

A Tale of Two Dreams

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1st in a five-part series

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Daniel 2:44–45 (CEB)

⁴⁴“But in the days of those kings, the God of heaven will raise up an everlasting kingdom that will be indestructible. Its rule will never pass to another people. It will shatter other kingdoms. It will put an end to all of them. It will stand firm forever, ⁴⁵just like you saw when the stone, which was cut from the mountain, but not by hands, shattered the iron, bronze, clay, silver, and gold. A great God has revealed to the king what will happen in the future. The dream is certain. Its meaning can be trusted.”

Luke 20:20–26 (CEB)

²⁰The legal experts and chief priests were watching Jesus closely and sent spies who pretended to be sincere. They wanted to trap him in his words so they could hand him over to the jurisdiction and authority of the governor. ²¹They asked him, “Teacher, we know that you are correct in what you say and teach. You don’t show favoritism but teach God’s way as it really is. ²²Does the Law allow people to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”

²³Since Jesus recognized their deception, he said to them, ²⁴“Show me a coin. Whose image and inscription does it have on it?”

“Caesar’s,” they replied.

²⁵He said to them, “Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.” ²⁶They couldn’t trap him in his words in front of the people. Astonished by his answer, they were speechless.

Romans 13:1–7 (CEB)

Every person should place themselves under the authority of the government. There isn’t any authority unless it comes from God, and the authorities that are there have been put in place by God. ²So anyone who opposes the authority is standing against what God has established. People who take this kind of stand will get punished. ³The authorities don’t frighten people who are doing the right thing. Rather, they frighten people who are doing wrong. Would you rather not be afraid of authority? Do what’s right, and you will receive its approval. ⁴It is God’s servant given for your benefit. But if you do what’s wrong, be afraid because it doesn’t have weapons to enforce the law for nothing. It is God’s servant put in place to carry out his punishment on those who do what is wrong. ⁵That is why it is necessary to place yourself under the government’s authority, not only to avoid God’s punishment but also for the sake of your conscience. ⁶You should also pay taxes for the same reason, because the authorities are God’s assistants, concerned with this very thing. ⁷So pay everyone what you owe them. Pay the taxes you owe, pay the duties you are charged, give respect to those you should respect, and honor those you should honor.

Does the American Dream depend upon a Creator?

This week, we will begin exploring this and many similar questions.

This week we begin a new series: *Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness*. We will be considering topics ranging from God’s dream to the American Dream, liberty, virtue, religious freedom, and more. Nearly all of us have some knowledge of these matters and none of us lack in opinions. Thus, in addition to delving deeper into some of the relevant Scripture passages, I’ll be providing some background information that will help us all come to a deeper understanding of these issues and their implication for disciples of Jesus.

God’s dream

Everything must begin with God. He created the entire cosmos and all within it. He is the sovereign Lord of us all and, thus, understanding anything about our nature and our lives together must begin with him.

That’s the point of Daniel’s dream in the passage above. Sure, there are countless mighty kingdoms on earth. Daniel and thousands of his fellow Jews had been taken

into exile by one such kingdom, the Babylonian empire. But as with all empires, the Babylonians would soon be eclipsed by a rival.

God enabled Daniel to interpret the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar, including one featuring a giant statue with a head of gold, chest of silver, abdomen of bronze, legs of iron, and feet of clay. One empire would give way to another, and then another, and then another. But, finally, Daniel told the king, God would raise up an everlasting kingdom that would be indestructible and never supplanted.

The kingdom Daniel spoke of is the kingdom of God, ushered in by Jesus but still awaiting its full consummation. In most of what he said and he did, Jesus was either painting a portrait of God's kingdom or enacting it, a place without sin and tragedy, without hunger or death, a place of joy and peace and hope. The Christian life is about learning to live in the "kingdom way" (aka the Jesus Way) every day of our lives and to order our lives around the reality of God's truth.

Ordering our lives together

Though we are to live in the Jesus Way, the truth is that we live in a strange in-between time, when the Kingdom of Sin and Death is still with us, but so is the Kingdom of God. If you've never been introduced to this Christian claim, you should take a look at the special page five section on the "already/not yet" perspective of Paul and the early Christians. This "present and coming" nature of reality underlies all that we will discuss in this series.

When Jesus returns and the kingdom of God is fully realized, it will be a straightforward matter to live in the kingdom. But not now; far from it. Unless we withdraw from the world into a monastery or some sort of utopian community, we must construct a civil society in which we can live, thrive, and pursue the Jesus Way alongside those who worship false gods and those who deny even the existence of God. Even if we were to try to withdraw, how could we then be witnesses to Jesus and the Good News? There is no way to be the light of the world unless we are in the world.

These are not new matters. The first Christians knew that they had to make their way in the world, to be the city on the hill, even as they were surrounded and ruled by pagans, for it would be almost three hundred years before Constantine converted to Christianity and took the Roman empire with him – at least in name.

Thus, in his letter to believers in the heart of the empire, Paul had some thoughts on their relationship with those in charge. Paul knew that we live in a world marred by sin and that we need restraints on our violent and abusive ways, so Paul endorsed governments over anarchy, seeing that governance of civil society is part of God's created order. God is not a god of chaos. At the same time, Paul is not simply endorsing all governments, for many have been an abomination. Tom Wright on Romans 13:1-7:

Of course Paul knew that quite often one might do the right thing and find the rulers doing the wrong thing. You only have to read the stories of his escapades in Acts to see that. But notice, in those stories (his visit to Philippi in Acts 16, for instance, or his trial before the Jewish authorities in Acts 23), that precisely when the authorities are getting it all wrong and acting illegally or unjustly Paul has no hesitation in telling them their proper business and insisting that they should follow it. Hardly the way to become popular, but completely consistent with what he says here.

His comments about taxes may well have a specific point in relation to the Roman situation at the time. Roman subjects living in the capital paid two types of tax, some direct and some indirect. The latter was so unpopular that it led to riots about this time, and at one point Nero actually promised the people of Rome that he would cancel all indirect taxation. (Cynics today will not be surprised to hear that he didn't keep the promise.) Clearly those who believed that Jesus was the one true Lord of the world might well use that belief to rationalize withholding taxes which many of their pagan contemporaries, too, thought were unjust. Paul stands out against that. Christians were likely to get into quite enough trouble for far more serious things, as

he knew well from his own experience; but they should be good citizens as far as they can.¹

But what sort of government? What sort of governors?

This is really the question isn't it? For most of history, this wasn't too much of a concern. Most peoples simply lived under an unending succession of absolute rulers – a few good and many downright terrible. Even in Rome, the great Republic fell into the dictatorship of the many Caesars.

But coming out of the dark ages in the west, some new ideas began to take hold. In England, the lords forced their king, John, to agree to constraints on the king's power. This *Magna Carta* (Latin for “the great charter,” so named for its length), signed in 1215, was a key turning point in the governance of peoples. In the centuries that followed, through countless fits and starts, the idea that people should have a say, and more, in their own governance grew.

The 17-century English philosopher John Locke developed these ideas and brought them into a coherent theory of government. Because God made the humans in his image, governments must exist only by the consent of the governed. It is the people who are made in the *imago Dei*, not the particular form of governance. Locke's writings had an enormous influence on those that followed including an American colonist named Thomas Jefferson. Indeed, Jefferson wrote that the greatest men who ever lived were John Locke, Isaac Newton, and Francis Bacon, for they provided the “superstructures” of the enlightened world in the “Physical and Moral sciences.”

The democratic ideals that animated the leaders of the thirteen British colonies were not invented by them, but were largely imported from the European continent and given new shape and form in the colonies' struggles against what they believed were abuses by an over-reaching British crown. Here's an example. It is a paragraph from Locke's 1690 essay, *Concerning Human Understanding*. It is not easy reading, but the phrases will sound familiar.

The necessity of pursuing happiness [is] the foundation of liberty. As therefore the highest perfection of intellectual nature lies in a careful and constant *pursuit of true and solid happiness*; so the care of ourselves, that we mistake not imaginary for real happiness, is the necessary foundation of our liberty. The stronger ties we have to an unalterable *pursuit of happiness* in general, which is our greatest good, and which, as such, our desires always follow, the more are we free from any necessary determination of our will to any particular action, and from a necessary compliance with our desire, set upon any particular, and then appearing preferable good, till we have duly examined whether it has a tendency to, or be inconsistent with, our real happiness: and therefore, till we are as much informed upon this inquiry as the weight of the matter, and the nature of the case demands, we are, by the necessity of preferring and pursuing true happiness as our greatest good, obliged to suspend the satisfaction of our desires in particular cases.²

Thus, in Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence*, there are numerous phrases that echo and even mimic Locke. Here is Jefferson's foundational statement on the nature of government:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, -- That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its

¹ Wright, T. (2004). *Paul for Everyone: Romans*, Part 2: Chapters 9-16 (pp. 86–87). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

² The quote is taken from an essay by Carol Hamilton, “The Surprising Origins and Meaning of the ‘Pursuit of Happiness.’”

foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.³

We've heard some or all of these words often enough that we can fail to listen well, to really pay attention to what Jefferson was saying when he wrote this. The "American dream" is grounded on these few sentences, for they gave shape to all that followed. Here's a few thoughts:

- Jefferson says that the truths he is about to set forth are "self-evident." This reminds me of the apostle Paul, who held that just by virtue of existing in this world, all people have some knowledge of our Creator (Romans 1:18-20). Being "self-evident" means that this knowledge isn't the property of any religion or dependent on any religious text.
- The Declaration is grounded in the existence of a Creator – it is this claim that is essential to the American dream. If there is no creator, then none of us, including Jefferson, have any basis for making moral claims about government or anything else.
- To call something "unalienable" is to say it cannot be given away. The rights Jefferson has in mind are inherent in being human. ("Unalienable" and "inalienable" reflect only differences in spelling, not meaning.)
- Jefferson has in mind an unsaid number of such unalienable rights but lists only three: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Next week, we'll talk about what Jefferson (and Locke!) meant by the pursuit of happiness and how we, as a nation, are in danger of wasting the gift that God has given us.
- These rights that we cannot give away are given us by God, our Creator – *not* by the government. Further, we form governments because there are those who would try to deprive us of our unalienable rights. Thus, as Jefferson says, the first duty of government is to secure our rights. As I said earlier, that is the reason for governments to exist. Yes, we need governance to bring about order and security (back to Romans 13), but that is only because our exercise of our unalienable rights are threatened.
- A rightful government in God's created order is one that exists by the consent of the governed. There is no royal prerogative – any and all governments in any and all times must govern by the consent of the people if the government is to have any claim to legitimacy.

As Jefferson and the other leaders of the revolution found, none of this is easy. Alexis de Tocqueville wrote: "Governments ordinarily perish by powerlessness or by tyranny. In the first case, power escapes them; in the other, it is torn from them."⁴

Further, what did Jefferson even mean by "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"? And what does any of this have to do with living our life in the Jesus Way? After all, most of us would have trouble embracing Jefferson as a fellow Christian. I have on my shelf a copy of "Jefferson's Bible" which is his remaking of the New Testament using a razor and glue. Working late in his life, Jefferson took out all the passages dealing with miracles, resurrection, Jesus' divinity, and more. He titled this revision, *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*. And yet, from Jefferson's pen was birthed the gift called America, a gift we cannot waste, for our freedom is given us by God, who is revealed fully in Jesus.

³ Quoted from the U.S. archives site: www.archives.gov. This is a great site and you might enjoy prowling around on it.

⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville was a French aristocrat and who traveled around America in 1831 and later wrote two volumes titled, *Democracy in America*. Two translators got it about right when they called it, "at once the best book ever written on democracy and the best book ever written on America." De Tocqueville's quote is from Volume One, Part Two, Chapter Seven in a section subtitled, "That the greatest danger of the American republics comes from the omnipotence of the majority."

The Already/Not yet Arrival of the Kingdom of God

Jesus the Messiah

Jesus came talking about fulfillment of the Jewish hope and demonstrating the reality of God's kingdom. In God's kingdom there were no blind or lame, so Jesus made the blind see and the lame walk. Though most Jews did not accept Jesus as the Messiah, some did. In the years immediately after Jesus' resurrection, these followers of Jesus, all of whom were Jewish, had a problem. They proclaimed to all who would listen that Jesus truly was the long-expected Messiah, but it was also clear that evil and tragedy and suffering were still present in the world. Using Figure 1 as a guide, it's as if the Messiah had come, but the Kingdom of God had not! To the average Jew, the answer was simple – Jesus wasn't really the Messiah, hence the world still awaited the coming of the Kingdom of God.

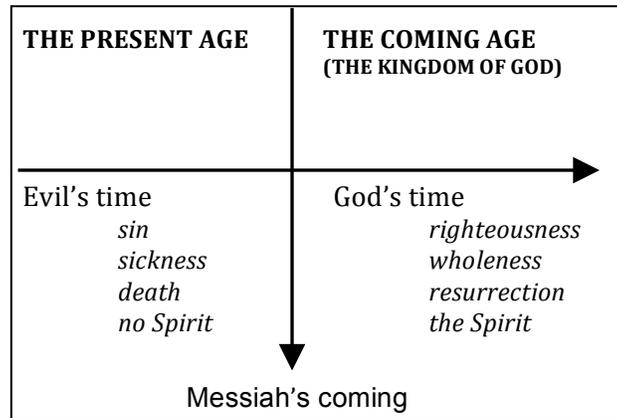


Figure 1. Jewish expectations in Jesus' day
(figures from Fee's *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*)

Already/Not yet

But Jesus' disciples had seen, touched, and eaten with the risen Christ. They knew that God's anointed had indeed come. Thus, the problem was not with Jesus but with the Jewish perspective depicted in Figure 1. In the writings of the New Testament, we see a new perspective emerging, as depicted in Figure 2.

Yes, Jesus was the Messiah. Yes, God's kingdom had come – but not yet in all its fullness! The time of renewal had begun with the Messiah's coming but the consummation of this transformation would await his return. The Christians came to understand that they lived "between times" when God's kingdom had come already, but not yet. I really can't overemphasize how important to our reading of the NT is our understanding of this "already/not yet" perspective. When Paul writes that Christians are the ones on whom the "ends of the ages have come" (1 Cor 10:11), he means exactly that! This framework determined everything about the early Christians – how they lived, how they thought, what they wrote, how they worshipped . . . everything. The new order had begun. They were new creations (2 Cor 5:17). They were now the people of the Spirit. . . and, truly, so are we!

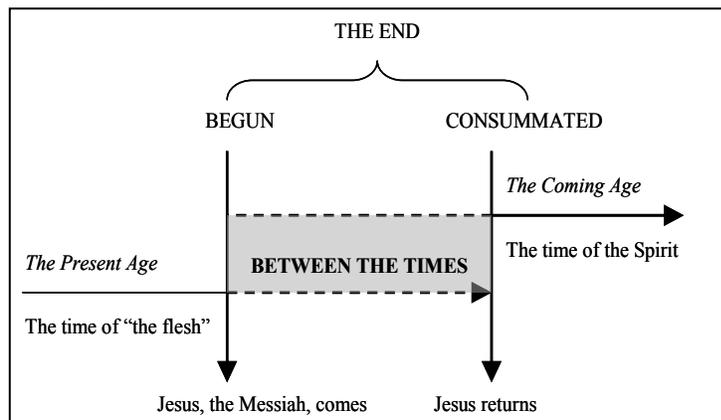


Figure 2. The Christians' new perspective: already/not yet

