look! Here is a load of false teaching!” He is not stupid. He is going to say, “Oh, I think it’s wonderful that you believe the gospel. The gospel is such a good thing—isn’t God nice? But, you know, we have discovered something that helps you to apply the gospel to your life just a little better. In addition to believing the gospel, you need these extra techniques in your counseling. This will be hugely helpful for those of you who have come from an abusive background.” He will suggest things like that. He will constantly tempt us to multiply things, and multiply things, and multiply things until the gospel is made essentially irrelevant because it becomes that which is merely assumed. It is not what you are excited about anymore. It’s not at the forefront of your thinking.

## Gospel Sufficiency

I have been teaching for more decades now than I can count, and if I have learned anything from all of this teaching, it's this: my students don't learn everything I teach them; what they learn is what I'm excited about. So within the church of the living God, we must become excited about the gospel. That's how we pass on our heritage. If, instead, the gospel increasingly becomes for us that which we assume, then we will, of course, assent to the correct creedal statement. But, at this point, the gospel is not what really captures us. Rather, it is a particular form of worship, or a particular style of counseling, or a particular view of culture, or a particular technique in preaching, or—fill in the blank. Then, ultimately, our students make that their center, and the generation after us loses the gospel. As soon as you get to the place where the gospel is that which is nearly assumed, you are only a generation and a half from death.

So now, let me take just a moment to show you that the picture I have given here in apocalyptic categories from the book of Revelation is, in fact, assumed throughout the New Testament. I will do this merely by pointing to one book very quickly. Galatians is about as nonapocalyptic a book as you can imagine. However, I want to insist strongly that, although the language in Revelation 12 is certainly apocalyptic, the stance itself is very common. Let us look, briefly, at what I mean from the book of Galatians.

We begin in Galatians 1. There the apostle Paul tells us that he was sent, not with a human commission or by human authority, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead. Look at what he then says in verses 3–5:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the

present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Paul is here describing the start of the conflict we have been speaking of. The rescue turns on Christ sacrificing himself for our sins. So the rescue is from the guilt and the power of sin. This happens in this present evil age according to the will of God our Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. That's the introduction.

Then, in verses 6–9, Paul identifies those who oppose gospel exclusiveness. What characterizes this present evil age, amongst other things, is that which denies gospel exclusiveness. Paul speaks in the strongest possible language in verses 8 and 9:

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

In 2:1–5, Paul identifies the opponents of gospel sufficiency. In this case, Titus, a Gentile lad, was brought to Jerusalem. Paul insisted that he did not have to be circumcised to be accepted by the Christian leaders in Jerusalem. Here was the reason: if you can only be acceptable to Christians in Jerusalem because you have the gospel plus circumcision, then the gospel itself is not enough. Yet there were “false brothers” in the church who demanded that he be circumcised. This was a threat to gospel sufficiency, which is a part of this present evil age.

Paul continues in 2:11–21. He wants us to know about opponents to the truth of the gospel in exclusive justification, which space prohibits me from unpacking further. In chapters 3 and 4, we see opponents to biblical cohesiveness. The whole argument of

these chapters is Paul saying to the Galatians, “Don’t you understand that this gospel that I am preaching was announced in the Old Testament?” In 5:1–6, we see opponents to gospel freedom and grace. Beginning in verse 7, the apostle speaks of opponents to gospel perseverance. These people were never really committed to the gospel. In verse 13 and following, Paul shows us opponents to gospel fruitfulness. This section, of course, contains the well-known detailing of the fruit of the Spirit. We are reminded that the gospel is more than justification. Justification declares our standing before God. But the gospel is also the wonderful news of what God has done by pouring out his Spirit, causing us to be regenerated and then transformed. Thus the principle Jesus announced—“By their fruits you shall know them”—remains true in the apostle’s vision of the Christian life.

It is not merely a matter of believing the right things. Genuine faith leads to the bearing of good fruit. The gospel is the announcement of the powerful thing that God has done. The gospel transforms us and separates us from this present evil age. It makes us different.

## **Christians Overcoming**

This leads me to conclude with the verse we skipped in Revelation 12. It is right to think about the characteristics and profile of this present evil age. It is right to think of the place of the devil, as he maliciously controls these structures, mustering opposition and violence against God’s people. It is right to think of all these things, but Revelation 12:11 tells us how Christians overcome the devil: “And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.”

Now, this deserves a couple of sermons just by itself, but let me briefly outline the three points that John makes. First, Christians overcome satanic rage by the blood of the Lamb. In fact, the original language is even stronger; it says that Christians overcome Satan quite literally “on the ground of the blood of the Lamb.” So it is not by the blood of the Lamb seen as a kind of device, but it is on the ground of Christ’s atoning death. Satan comes to accuse us psychologically or tries to vent his voice before God, saying, “How can you let that Don Carson walk away? He is a sinner, for goodness sake! You claim to be so holy, God, yet you let him go free.” What do we say? My plea is not, “I am not as bad as all that.” My plea is the blood of the Lamb—that is what silences the accusations. This is gospel freedom and this is why Satan has been cast out. The cross stands at the heart of everything. This needs to be unpacked and teased out again and again and again, so we understand the riches of what we have in Christ in overcoming Satan and all of his wiles.

Second, Christians overcome by the word of their testimony. That does not mean that they give their testimonies frequently. This refers to the word of their *witness*; that is, they bear witness to the gospel. How are we going to advance the gospel? How are we going to push back the frontiers of darkness in America today? Some people advise us to start a political party. Maybe we should do some lobbying in Washington. There may be some place for these kinds of things as part of God’s common grace, but they should not be confused with gospel-centeredness.

John is telling us that the hosts of darkness are pushed back by Christians bearing witness—giving testimony to who God is and what he has done in Christ Jesus. How else can we push back against Satan and his forces? We will be defeated if we simply keep silent. If you never share the gospel with anybody else, you yourself are defeated. You are not pushing back the frontiers of

darkness. This is how Satan is defeated—by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of your testimony.

Third, Satan is overcome when we do not shrink back, even from death itself. We are called to die daily. This is what it means to follow a Savior who went to the cross. We are to learn afresh to take up our crosses and follow him. This is why Paul could write things like this: “For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake” (Phil. 1:29). This has been *granted* to us. Or think of that remarkable passage, Acts 5:41, when the apostles were first beaten for proclaiming the gospel. What did they do? Luke tells us that they rejoiced “that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.”

Recently I began to understand why the apostles rejoiced on this occasion. After all, before Jesus went to the cross, he spent a fair bit of what we call the “Farewell Discourse” talking about how his own followers would suffer. He had done so earlier in Matthew 10. He anticipated this in Matthew 5:10: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Then again in verse 12: “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Now, in Acts 5, Jesus has gone back to heaven, the Spirit has fallen, and Pentecostal power is causing many people to be converted. I imagine that if the apostles were thoughtful at all, they were sometimes saying to themselves, “This is fantastic, but where is the suffering?” Then it happens; they are beaten, and what do they say? “At last!” That is stunning.

Now, if we truly understand that this is how Christians ought to react in this fallen world, it changes everything. You too will rejoice that you were counted worthy to suffer for the name. This suffering will take different forms for each of us.

Some of us will be called to suffer intellectually. We will be mocked for taking up our cross and daily following Jesus with our minds. For others, it will be actual physical suffering that we have to endure. I look at my brothers and sisters who suffer horrible physical torments, and then I witness how they adorn the blessed gospel with forbearing perseverance. I watch them forgive their tormentors. Still I wonder why salvation should cause them so much pain.

But then I recall our Savior's words: "Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:20). And so Satan will be overcome as we remember these words of our Lord and, remembering them, practice them in our daily lives. These three things from Revelation 12 are God's ordained means of overcoming our enemy and living to the glory of our Savior in this present evil age.