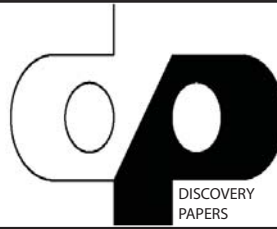


TASTE AND WAIT

SERIES: BETWEEN THE TIMES



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1 & 2 Thessalonians
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2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

A recent *Time* magazine cover story suggested that the gap between our optimistic expectations and the reality of our dissatisfied existence has spawned a “vast happiness industry,” which includes motivational speakers, self-improvement products and services, and pills. Some pills in some cases are, of course, helpful. Some pills in other cases . . . not so much. *Time*: “The pursuit of happiness, once an ideal, has become a big business but not an especially effective one; plenty of other countries are doing a lot better than we are without trying so hard.”¹ According to the World Happiness Report, published by the Earth Institute of Columbia University, the U.S. ranks twenty-third on a fifty-country happiness index, far behind No. 1 Iceland, No. 2 New Zealand, and No. 3 Denmark and trailing Singapore, Malaysia, Tanzania, and Vietnam. Vietnam? People in Vietnam are happier than people in the United States? Evidently, we’re an optimistic lot but not a particularly happy one.

Are we missing something?

We live, as we have seen throughout our study of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, between the first coming of Christ and the second coming of Christ. What can we expect between the times? What can we hope for from the current day?

The day of the Lord has not yet come

2 Thessalonians 2:1-2:

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers,² not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17, Paul wrote to the Thessalonians about the “coming of the Lord,” when the dead and Christ will rise and those who are alive will be “caught up together” with them to meet the

Lord in the air and, apparently, escort him back to earth. He also wrote to them in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 about “the day of the Lord.” Some see the coming of the Lord and the day of the Lord as two separate events, but Paul equates the two not only in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2 but also in 2 Thessalonians 2:8. The day of the Lord will feature the coming of the Lord.

Despite Paul’s earlier letter and in-person instruction, he is concerned that some may be unsettled by false teaching concerning these matters. Paul taught that those who believe in Christ have been raised with Christ in a spiritual sense, but some people concluded that the day of the Lord had already come (Colossians 2:12, 2 Timothy 2:18). No, says Paul, the Thessalonians still await the day of the Lord, when everyone will be raised from the dead in an actual sense.

In 1914, the leader of the Jehovah’s Witnesses claimed that Christ’s final coming had occurred invisibly on October 1 of that year. In more recent times, Harold Camping, after one of his failures to accurately predict the rapture, announced that a “spiritual” judgment had taken place on the date he predicted for the rapture, May 21, 2011. Camping, intentionally or not, deceived many people. It seems to me, as an observer from afar, that he was a well-meaning crackpot.

There are lots of well-meaning crackpots out there. There are also lots of people who put themselves forth as “prophecy experts” and misread the Scriptures by over-reading them, often disregarding the biblical authors’ original intent. By the way, I can’t quite remember hearing a so-called prophecy expert who didn’t think the end wasn’t close at hand. Has there ever been an expert who didn’t see all sorts of signs of the end? Last of all, there are lots of charlatans out there who intentionally deceive people for their own nefarious purposes. Such crackpots, “experts,” and charlatans are like the proverbial boy who cried wolf. Nevertheless, the day of the Lord will come, and we should expect it to come, though it hasn’t yet come.

Next, Paul lays out the evidence that the day of the Lord not yet come.

What comes first

2 Thessalonians 2:3-5:

Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, ⁴who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. ⁵Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things?

The day of the Lord, Paul says, will be preceded by two developments: the “rebellion” and the revelation of the “man of lawlessness,” who is further defined as the “son of destruction”—that is, a man who is destined to be destroyed. Because those two developments had not yet taken place, Paul can tell the Thessalonians that the day of the Lord has not yet come. He does not instruct them to watch for the rebellion or the revelation of the man of lawlessness; his point is to say that the day of the Lord has not yet come.

The “rebellion” that Paul anticipates would seem to be rebellion against God, as seen in verses 10-12. The man of lawlessness is called such because he will rebel against God and his laws. As is evident from verses 10-12, the man of lawlessness will also inspire others to rebel against God.

The man of lawlessness will not only rebel against God, he will also present himself as superior both to any so-called god and to anything else that is deemed worthy of worship. To demonstrate his superiority, he will take his seat in the “temple of God” and proclaim himself “to be God.” Some understand Paul to be speaking of the physical temple, which they expect to be rebuilt in Jerusalem. Others understand Paul to be speaking of the spiritual temple, the church.

However, Paul’s words could be translated to mean that the man of lawlessness will take his seat in the “temple of a god” and proclaim himself “to be a god.” Contextually, the latter translation has much to commend it, inasmuch as the man of lawlessness exalts himself against every so-called “god” and, presumably, against God himself. If such is the case, the man of lawlessness will assert his deity by enthroning himself not in the temple in Jerusalem or as the leader of the church but in some other sort of temple, perhaps a temple he builds for himself.² If the man of lawlessness is rebelling against God, he isn’t claiming to be God; he’s claiming to be a rival god,

superior to the God of Jesus. Some identify the man of lawless with the antichrist, spoken of by the apostle John. Different writers may have different ways of referring to the same individual.

Paul has already spoken to the Thessalonians about these matters; therefore, he writes to remind them of what he has already told them. Paul didn’t speak to us about such matters, although he touched on them in his first letter to the Thessalonians; therefore, we are at an interpretive disadvantage. Paul writes, “Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things?” And I want to answer, “No, Paul, I don’t remember. You were never with me. You never told me these things. If you had told me these things, I’d have a better idea of what you mean in this passage.” As it is, we’re missing a few pieces of the interpretive puzzle.

Nevertheless, I do my best, as an interpreter, to try to understand what he means, but I remain uncertain about some details, such as the nature of the temple. Moreover, I would advise you to be skeptical of anyone who comes off as convinced of his or her interpretation of all the details in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12. Helpfully, the main point of the passage is clear: the day of the Lord has not yet come. The details of the passage are as interesting as they are puzzling, but we shouldn’t stray far from the main point, which is clear.

The man of lawlessness, whoever he is, will have his day, but he will meet his demise.

Brought to nothing

2 Thessalonians 2:6-8:

And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. ⁷For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. ⁸And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming.

Again, Paul writes to people whom he expects to “know” what he means; therefore, he doesn’t need to be more expansive. Although the Thessalonians may know what he means because he’s been with them before, we haven’t been with him and therefore must to do our best to understand the words we know about.

First, the verb translated “restraining” in verse 6 (and “restrains” in verse 7) can also be translated

along the lines of “prevailing,” “holding fast,” or “possessing.” In fact, in every other place the verb is used in the New Testament, the English Standard Version understands its meaning in this sense (Matthew 21:38; Luke 18:15, 14:9; Romans 7:6; 1 Corinthians 7:30, 15:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:21; Hebrews 3:6, 3:14, 10:23; 2 Corinthians 6:10). Note, also, that the pronouns “him” in verse 6 and “it” in verse 7 do not appear in Paul’s letter but are interpretive additions by modern translators. Therefore, the sentences in verses 6-7 could be translated this way: “And you know what is prevailing now so that he may be revealed in his time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who prevails will do so until he is out of the way.”

This translation makes the most sense of the context. What is prevailing (verse 6)? The mystery of lawless, which is already at work, prevails.³ Who prevails? The man of lawlessness prevails—or, the man of lawlessness will prevail. Paul tells the Thessalonians that the mystery of lawless—that is, a principle presently at work—anticipates the revelation of an individual who embodies lawlessness. Lawlessness that prevails creates a climate for a lawless person to prevail and exacerbate lawlessness.

The man of lawless will have his day, but at some point he will be “out of the way.” The second sentence in verse 7 is best understood as parenthetical, the meaning of which is spelled out in verse 8. For the third time, Paul says the man of lawlessness will be “revealed”—evidently, by God. He will be revealed, but only to meet his demise. When Jesus returns, the man of lawlessness will be destroyed. All Jesus has to do to put an end to the man of lawlessness is open his mouth. Likewise, the apostle John sees Jesus waging war with words that come from his mouth (Revelation 19:11-21).

Before the man of lawless is destroyed, however, God will cooperate with him in a strange way.

A strong delusion

2 Thessalonians 2:9-12:

The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders,¹⁰ and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.¹¹ Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false,¹² in order

that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

Paul juxtaposes the “coming” of the Lord (verse 8) with the “coming” of the man of lawlessness (verse 9). He leaves no doubt whose “coming” is greater, for the coming of one finishes the coming of another.

However, in that the man of lawlessness is in line with the “activity of Satan,” he comes with a certain power, even “all power”—that is, all the power of Satan. It’s as if Satan, who threw all he had at Jesus before being defeated at the cross, again throws everything he has at humanity before the return of Jesus. The man of lawlessness, with a supernatural being pulling the strings, will perform supernatural signs and wonders. Such signs and wonders are described as “false” not because they’re unreal but because they have nothing to do with the truth, which is the gospel. Satan’s goal, through the man of lawlessness, will be to deceive humanity. His goal is always to deceive humanity (2 Corinthians 4:3).

The man of lawlessness, with Satan behind him, will deceive “those who are perishing,” who have marked themselves out as wanting to be deceived inasmuch as they don’t want the salvation from Satan, sin, and death that Jesus offers. Why don’t they want the Gospel, defined here as “the truth?” Because it will be shown that they “had pleasure in unrighteousness.” To them, unrighteousness holds forth greater promise than the gospel.

And how does God respond? He says, “Have it your way.” He gives people what they want: he “sends them a strong delusion” so that they become even more resistant to the Gospel. Becoming more resistant, their inner disposition surfaces so that God may judge them. In this way, God makes more apparent what is already present. He magnifies sin in order to judge it. (See also Exodus 4:21, 7:13, 9:12; 1 Samuel 14:1; 1 Kings 22:23; Ezekiel 14:9; Romans 1:24, 32, 5:20-21). N.T Wright observes, “Paul is reminding the Thessalonians that for evil finally to be eradicated from God’s world it must be brought to full height, must be concentrated at one point and must be dealt with there.”⁴

However we understand “the rebellion” and “the man of lawlessness,” Paul’s point, in writing of these things, was to demonstrate to the Thessalonians that the day of the Lord had not yet come. Still, almost two thousand years after Paul wrote this letter, the day of the Lord has not yet come. Not many today would misunderstand Paul, or misrepresent him, and claim

that the final day has already come. Some things, with the benefit of interpretive history, we have a better grasp on than Paul's original audience. Nevertheless, such knowledge hasn't prevented many people, even followers of Jesus, from believing that they can and should experience in the present more or less all of what the final day offers.

Can you have it all now?

Our culture preaches, "Life is short," and, "You can have it all now." If life is short, and if there's little or nothing to hope for after death, then you may as well get everything you can out of the few years allotted to you. Paul himself acknowledges as much (1 Corinthians 15:32). In fact, if there's nothing to hope for beyond death, all you get is now! Therefore, the mystery of lawlessness prevails, and men and women of lawlessness prevail, as many take pleasure in unrighteousness.

The obvious problem is that "now" doesn't deliver what we want. Even if it does deliver, we eventually stop wanting what we earlier wanted. You want this relationship, this job, this impact. You get it, and then you lose interest. As Emily Dickinson wrote, "Success is counted sweetest, / By those who ne'er succeed." For those who do succeed, success isn't counted as sweet. The "vast happiness industry" takes our money and leaves us wanting.

Nevertheless, belief in the better life is resilient. If a dream dies, or if the success of a dream fails to live up to expectations, then a better dream—what you really want—is just beyond the horizon. We are, after all, an optimistic lot. F. Scott Fitzgerald captures this ethos on the last page of what many consider the greatest of the great American novels, titled, appropriately enough, *The Great Gatsby*. In the novel, Gatsby pines for Daisy, who lives across the bay from him, near a dock with a green light. For Gatsby, the green light represents what he wants but never gets. For Fitzgerald, the green light represents what America wants and can't get: "Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther And one fine morning—" But one fine morning never comes.⁵

Then what? Brent Curtis and John Eldredge observe: "If for all practical purposes we believe that this life is our best shot at happiness, if this is as good as it gets, we will live as desperate, demanding, and eventually despairing men and women. We will place on this world a burden it was never intended to bear."⁶

The day of the Lord has not yet come. What, then, should we expect from this day?

What can you have now?

In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul anticipated the day of the Lord but told his readers that they were "children of the day" (1 Thessalonians 5:1-12). How can we be children of the day if the day has not yet come? Well, in some measure, the day already has come, though it hasn't come fully, which may be why the Thessalonians were confused. Paul says elsewhere that, as a result of the first coming of Christ, the Holy Spirit has been given to us as a "guarantee," or down payment, of our inheritance, the new creation, which we will receive at the second coming of Christ (Ephesians 1:14, 2 Corinthians 1:22). No, we can't have it all now, but we can have some of it now. In fact, we do have some of it now: we have the Holy Spirit, who has visited us in the present in anticipation of the future.

What do we have? We have moments. We have moments, or perhaps seasons, when we experience something powerful.

At some such moments, we know we're experiencing the presence of God, as if he were flooding our hearts with his love. Paul experienced such a moment. He was "caught up into paradise" and "heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter" (2 Corinthians 12:2-4). I can remember three occasions when, alone on a personal retreat, I experienced the love of God or the longing for God with such power that I almost had trouble breathing.

More often, we know we're experiencing *something*, and only later, upon reflection, do we connect it to some kind of visitation. Two disciples experienced such a moment on the road to Emmaus, when their hearts burned within them. Only later did they recognize that they had been walking with Jesus (Luke 24:13-35).

At such moments, the Holy Spirit enables us to taste "the powers of the age to come" (Hebrews 6:5). In that we only "taste" the age to come, we don't experience all of it. Such moments, therefore, come to us as something like appetizers. They make us want more and assure us that more is coming, but they make us wait for more. They satisfy for the moment, but the moment passes. We can't make the moment last, nor can we repeat the moment. We must therefore learn to appreciate the moments for what they are: a taste of the age to come.

I was one of the coaches for my eight-year-old daughter's softball team, which just concluded its season. At the end-of-the-season picnic, I said a few words to the girls, but I couldn't get the words out, so overcome was I by the moment. I was trying to tell the girls that they learned a lot more than softball this season—that they learned about teamwork, sportsmanship, commitment, perseverance, and attention to detail. I was trying to tell them that they learned lessons for life. What they learned culminated in a championship, but I was trying to tell them to remember the championship for what they learned. I was trying to tell them that the lessons I learned playing Little League baseball have stayed with me to this day. (They are with me, by the way, in every biblical passage I study and every sermon I prepare.) I was trying to speak, but I couldn't speak.

Upon reflection, I realize that the moment overtook me for many reasons, one of which being the sadness I was feeling. The girls, the other coaches, and I shared a magic season together, but the season had come to an end. I couldn't make it last; it couldn't be repeated—and I was sad.

Savor the taste, and wait for the feast.

One fine morning

You can't have it all now; you can have some of it now. Therefore, savor the moments. Life is not short; life is eternal. Therefore, savor the moments as foretastes of the feast to come.

And one fine morning—

All the moments will culminate in an eternal moment. You won't need any motivational speakers. You won't need any self-improvement products or services. You won't need a pill.

The sun will rise, and it will be a new day—a day unlike any other, a day that won't even need the sun, to be followed by a night that won't need the moon, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea, to be followed by endless days and nights, each of which will shimmer with possibility.

One fine morning—

The day of the Lord will come.

Put your trust in Jesus, and I'll see you there.

(Endnotes)

¹Jeffrey Kluger, "The Happiness of Pursuit," *Time* magazine (July 8, 2013), 27.]

²Elsewhere, whenever Paul speaks of the temple of God, he never refers to the physical temple in Jerusalem; he always refers to the spiritual temple: the church or the individuals who make up the church. It is therefore unlikely that he is here referring to a physical temple in Jerusalem that is indwelt by the Spirit of God. On the other hand, it seems utterly possible for him to be referring to a physical temple as being the temple of a pagan god.

³The word translated "what" in verse 6 is in the neuter in gender, as is the noun "mystery."

⁴N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Parts III and IV (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 1290.

⁵F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), 182.

⁶Brent Curtis and John Eldredge, *The Sacred Romance* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc., 1997), 179.