

“How To Keep Your Wits While Waiting for Jesus” – 2 Thess 2:1-5

Do you know what the final prayer of the Bible is? I was personally encouraged this week when I read this in my Gospel Transformation Study Bible,

“The final prayer of Scripture is a prayer for this second coming: “Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev. 22:20). Such prayer—made in the light of God’s promise that our Savior will come to execute justice, vindicate the righteous, and make the world right—has the power to refresh and sustain us regardless of whatever pain may wash into our lives.”ⁱ

The Thessalonian church was in danger of losing this hope. In these verses, *Paul reminds believers of two things that will happen before Jesus comes again that help you keep waiting for the day of His return, keep watching for prophecies to be fulfilled, and keep your wits when the way is hard.*

Keep waiting for the Day of the Lord (read 1-2)

So the first thing we can see in verses 1-2, is that Paul and Timothy and Sylvanus wrote this to comfort the persecuted Thessalonian believers. The coming of Christ and the gathering together of His people is a core Christian belief. This is what this chapter is about (1). In fact, this is the centerpiece of the whole book. This is a central doctrine according to Jesus. It is the future “Day of the Lord”—visible, coming, judgement, gathering. The context here should guide how we interpret what Paul wants us to believe about the second coming of Christ—the context is **2 Thess 1:7b-10!** “When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven...” (v7), “when he comes on that day” (10) *has not come yet*. Believers and unbelievers will see Him come and believers will be “gathered together to him”—the word gathered here is literally “synagogue”—a reunion of all believers with the Lord, a physical gathering together with Jesus when He comes back to this earth.

WE ASK YOU BROTHERS, DON'T BE... (shaken in mind) Wycliffe, in the 14th century, translated this, “moved from your wit” (RWP). (Alarmed) startled by a yell (**Mat 24:6**) // Don’t let anyone tell you different, even if they are proving it from the Bible (by the Spirit), in a sermon (by a word), or in writing claiming to be from the apostles (by a letter seeming to be from us) (5) *because as verse 5 says, nothing should be allowed to un-convince them of what Paul had already taught them.* But somehow, some of them were being shaken by strange teaching:

TO THE EFFECT THAT THE DAY OF THE LORD HAS COME... Dr. Kent Hughes helpfully said,

“We might find that unusual, but in the late 1800s a pastor named Charles T. Russell taught that Christ would return invisibly in 1874 and make himself known to the world in 1914. Another leader in that movement, Judge J. F. Rutherford, explained that Russell was wrong in his calculations. Christ came back on October 1, 1914, but it was an invisible coming... Those were the beginnings of what we know as the Jehovah’s Witnesses...”ⁱⁱ

Today there are about 8 ½ million people who claim to be Christians but are misled about the second coming of Jesus “and our being gathered together to Him” (1). But there are millions of evangelicals who also need to hear this.

If you don't cherish the belief that the Day of the Lord is coming, there is a danger you might live like it isn't. Christians live with one foot in the now and one foot in the not-yet. When we put too much weight on the Now, we are in danger of having an "over-realized eschatology." I read a blog this week that helped me think through some ways this can be dangerous to our faith: **1) we might** have a hard time accepting things that go along with a fallen and cursed world—like disease, death, disappointment. The whole world has been under the curse since Adam sinned. Yes, Jesus saves us from sin's penalty, but that doesn't change our bodies or the world we live in...yet: that day is not Now, it is Not Yet. **2). Yes, Jesus is** the Great Physician, the healer, and He will wipe every tear away and give us victory. But sometimes we can't understand why God won't heal when we pray for deliverance from cancer, or even Covid-19; He has promised He will deliver us from all sickness but that day is not Now, it is Not Yet. **3) When we are** born again, God gives us a new nature, but some people think this means we should be able to have complete victory over sin. But the person who really believes this will become depressed and discouraged when he isn't able to live up to it. He will think his failures mean he isn't a Christian. Even though Paul talked about his ongoing battle with sin (Rom 7); even though John wrote that if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and instead tells us, "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:1)! We will be freed one day even from the presence of sin, from temptation, from failure, from weakness—but that day is not Now, it is Not Yet. **4) Sometimes we** Christians think we have failed if we can't get the government to stop things like abortion; or what they teach kids in schools about sexuality and gender; or how they decide to handle emergencies like Covid-19!—but though Christ is King, this isn't His Kingdom yet. We cannot, must not expect earth to be like Heaven until Jesus comes again. To paraphrase David Lee Roth, "this [is not] just like living in Paradise". That day is not Now, it is Not Yet.ⁱⁱⁱ

Live like the Day of the Lord is future. Guard yourself against living mainly for Now. Next, Paul unpacks two predictions that are meant to help us keep waiting for the day of the Lord.

Keep watching for the prophecies to be fulfilled (read 3)

Paul already told them these things (5)—two major events need to happen first, neither of which had happened yet when they wrote this letter (around 50AD). First there would be an apostasy. Then the Antichrist, predicted long ago, would be revealed. I'm going to stop at verse 5 today and leave many questions unanswered until next week. But the first prophetic event to watch for was “the rebellion.” The Greek word translated “rebellion” here is “ἀποστασία”. In English, “apostasy.” Some think this is going to be a global, political rebellion against God, but the word itself, in the OT and NT, is used for a falling away from what is considered biblical faith. For example,

Have you not brought this upon yourself by forsaking the LORD your God, when he led you in the way? 18 And now what do you gain by going to Egypt to drink the waters of the Nile? Or what do you gain by going to Assyria to drink the waters of the Euphrates? 19 Your evil will chastise you, and your **apostasy** will improve you. Know and see that it is evil and bitter for you

to forsake the LORD your God; the fear of me is not in you, declares the Lord GOD of hosts. (Jer 2:17-19 ESV)

This is a noun in verse 3, apostasy, but Jesus used the verb, apostatize, in the parable of the sower: “And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing **fall away**,” (Luk 8:13 ESV). And Paul used it in his letter to Timothy, in a prediction like this one: “Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will **depart** from the faith,” (1Ti 4:1 ESV). Then Hebrews uses it, “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to **fall away** from the living God” (Heb 3:12 ESV).^{iv} The apostasy predicts a widespread turning away of so-called Christians from true faith in Jesus.

The second event that had to happen before the Day of the Lord is the appearance of Antichrist. He doesn't use that name here but that's who he's talking about. Paul uses two colourful references to describe Antichrist that leave no doubt he means an apostate, hypocritical Christian leader. It's common knowledge that Paul is comparing Antichrist with Judas when he says “son of destruction”—but I had never seen that “man of lawlessness” is another biblical-historical comparison until I read this in a commentary by FF Bruce. But I believe he's right: Paul makes **two** comparisons here.

The Antichrist will be like a Sheba and a Judas. That's the double-point Paul makes with the two names he gives Antichrist (3b). The first, “man of lawlessness” comes from a Hebrew expression, “man of belial”—meaning a worthless or unlawful person.^v 2 Sam 20:1 calls a man named Sheba a “man of belial”. [read 2 Sam 20:1-2] Even while King David was returning to his capital in Jerusalem, Sheba led an unlawful rebellion against his lawful King. Most of the country followed him. But the second colourful name for Antichrist doesn't just picture him rebelling against his lawful King, but as an apostate follower of Jesus [read John 17:11b-12]. He said this about Judas. One of the 12. Because he had fallen away from following Jesus.

That's the foreview of Antichrist Paul gives in verse 3: a Sheba and a Judas. A kingdom usurper-apostate follower of Jesus.

How can you make sure you don't fall away from Jesus? Falling away is falling away from trusting Jesus; from keeping on believing the Gospel; from keeping on confessing your sin and depending on the forgiveness Jesus promised to give you. Faith in Jesus helps us keep looking forward to His coming not with fear of judgment but with delight and joy that we will finally get to be with the One whose death and resurrection has saved us from our sins once and for all!—“the coming of the Lord and our being gathered together to him!” (1). We can become too quickly shaken in our minds, alarmed at events, if we do not keep waiting for the Day of the Lord and keep watching for the prophecies to be fulfilled. But if your hope is regularly refreshed by the core doctrine Paul is focused on in verse 1, it will help you...

Keep your wits when the way is hard (read 4-5)

Paul has made two Holy Spirit-inspired predictions about the apostasy and the Antichrist: Two things that will happen before Jesus comes again. The Holy Spirit is giving the people of Christ exactly what they need to not be easily shaken or alarmed, but to be ready for Jesus to come and also prepared to wait a long time, even when the way is hard. As Wycliffe put it, to keep

your wits. You also need to notice that the things Paul is predicting here were not brand new prophecies. [read v5] Acts 17 tells us a little bit about Paul's time in Thessalonica, and it says "he reasoned with them from the Scriptures" (Acts 17:2). Paul was a Bible teacher and a preacher, and the Bible he preached and taught was the Scriptures at that time—what we call the Old Testament. Which means that some of the time at least, when Paul had "told them these things," (5) he had been teaching from the Old Testament prophecies. In verse 4, Paul reminds them of what he had previously taught them, and just gives two very brief descriptions of what the Old Testament predicted Antichrist would do. [read v4]

Verse 4 starts with a modified quotation from Daniel 11:36. The previous verses in Daniel 11 (which I preached on in 2017) were about the last of the Greek tyrants who severely oppressed the Jewish people. But many scholars see that verse 36 switches gears, talking about the rise of a new super-power after the Greeks. Calvin makes a very persuasive case that this is about the rise of the Roman Empire and its rule over Jerusalem.^{vi} A premillennial Puritan scholar named Thomas Brightman wrote a whole commentary just on these verses and showed that it was the rulers of the Roman Empire who elevated themselves as kings with unprecedented authority and paved the way for this Antichrist.^{vii} Did you know the first emperor, Caesar Augustus, also became the Supreme Priest (Pontifex Maximus) of the Roman religion. It seems then, in verse 4, that Paul had taught the Thessalonians the Antichrist would follow in the footsteps of the Priest-Kings of Rome. Next Paul borrows from *recent* events to finish the picture. [read 4b] For Christians and for Jews, this was still pretty fresh. About 10 years before this letter was written, Gaius Julius Caesar had renovated the Temple in Jerusalem to his own ego, making it the Temple of Illustrious Gaius the New Jupiter.^{viii} Paul, however, was not talking about the past but the future. Antichrist would follow in the footsteps of the Roman Emperors, would be a Priest to God, even act as if he is God, and rule over the Church of Jesus Christ. None of that had happened yet when Paul wrote this letter.

The road ahead would be hard for Christians, for many, many generations. They didn't know how long it would be before Jesus returned, but they were taught by the Holy Spirit to count on the promise He is coming again. They were prepared by the Holy Spirit, in these Scriptures, to endure a long, hard road. **And we are too.** So that we are not too quickly shaken, or alarmed and frightened by events happening in the world today. We keep waiting for the Day of the Lord; we keep watching for the prophecies to be fulfilled; we keep our wits when the way is hard. Why? Because we believe "in the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him" (v1).

I know there are Christians who fit the cartoonish description of having their noses buried in Bible prophecy, their heads in the clouds and both feet in Heaven. But believers should have one foot in Now and one in Not Yet. This has been the hope that empowers endurance in Christ's followers for 2000 years. In 1812, Henry Martyn was a missionary translating the New Testament for the people of Persia (Iran today), knew he could die, but kept working because he knew he would not die as long as Jesus still had work for him to do. He wrote this in his journal about 10 months before he died of the plague:

To all appearance, the present year will be more perilous than any I have seen; but if I live to complete the Persian New Testament, my life after that will be of less importance. But whether life or death be mine, may Christ be magnified in me! If he has work for me to do, I cannot die.^{ix}

And the day before he died, before he was gathered to His Lord, he wrote this in his journal:

Oh! when shall time give place to eternity? When shall appear that new heaven and new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness?^x

This is our Christian hope that gives strength to our minds, our hearts so that we are not easily shaken—strength to our hands and feet, so that we serve our Lord until He comes, or until He calls us home. Amen. Come Lord Jesus!

ⁱ The Gospel Transformation Study Bible (Crossway). Olive Tree Edition. “2 Thessalonians 2:1-15”.

ⁱⁱ R Kent Hughes, PTW, 2 Thess 2:1. Citing John R. W. Stott, *The Message of 1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), p. 157; Anthony Hoekema, *Jehovah’s Witnesses* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1973), pp. 90, 91.

ⁱⁱⁱ C.f., <https://growingin grace.blog/2020/04/03/3-dangers-of-an-over-realized-eschatology/>

^{iv} On 1 Tim 4:1, TDNT (see citation below) explains this “apostasy implies capitulation to the false beliefs of heretics.” On Heb 3:12, TDNT adds, “This apostasy entails an unbelief which abandons hope.” Schlier, TDNT, s.v. “ἀφίστημι, ἀποστασία, διχοστασία,” I:513. https://accordance.bible/link/read/TDNT_Complete#4173.

^v Bruce cites an argument, “that ‘man of lawlessness’ is a rendering of the OT phrase ‘man of Belial’ (אִישׁ בְּלִיעֵל)...”. Bruce, F. F.. *1 and 2 Thessalonians, Volume 45 (Word Biblical Commentary)* (p. 217).

Zondervan. Kindle Edition. C.f. LXX translation of “belial” as “παράνομος” a close equivalent of “ανομία” (c.f. Louw-Nida Lexicon 88.139 & 88.142; also c.f. LSJ Lexicon, #32682.

^{vi} John Calvin, *Commentaries* “Daniel 11:36” (Olive Tree Module).

^{vii} Thomas Brightman, *A Most Comfortable Exposition of the Last and Most Difficult Part of the Prophecy of Daniel from the 36 Verse of the 11 chap. To the end of the 12 chapter* (1635). Pp16-19.

^{viii} Philo, *Gaius* 1.346 (BibleWorks Module).

^{ix} John Piper. *Coronavirus and Christ* (Kindle Locations 409-413). Crossway.

^x (1837) Wilberforce, Samuel (ed.). *Journal and Letters of the Rev. Henry Martyn B.D.*. London: Seeley and Burnside. Quoted on Wikipedia [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Martyn]. Accessed May 17, 2020.