

October 3, 2010

## *Living in the Light of Christ's Return*

### *Knowing and Loving the Truth*

#### **2 Thessalonians 2:1 – 12**

In this little letter, Paul was responding to what seems to be a crisis of faith among the Thessalonians. It was a young church, months old, and as we have seen they were suffering persecution and affliction for the sake of the gospel. And we've seen how Paul encouraged them that this suffering was fitting them for heaven, and that evil would not ultimately triumph, but God would bring His vengeance on those who were causing the suffering and their faith and endurance would be vindicated and rewarded in the end. And then he encourages them that he is praying for them and reminds them that all of this is that the name of the Lord Jesus would be glorified in them and that they would be glorified in them. **What this shows is that the way Paul deals with wavering faith and uncertain hearts is to give out a healthy dose of the truth.** In order to supply their hearts with more faith and help them persevere through persecution and suffering he teaches them the objective truth about God and the ways of God.

And now in chapter two, we see the same thing working: *Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to Him, we ask you, brothers, 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.* 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2 As in his previous letter, there were some strong misconceptions and ideas that were floating around about the coming of the Lord. The cause of all this confusion was a false teaching from those who claimed to have authority from the Holy Spirit and from the apostle, and they seemed to have produced letters, supposedly from Paul that upheld their view that the Day of the Lord had come.

They suggested that the persecutions and afflictions the Thessalonians were enduring were part of the judgements of the Day of the Lord and that the gathering of the saints had already happened and the Thessalonians had somehow missed it. So they were **shaken**. Literally the word means '**shaken out of one's mind**' and it implies that they were having a panic attack. Another word picture this conjures up is a ship that is cut adrift from its moorings. They were also '**alarmed**' – that is they were so shaken that they had become despondent and perhaps even in tears over this. Whatever these false teachers were spreading had the effect of shaking and alarming the saints to the point that they had lost the ability to think clearly and were agitated, anxious and fretful.

**So Paul responds with the truth:** *Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who 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.* 2 Thessalonians 2:3 – 4 At the root of emotional and mental distress is deceit. If our faith is shaken, if we lose our way, if we feel alarmed or anxious and despondent, it is because we have been deceived somehow. The antidote to deceit is the truth.

Think about it for a moment. What is it that steels our hearts against the lie that if we are experiencing suffering and affliction that God is somehow against us? It is the truth that suffering and affliction are actually ordained by God and they are working for us an eternal weight of glory. What is it that bolsters our faith in God when there seems to be too much month left at the end of the money? It is the truth of God's word that says: *'Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. GOD, the Lord, is my strength; He makes my feet like the deer's; He makes me tread on my high places.* Habakkuk 3:17-19

When our anxious thoughts alarm us, when we are tempted to despair, where do we go for help? Do we ravage the word of God for the answers from God, or do we just do the best we can and muddle through or give up and cry? We must be those who battle the lie of the devil with the truth of God's word. Satan is the great deceiver and everything he throws our way is designed to deceive us so that we get untethered from the truth like a ship from its moorings and drift away from God.

So Paul gives the Thessalonians a healthy dose of the truth. It is as if he told the Thessalonians: 'Don't be shaken, don't be alarmed – let me remind you of the truth about the coming of our Lord'. *For that day will not come, unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who 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.* 2 Thessalonians 2:3 – 4 In other words, Paul told them that two things had to happen before the Lord returns: **the apostasy must happen, and the man of lawlessness had to be revealed.** Before we get into those two things, I would like to clarify something about the coming of Christ and our gathering together with Him, or as some call it, the rapture.

There is a great part of evangelical Christianity today that believes that the coming of Christ will happen in two distinct stages. First, Christ will come part way, not all the way to the earth, and those who are alive and remaining will rise to meet Him in the air. Then they'll go to heaven with the Lord for seven years while the judgements of God are poured out on the earth for seven years, and then after the Great Tribulation is over, they return for final judgement. This is what is known as a '**pre-tribulational**' view because Christ is said to come for His church before the Great Tribulation, and although there are minor differences between various proponents of this view, they generally agree that things happen this way. This is a view really brought to prominence by Hal Lindsey's book, 'The Late Great Planet Earth', and popularized in the fiction series by Tim LaHaye called 'Left Behind'.

This in fact was the view I grew up with and accepted for a long time. And I want to assure you that if you hold this view you are in no way some sort of heretic. In fact in many ways I hope pre-tribs are right because it saves us from a lot of suffering and affliction. However, from my study of history and more importantly, the Scriptures, I found it increasingly difficult to maintain a pre-trib view and this passage here illustrates just one reason why. The saints in Thessalonica were shaken and alarmed thinking that the 'Day of the Lord was at hand. And for those who are pre-trib, the day of the Lord is the second half of the second coming of Christ after the tribulation and it is described in verse 8: *And 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.* 2 Thessalonians 2:8

And so the logical thing for Paul to say, if he was pre-trib, was: '**You know the day of the Lord hasn't come because you are still here, I am still here and the rapture hasn't happened yet**'. But he doesn't say that. Instead he says: '**You know Christ has not come because the apostasy and the man of lawlessness have yet to happen**'. In other words, if the rapture preceded the Day of the Lord, then all Paul had to say was '**We're still here**'. Instead he points them to what he had already taught them: *Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things?* 2 Thessalonians 2:5

Evidently there were some pre-trib teachers in Paul's day, and their teaching was shaking and alarming the saints instead of encouraging them. Which prompted Paul to set out the truth, to get the Thessalonian's ship of faith firmly tied to the moorings of Scripture and fill them with hope. What I think the Bible teaches about the Day of the Lord and the second coming of Christ and our gathering together with Him is that He is coming with His mighty angels in flaming fire to establish His earthly kingdom, gathering His people to Himself, and giving vindication and rest to His saints and vengeance and retribution to His enemies. That is all encompassed in the phrase: 'The Day of the Lord'. If you want to know more about this, I suggest you check out the messages on this we preached on 1 Thessalonians earlier this year.

From this and other passages, before the Day of the Lord comes, what Paul calls the **apostasy and the appearance of the man of lawlessness comes first.** The **apostasy**, or as some translations have it, the **falling away**, or as the ESV says, the '**rebellion**' could mean either a religious apostasy – that is a falling away from true religion, or it could be describing a rebellion against the truth. In any case, whichever it refers to, it is the truth that is at stake. Jesus seems to be referring to this in Matthew: *And then many will fall away [apostasize] and betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.* Matt. 24:10 – 14

Paul also tells Timothy: *Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, 1 Tim. 4:1 For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.* 2 Tim. 4:3 –4

In other words, the end of the age is characterized by a massive turning away from the truth – people devoting themselves to lies and listening to what tickles their fancy. **I don't think any age before this age was ever devoted more to the proposition that everybody has their own truth.** What is true for you is not necessarily true for me and vice versa. Countless books have been written on the subject and countless teachers have sprung up with the latest version of their truth. We are inundated by truth claims from every corner and each one is as valid as the next and the only sin we can commit is to challenge the truth claim of one another.

This is one reason why the gospel is so unpopular. It represents absolute claims on people's minds and wills and emotions. If Jesus is the only way to God, then all other ways are counterfeit and deceptive lies. If Jesus died for our sins, then we must be sinners guilty of and worthy of punishment. If God exists, we are not god. If God is true, then we cannot decide what is true. It's out of our hands, we have no say in it. We cannot fashion our own truth. Men have always sought their own truth in defiance of God's revealed truth, in fact he told the Thessalonians in verse seven that the mystery of lawlessness was already at work in his day. But Paul says that one of the things that needs to happen before the coming of Christ is **the apostasy. In other words one of the immediate indications of His return is an even greater turning away from the truth to embrace a lie.**

The other sign is the revelation of *the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who 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.* 2 Thessalonians 2:3 – 4 I will tell you right now I have no idea who this is. I put myself in the company of theologians like St. Augustine who said 'I **confess that I am entirely ignorant of what [Paul] means to say**'. The great Greek New Testament scholar Vincent said: '**I attempt no interpretaton of this passage as a whole, which I do not understand**'. So I would be on shaky ground at best to try and tell you who this guy was. There are many people who have put forward their idea but none of them are convincing, much less definitive.

I believe that **who he is is not as important as recognizing him when he comes**, and Paul gives six descriptive facts about this man. **First**, from verse 3, simply notice his name, the '**man of lawlessness**.' I think that we can infer from this that he is an individual person and that he embodies the spirit of rebellion against God's law—lawlessness. It is not that he is without some sense of law and order, in fact some think that he will be so keen on law and order that he will be a world dictator. Man of lawlessness refers to the fact that he will spurn the law of God.

**Secondly**, he is called the **son of destruction**. Because he rejects the law of God, his end is destruction, with all those sinners who have rejected God. In fact the definition of sin according to the apostle John is lawlessness. That is why we must guard ourselves from sin because that leads surely to destruction. **Third**, in verse 4, **the man of lawlessness will be in opposition to God and oppose all objects of worship except himself.** *who 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.* 2 Thessalonians 2:4 He will exalt himself, Paul says, and put himself forward as God. And as a means to that end it says he takes his seat in the temple of God, which may mean the church, since Paul calls the church the temple of God. He may, as some speculate, put himself forward as some world-church leader.

**Fourth**, in verses 6–7, **the man of lawlessness is now being restrained until his appointed time.** He is not in control; God is. *And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way.* 2 Thessalonians 2:6 – 7 His is an appointed time and will be very short, and who or what the restrainer is no one knows for sure, but ultimately it is the power of God that sets the times and seasons for the last days.

The fifth thing we know about him is in verse 8: *And 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.* 2 Thessalonians 2:8 Certainly this is not someone real Christians should fear. One little puff of air from the mouth of Jesus and the man of lawlessness will be destroyed.

**Finally**, we see from verse 9 and 10, the man of lawlessness is not Satan, but comes in the energy and power of Satan with supernatural power and signs and wonders. *The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.* 2 Thessalonians 2:9-10 I take this to be a warning **not to make signs and wonders the ground of your faith or the standard of truth.**

**All these signs and wonders are counterfeit not because they aren't miraculous—they have satanic power—but because they don't point to truth.** Ultimately they lie. They are no more to be trusted than the spirit of prophecy in verse two that told the Thessalonians that the day of the Lord had come. Supernatural power. Supernatural signs and supernatural wonders are not by themselves evidence of the power of God or testimonies to His truth. There are counterfeit signs and wonders working in the world today and we need to know the truth and love the truth so that we will not be deceived into thinking that is God at work in those things.

The reason people are deceived, says Paul, is *because they refused to love the truth and so be saved*. We must not just know the truth, we must love the truth. We can know all about the coming of Christ, the gathering of the saints together with Him in the air, the great apostasy and the man of lawlessness, and yet if we do not love the truth we can still be deceived. **To know the truth and to love the truth is to know and love the author of truth** and when you love someone you naturally want to spend massive amounts of time in their company. Is that true of you? Do you not only know the truth but love the truth? Do you know Christ and love Christ this morning.

Even now the mystery of lawlessness is at work, luring and seducing even those who know the truth away to destruction. How much more will that be the case when the man of lawlessness appears with supernatural power and signs and wonders? Don't think that this guy is going to wear a sign that says, '**Watch out, deceiver at work**' or that these signs and wonders will appear in any way demonic or devilish. The apostle of Satan will appear like Satan so often appears, as an angel of light to deceive if possible even the elect. So we need to be those who know and love the truth. Those who don't, Paul says, *Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.* 2 Thessalonians 2:11 – 12

The only sure and certain defense against the apostasy and the man of lawlessness is a deeper love for God and for His truth. If we know and love the truth, if we treasure Christ above all things, if He is our portion and our inheritance, if we love the glory of His gospel and the supremacy of His rule, then we will not be deceived by the man of lawlessness, and we will not be those who fall away from the truth, and our love will not grow cold and we will endure to the end and be saved.

If you are not certain that you can say that this morning – if you cannot say 'I know Jesus Christ and I love Him' then you are in a precarious state. The mystery of lawlessness is coming to a powerful climax and we will soon be deluged with a veritable tsunami of deceit and delusion, and those who are already perishing will not see and embrace the truth and so be saved. Today is the day of salvation and now is the hour. I urge you by the mercies of God to know and embrace Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. He is the only truth in this age of deception.

*Our gracious God and faithful Father,*

*You are our portion forever, our exceeding great joy, the strength of our hearts, the well-spring of life and the forever truth. May the truth that is in Your dear Son illuminate in us all that is dark, establish in us all that is shaken, assure in us all that is alarmed, comfort in us all that is despondent and wavering, accomplish in us all Your purpose and glorify in us the name of Jesus. Conquer all other loves with the surpassing love of Christ and break our bondage to the suicidal deceit of sin with generous applications of Your truth. Let us be those who know and love the truth, who treasure Christ above all things and love the glory of His gospel and the supremacy of His rule. Grant that we would delight in God through Jesus Christ, spreading His joy through the gospel to all people we pray in the precious and powerful name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*