

Now and then: Isaiah 65:17-25; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

by [Michael A. King](#) in the [October 30, 2007](#) issue

In the beyond, in the dream, on the mountaintop, in the joy made flesh—not in the flesh still longing—is where I want to dwell. I long to be in the “new heavens and a new earth” where “former things shall not be remembered or come to mind,” as Isaiah puts it. Give me that. Give me all manner of things that shall be well, so well that even “the wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust!”

Or give me, centuries later, Jesus’ vision of what must end before the new can unfurl. As Luke heard it, observers were marveling at the beautiful stones and gifts adorning the great temple at Jerusalem when Jesus warned, “As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”

To those who ask when it will happen and what to look for, Jesus gives clues that boil down to “everything will come unglued.” He also insists that the end will be a moment of great possibilities: “an opportunity to testify” and “by your endurance . . . gain your souls.”

Whether offering a nightmare or a dream, both texts paint a reality beyond what is. What is *now* is not what God will bring *then*. So we are to hope, wait, endure.

Except that we want it now. How jolting yet pertinent are the teachings of the apostle Paul (or a successor in the Pauline school) for those who are idle: those who do not work, he says in 2 Thessalonians, shall not eat. I can hear the voices of my mother and father reminding us children of the same thing. The Bible says so. What is such an earthbound text doing amid flights of vision?

Grounding us, I suspect. Some think that Paul was addressing people who were taking a scenario like Luke 21 so seriously that they felt unmotivated to earn money, balance checkbooks or pay rent. Others think that by the time 2 Thessalonians was written, people had concluded that the day of the Lord had already come. Now the problem was traveling missionaries who wanted to live entirely in the “beyond” of their ministries—and let the church pay the rent. Whatever the details, at root was

that common temptation: Give me God's beyond now; spare me the irritants of ordinary life.

Such temptation regularly afflicts me. I also think I saw it writ large in Robert, as I'll call him. Robert appeared in my missionary parents' home back in the 1950s and, when they switched countries of service, in each of those homes as well. At any place, in any season, at any hour of day or night, Robert might show up from one of his worldwide ministry tours expecting to be fed, housed and supported by my parents.

The decades passed, and I was a pastor far away in time and space from those boyhood memories. Then one day the phone rang. I could hardly believe my ears. It was Robert. At the airport. He'd wait for me to pick him up. I turned him down. He raged, warning that I was interfering with the Lord's call.

It doesn't matter if Robert's behavior was rooted in expecting the Lord's day to come tomorrow or believing it had already come with joys he was called to share. Either way, he believed his situation exempted him from the work of ordinary life. His role was to live in the beyond and bring it back here. His supporters' role was to offer the fruits of their toil so he needn't be distracted.

That helps me glean an insight from 2 Thessalonians for life today. We parents aren't entirely wrong to tell our children that one who doesn't work doesn't eat; children can fly so far into books or instant messaging or iPods or DVDs—or even their own Christian passions—they come to believe that ordinary life has no claim on them.

As the parent of a child, let me just delicately report (with permission): After a time of admirable Christian service inspired by visions of God's beyond, this child was troubled to realize that the return to ordinary life included addressing a dwindling checkbook balance. A wail of protest against that vale of tears called adulthood was heard.

But we also make the text too simple if we treat it only as a proverb demanding that we work to get fed. And we pervert the text if we give it a capitalist spin, as some do. Then it becomes justification for not caring if the poor go hungry, because surely if they are not eating, it's because they are not working.

Instead what this text seems to want to say to us, then or now, is that however powerfully we intuit the ending of this earth or dream beyond it, we prepare not by fleeing ordinary responsibilities, but by maintaining them even as we see past them. This too is a form of endurance: "Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right."

Then I think again of Robert. I think what a fierce visionary for the Lord he was. I think how easily consumerist culture seduces us into forgetting what lies beyond and worshiping what we can buy today with the checkbook we balance or the cards we flash. I'm not sure I'd undo my rejection of Robert's airport plea. But I wish that he and I had known how, instead of opposing each other, to collaboratively stitch together life's ordinary labors and our longing for the day of the Lord.