

Understanding the “Day of the Lord” in 2 Thessalonians

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Introduction

According to Henry Clarence Thiessen, the apostle Paul wrote his first letter to the Thessalonians shortly after he left Thessalonica (in AD 50 or 51) while he was staying in the city of Corinth [Thiessen, Henry Clarence. *Introduction to the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2002), 193-94]. In that letter Paul addressed some of the Thessalonian believers who were grieving the loss of loved ones, reminding them of the hope they had in the future return of Jesus Christ [Ibid., 193]. However, in the time between his first and second letters, increasing persecution of the church had led some to misinterpret Paul's teaching on the "Day of the Lord," believing it had already come [Ibid., 197-98].

D. Michael Martin argues that the inclusion in the Greek of "*apo tou noos*" (left out of some translations but literally meaning "from the mind") suggests that Paul "was worried about the believers becoming disoriented or confused by false teaching" [Martin, D. Michael. *1, 2 Thessalonians: The New American Commentary*. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1995), 224]. After all, if they earnestly expected a parousia and that parousia did not arrive, many could fall from their faith. Thus, in Paul's second letter he directed the Thessalonian church away from this false teaching and toward the truth that while the Day of the Lord is certain, there are still several things that must occur before it can take place.

Structure

According to Jeffrey A.D. Weima, Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians proceeds in five parts. First, there is an opening in 1:1-2. This consists of Paul's identification of himself as the author, the Thessalonian church as the intended recipient, and a greeting. Second, Paul shares his thankfulness (1:3-12), not only for the perseverance of the Thessalonians in the face of

persecution, but also for God's just judgment and the vindication believers can expect as a result. Third, in this surrounding context Paul corrects a false belief that has begun to permeate the church, specifically that the Day of the Lord had already come (2:1-17). Fourth, perhaps as a result of this belief that Jesus' return would occur in the immediate future, Paul needed to exhort those in the church who had become idle and were not working as they should (3:1-15). Finally, Paul closed his letter with benedictions and final words of encouragement (3:16-18). [Weima, Jeffrey A.D. *1-2 Thessalonians: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), *The Structure of 2 Thessalonians*, Kindle]

In regard to Paul's discussion of the Day of the Lord, D. Michael Martin suggests that there is some question as to whether it should be seen as ending at verse 12 (as opposed to continuing through verse 17). Martin concludes, though, that ending the section at verse 12 would leave it "unconnected from its concluding exhortation, 'so then brothers stand firm,' which occurs at v. 15" [Martin, D. Michael. *1, 2 Thessalonians: The New American Commentary*. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1995), 221]. Weima agrees, pointing out there is a "verbal inclusio between verse 2 ('either by a spiritual utterance or by a word or by a letter supposedly from us') and verse 15 ('either by a word or by a letter from us')" [Weima, Jeffrey A.D. *1-2 Thessalonians: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), *Comfort concerning the Day of the Lord*, Kindle]. Therefore, the relevant passage for analysis of Paul's use of the Day of the Lord extends through verse 17.

Exegesis

Is the Day of the Lord in 2 Thessalonians a Point or a Period of Time?

Martin argues that even though the term “the Day of the Lord” has at different points in Scripture referred to either a single eschatological event or “a complex of events that may somewhat extend its temporal scope,” it is clear in this passage that Paul is referring to a “climactic point of eschatological judgment concurrent with the ‘splendor of the coming’ of the Lord Jesus” in verse 8 [Martin, D. Michael. *1, 2 Thessalonians: The New American Commentary*. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1995), 227]. Somehow, however, the Thessalonians had come to believe that this Day had already come, raising the puzzling question of how they came to such a belief. Weima says, for instance, “it would have been obvious to them that none of their fellow believers who had ‘fallen asleep’ had been resurrected (1 Thess. 4:14, 16), that ‘sudden destruction’ had not yet fallen on their unbelieving neighbors (5:3), and that there had been no cry of command, voice of an archangel, or ‘trumpet call of God’ to signal the glorious parousia of Christ (4:16)” [Weima, Jeffrey A.D. *1-2 Thessalonians: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), Comfort concerning the Day of the Lord, Kindle]. Why, then, did they believe that the Day had already come?

According to Weima, “Most commentators conclude that the Christians in Thessalonica likely did not understand the day of the Lord to be a single and instantaneous happening but rather to be a complex number of events, of which Christ’s parousia was just one part” [Ibid.]. Thus, because the series of events surrounding Christ’s return had allegedly begun, they believed the Day of the Lord had similarly already begun. Given that this was the belief to which Paul was responding, it follows that the Day of the Lord is not a series of events, but rather refers to an isolated event at a specific point in time, i.e., the return of Christ in power and glory.

Paul mentions several things that must occur (and which had not yet occurred) prior to the Day of the Lord as evidence that the Day was still yet to come. These include rebellion, the revealing of the man of lawlessness (2:3) and that same man setting himself up in the temple and proclaiming himself to be God (2:4). If these events must take place *before* the Day of the Lord, then they cannot be a part *of* the Day of the Lord.

Craig A. Blaising, however, disagrees. He concedes that this interpretation of Paul's response in 2 Thessalonians 2 would be a way of addressing the false belief that the Day of the Lord had already come. After all, if there are events that must precede it, and those events have not yet happened, then the Day cannot yet have arrived. However, Blaising claims this "requires a radical adjustment of how the day of the Lord is to be understood in relation to the tribulation" [Blaising, Craig A. "The day of the Lord and the rapture." *Bibliotheca sacra* 169, no. 675 (Jul-Sep 2012): 268]. This is so, according to Blaising, because Paul has already stated that there will be no sign preceding the Day of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians 5. Knowledge of preceding events is a sign as to when the ultimate event in question will occur (or at least when it will not occur) [Ibid.]. Therefore, Blaising concludes that the Day of the Lord is a period of time, not an isolated event.

However, Blaising is mistaken in his interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 5. In fact, Paul only says that Christ's coming will be like a "thief in the night" for nonbelievers. In 5:4 he states, "But ye, bretheren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief" [1 Thess. 5:4 (KJV)]. To believers Christ's coming will not appear sign-less. Thus, the resolution to Blaising's dilemma is not a "radical departure" from the way the Day of the Lord should be viewed, but rather perfectly in accord with Scripture.

P.J. Gloag refers to a similar approach as Blaising. He first argues that in order to explain how the Thessalonians could have possibly believed the Day of the Lord had already come, some scholars claim that it “is not identical with ‘the coming of the Lord,’ but that, besides the actual advent, it includes the events which are its antecedents and concomitants” [Gloag, P.J. *The Second Epistle to the Thessalonians: The Pulpit Commentary*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950), 24]. However, while this may have been what the Thessalonians believed, it is not consistent with the text to claim that this is the actual nature of the Day of the Lord. It may explain why the Thessalonians believed the Day had come, but it would not explain why Paul was seeking to disabuse them of that notion.

Gloag himself suggests that the idea that the Day of the Lord had “come” may simply be “a strong expression for the imminence of that day; that the hour of the advent was about to strike.” [Gloag, P.J. *The Second Epistle to the Thessalonians: The Pulpit Commentary*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950), 24]. In other words, the Thessalonians did not truly believe the Day of the Lord had come after all. They merely believed that it was imminent. This, however, cannot be supported by the Greek. Martin observes, “The perfect tense verb (*enestēken*) means ‘has arrived,’ not ‘is imminent’” [Martin, D. Michael. *1, 2 Thessalonians: The New American Commentary*. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1995), 227]. Therefore, while the Thessalonians may have thought otherwise, the scriptural evidence supports that the Day of the Lord is a specific event, not an extended period of time. This explains not only the basis for the Thessalonians’ confusion but also the relevance of Paul’s response.

When Will the Day of the Lord Take Place?

While Paul does not give a specific date for the Day of the Lord, he does provide enough information to place it at the end of the 7-year tribulation (i.e., Daniel's 70th week). Again, as Martin observes, both the "rebellion" and the "man of lawlessness" are presented by Paul as preliminary to the Day of the Lord [Martin, D. Michael. *1, 2 Thessalonians: The New American Commentary*. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1995), 227]. In 2:4 Paul states that this man will set himself up in the temple and proclaim himself to be God. This is a clear reference to Daniel 9:27 in which Daniel describes the Antichrist causing a desolation in the temple at the midpoint of the tribulation. The Day of the Lord that is being referred to by Paul, therefore, must happen after that event.

2 Thessalonians 2:8 then says, "And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming" [2 Thess. 2:8 (KJV)]. The man of lawlessness is destroyed with the coming of Christ. Because verse 4 shows that this "coming" must be after the desolation at the middle of the tribulation, it can only refer to Christ's return in power and glory at the end of that 7-year period.

Given Paul's clear teaching on these events, it is again perhaps difficult to imagine how the Thessalonians could have believed that Day was already upon them. Martin suggests, "Somehow they must have either spiritualized the event or misunderstood its character" [Martin, D. Michael. *1, 2 Thessalonians: The New American Commentary*. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1995), 228]. Richard L. Mayhue says that the church likely allowed their theology to be unduly influenced by the tribulations which they were suffering [Mayhue, Richard L. "The Bible's watchword: day of the Lord." *The Master's Seminary Journal* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 73]. Regardless, the danger was clear. According to Martin, "The delay of the parousia for a

community convinced that it must occur in a very short time could spell the end of faith for many of its adherents” [Martin, D. Michael. *1, 2 Thessalonians: The New American Commentary*. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1995), 229].

Weima, however, appears to downplay the significance of Paul’s explication of these future events and is somewhat noncommittal as to the time at which they will occur. He claims, “Paul is not interested in spelling out a detailed ‘timetable of apocalyptic events’ ... but rather in proving to the Thessalonians that the claim about the day of the Lord being present cannot be true” [Weima, Jeffrey A.D. *1-2 Thessalonians: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), Comfort concerning the Day of the Lord, Kindle]. While it is true that Paul’s primary goal in this passage is to correct false teaching, the method by which he does so is to lay out at least a rudimentary timetable of future events. By saying “these events need to happen first” he is necessarily also saying that “these events will happen in the future.” Thus, Weima fails to demonstrate why we should not look to this passage for at least the extent of detail it reveals about future events, even while maintaining the humility to recognize that we should take our conclusions no further than is warranted by the text.

What is the Meaning of “that Day will not come except?”

Speaking of the Day of the Lord, Paul writes in 2 Thessalonians 2:3, “Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition” [2 Thess. 2:3 (KJV)]. The New International Version substitutes the word “until” for “except,” and Weima agrees. “The day of the Lord cannot have come ‘because’ ... this future event will not take place until certain clearly defined events take place first, foremost of which involves the appearance and destruction of the man of

lawlessness, who for the present time is being restrained” [Weima, Jeffrey A.D. *1-2 Thessalonians: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), Comfort concerning the Day of the Lord, Kindle].

As Martin elaborates, Paul is expressing himself in a conditional form. He begins with the negative conditions (i.e., neither the rebellion nor the revealing of the man of lawlessness have happened) with the intention of teaching that because these things have not occurred, the Day of the Lord cannot have come [Martin, D. Michael. *1, 2 Thessalonians: The New American Commentary*. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1995), 230]. Thus, by saying “that day shall not come except...,” Paul is stating that it will not come until the listed preconditions are satisfied.

It should be noted that the first part of this phrase, “that day will not come,” does not appear in the Greek text [Ibid.]. In fact, grammatically speaking verse 3 is an incomplete sentence. However, Martin observes that “Paul’s flow of thought is indicated by the preceding statement of his topic. Verses 3-4 refute the proposition that ‘the day of the Lord has already come.’ So Paul likely intended readers to complete the negative conditional clause ... in vv. 3-4 with some such statement as ‘then the Lord has not (or will not) come’” [Martin, D. Michael. *1, 2 Thessalonians: The New American Commentary*. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1995), 231]. Even without those words, Paul’s overall context and intent is clear.

Conclusion

Despite the phrase “the Day of the Lord” at times referring to other incidents of God’s judgment, the context of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-17 clearly indicates that Paul is referring to a specific event, the future coming of Christ in power and glory, i.e., the eschatological Day of the

Lord. While he describes other events, Paul identifies these as needing to happen before the Day of the Lord (and in fact, that forms the foundation of his response to the Thessalonians). Thus, these preceding occurrences cannot be a part of that Day. Also, while Paul does not provide a specific date of this Day, he does give enough information to know that he is speaking of the specific incident of the coming of Christ at the end of the tribulation. He ties the occurrence of the Day of the Lord to Christ's coming and says that it will happen after the Antichrist's desolation that occurs at the tribulation's midpoint. Finally, Paul's use of the phrase "that Day will not come except" does not mean that the Day may not come at all, but rather that it will not come until certain preconditions are met.

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