

Clarity and Comfort

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. (1 Thessalonians 4:13 ESV)

So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter. (2 Thessalonians 2:15 ESV)

The Man of Lawlessness

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2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to 2 Thessalonians 2.

Our text this morning is widely considered to be the most challenging passage in all of the Apostle Paul's letters.

But, if I could encourage you, many of us are coming into this text with an advantage. Raise your hand if you were with us while we walked through the book of Daniel at the beginning of the year. Do you remember the second half of Daniel when we worked through those difficult apocalyptic passages? Do you remember when we talked about little horns and big horns and Antiochus IV Epiphanes and how those antichrist figures all pointed forward to a figure who was to come? Do you remember when we talked about the empires of Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome and the Archangel Michael?

Well, in today's text, Paul is picking up the language from those difficult Daniel passages and he's giving us a fuller glimpse into the things that are to come. Our study in the Daniel series has positioned us to understand and apply the argument that Paul is making here.

In our current cultural moment in evangelicalism, there is a phobia of eschatology. We treat this study of the end times with suspicion and act as if it should only ever be discussed in seminary classrooms. But, let's notice something: This is now the THIRD time that Paul has picked up the

topic of eschatology in his letters to the young, freshly planted, Thessalonian church. Remember, Paul was only able to spend a brief amount of time equipping these new believers – maybe 6 months – and yet he obviously devoted a great amount of that time preparing them to anticipate and recognize the final days before the coming return of Christ.

The Apostle Paul obviously believes that this matters. He was teaching this theology to BABY Christians! He was building this into the foundation of their faith. It would appear that if we choose to neglect the study of eschatology, we do so at our own peril.

When 2020 began, we preached a series that walked through our church's vision statement. We identify as a church that is:

Watching and Waiting for the Return of the Lord

Jesus told parable after parable reminding his people that they needed to live with one eye on the present and one eye on the future. That's who we want to be.

So would you look with me to 2 Thessalonians 2:1-17. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today:

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers,² 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.³ Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction,⁴ 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.⁵ Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things?⁶ And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time.⁷ 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.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.⁹ The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders,¹⁰ and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.¹¹ Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false,¹² in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. ¹⁴To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁵So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.

¹⁶Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, ¹⁷comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word. (2 Thessalonians 2:1-17 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

I mentioned that this is a difficult passage, but in reality, the main point of this text – the PURPOSE of this passage – is crystal clear. Look again at that concluding paragraph:

¹⁶Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, ¹⁷**comfort your hearts and establish them** in every good work and word. (2 Thessalonians 2:16-17 ESV)

Paul wrote to bring CLARITY and COMFORT.

This church had heard some false teaching that really unsettled them. This letter was Paul's response. We learn about the nature of the false teaching in verses 1 and 2:

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, ²not 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 ESV)

The church is “shaken in mind” and “alarmed” because someone has told the Thessalonians that the day of the Lord has already come. And he seems to have done so claiming Paul's authority.

We're not sure exactly what that looked like. Perhaps this false teacher wrote a letter, signed Paul's name to it, and then began teaching from it in the churches. Perhaps he was preaching a bad interpretation of Paul's first letter. Regardless, the church was shaken.

Remember, these are NEW believers. These are first generation Christians who are still attempting to lay a foundation for their faith. We know from Paul's first letter that the Thessalonians eagerly

longed to witness the return of King Jesus. The fear that their deceased loved ones might miss out on that glorious day was the primary reason why Paul needed to write the first letter.

So, imagine how disheartening it must have been for them when a teacher stood up and declared, “I have a message from Paul: The day of the Lord has already come!”

They must have been thinking, “Has this all been for nothing? Did we miss out on his return because of our sin? Are we even God’s people? I thought we were going to see our resurrected loved ones on that day!”

They were shaken.

Our text this morning was written – not to provide fuel for speculation – but to provide clarity and comfort for a church that feared that they had missed the coming of their King.

Clarity

Look again at verse 3. There, Paul writes:

Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless **the rebellion** comes first, and **the man of lawlessness** is revealed, the son of destruction, (2 Thessalonians 2:3 ESV)

Paul highlights two signs that the church will witness before Jesus returns once and for all – two events that must take place before the Day of the Lord. Then, he goes on to write in verse 5:

Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? (2 Thessalonians 2:5 ESV)

“You KNOW these things, church! Don’t be alarmed. Don’t be so easily shaken. Don’t be so quick to forget all that I taught you!”

So, what are these two signs that will appear before the day of the Lord?

First, Paul says, you will see:

1. The great rebellion

When Paul refers to “the rebellion” he is almost certainly referring back to Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 24. Jesus said:

And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. ⁷For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. ⁸All these are but the beginning of the birth pains.

⁹“Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. ¹⁰And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. ¹¹And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. ¹²And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. ¹³But the one who endures to the end will be saved. (Matthew 24:6-13 ESV)

As the Day of the Lord approaches, we will see a spirit of rebellion in the world unlike anything that we have ever witnessed before. We will see natural disasters, wars, tribulations and mass deception. Jesus describes these as “the beginning of the birth pains” and we have been feeling this ever since Jesus established his church, haven’t we?

But then these birth pains will eventually culminate in a great apostasy – a great rebellion and defection. We will consider the leader of this rebellion – the man of lawlessness – in a moment, but for now I want to highlight the effect of his great deceptive power. Paul says:

The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, ¹⁰and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. ¹¹Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, ¹²in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness. (2 Thessalonians 2:9-12 ESV)

Look closely at verse 11. Paul is quick to remind us that GOD is the One who will send this delusion! Here’s an important observation: Even at the HEIGHT of the rebellion – God is still in absolute control! The man of lawlessness will work miraculous signs and will deceive many, but he will only exercise as much power and deceive as many people as God so DECREES.

I imagine that raises a big question: How could God send a strong delusion?

To answer that question, let's take a moment to consider how this scene fits into the Bible as a whole. The episode that Paul is describing here is the very last chapter before God will come to put an end to sin once and for all. Before we consider the end, let's remember back to the beginning.

How did sin come into the world? Let's look back at Genesis chapter 3 – the passage we refer to as “the fall”:

So when the woman **saw that the tree was good for food**, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be **desired to make one wise**, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. (Genesis 3:6 ESV)

She SAW. She DESIRED. And so, she TOOK. She rejected the goodness and the wisdom of God so that she could pursue her own sinful desires. That is sin in a nutshell and that is how it was introduced into our world.

In today's text, we catch a glimpse into sin's final chapter.

God sends the man of lawlessness and allows him to attempt to deceive mankind one last time. Across the world MANY believe the lie and fall into the snare. Why?

because **they refused to love the truth** and so be saved. (2 Thessalonians 2:10b ESV)

They refused to LOVE THE TRUTH. They refused to take God at His Word. They refused to rest in His goodness and to satisfy themselves with His generous provision. So, God sends the deceiver to expose their idolatrous hearts:

in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth **but had pleasure in unrighteousness**. (2 Thessalonians 2:12 ESV)

In this final scene before God will finally judge sin and restore the new heavens and the new earth, he essentially sends the serpent back into the garden to expose the hearts of men.

And, Paul tells us here, many will once again believe the lie. They will SEE, they will DESIRE, and they will TAKE to their own eternal ruin. There will be a mass falling away. The story of sin will end just as it began. As one commentator notes:

Therefore, the followers of the lawless one are on their way to destruction not because of forces outside their control but because of their own deliberate rejection of the truth of the gospel.¹

This ensuing rebellion will be worldwide and, as Jesus describes it, it will be unlike anything that this world has ever seen. That great rebellion will be a sign that the Day of the Lord is near.

Second, Paul reminds the church that the Lord will not return until we see:

2. The man of lawlessness

Paul says to the church:

For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction,⁴ 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 2:3b-4 ESV)

This figure is described with a number of titles in the Bible. In Revelation he is described as the beast, Jesus describes him as the Antichrist, Daniel points forward and describes him as the little horn and here Paul calls him the man of lawlessness. In these cumulative texts, he is described as an *agent* of the devil who acts *on behalf* of the devil with the *power* of the devil to deceive the nations.

Paul is OBVIOUSLY drawing from the language of the prophet Daniel here. In Daniel's "little horn" prophecy, he pointed to Antiochus IV Epiphanes as a prototype of the one who was to

¹ Jeffrey A.D. Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 541.

come. In case you've forgotten, Antiochus was a particularly wicked Seleucid ruler leader who claimed divine status for himself and who actively opposed the worship of the living God.

Daniel, in chapter 8, explained that this "little horn" was a TYPE or a FORETASTE of a final antichrist that was to come. Daniel prepared us to watch for THAT man – that final Antichrist who would be in full what all of the little "a" antichrists were in part. It is THAT figure – that final, culminating Antichrist – who Paul is describing in today's text.

Paul says, "Don't you remember what I taught you? When you see that man of lawlessness – that man who marches into the temple and claims DIVINE status for himself – that man who opposes the worship of the living God – THEN you will know that the Day of the Lord is at hand."

That's what he's referring to in verse 4. He's not suggesting that the Antichrist is going to literally rebuild a temple in Jerusalem. He's saying that this man will be what Antiochus was AND MORE. As one commentator notes:

The verse says more about the character of the man of lawlessness than the location where he will make his appearance.²

Another commentator notes:

The same phrase, *God's temple*, is found nine other times in the New Testament outside of 2 Thessalonians and it almost always refers either to Christ or the church. Not once in Paul (five other times outside 2 Thess) does it refer to a literal temple in Israel of the past or the future.³

Daniel and Paul are teaching us that a man will come who will boast of his great strength and power – who will claim the authority of God Himself – but who will be convincingly and embarrassingly defeated. C.S. Lewis in his Chronicles of Narnia series perfectly pictures this figure as a donkey dressed up like a lion. (story) Paul tells the Thessalonians in verse 8:

² Jeffrey A.D. Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 522.

³ G.K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 207-208.

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 ESV)

“Don’t fear him!” Paul says. “He will boast and he will roar but ONE LITTLE WORD SHALL FELL HIM! He’s a dolled-up donkey. He’s a little horn with a big mouth. Jesus will triumph over him WITH A BREATH!”

Now, we can’t move on from the man of lawlessness without dealing with verses 6-7. Look there with me:

And you know **what is restraining him now** so that he may be revealed in his time. ⁷ 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 ESV)

This man of lawlessness is currently being restrained. But who or what is restraining him?

There are really only two convincing answers to this question. One answer suggests that the final tyranny of the man of lawlessness is currently being held back by human government. That is a plausible answer because Romans 13 does teach us that government is used by God to restrain evil. The other answer suggests that there is an angelic being restraining the lawless one – something like what we see in Daniel 10 where the archangel Michael battled with a demon referred to as the Prince of Persia.

I would suggest to you this morning that the answer is BOTH. In fact, isn’t that what we learned when we studied Daniel? Do you remember how, in chapters 10-12, the curtain was peeled back, and we learned that there are spiritual battles taking place behind the scenes of all of our physical battles? For example, in Daniel 10 we read about how the archangel Michael was sent by God to answer Daniel’s prayer but that he was restrained for a time by the Prince of Persia – a demonic power of some sort. The earthly effect of that struggle was then unpacked in Daniel 11 where we read about the rising and falling of world empires. Commentator Jeffrey Weima notes:

The apostle's argument follows exactly the chronological schema found in Daniel 10-12: eschatological tribulation will come upon God's people only when Michael, the guardian of God's people, ends his protecting or restraining work.⁴

I think that's exactly it. Michael is currently restraining the devil for a season. As a result, there is a semblance of order in the world, and that order is kept by human government. The gospel continues to go forth to all nations and the kingdom of God is advancing. But in the final days, God has ordained that the chain be released for a short time. In Revelation 20, John describes a similar scene. He writes:

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain.² And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years,³ and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. **After that he must be released for a little while.** (Revelation 20:1-3 ESV)

If our interpretation is correct, then the coming of the lawless one will coincide with that time when the enemy is "released for a little while." That will be a time of great rebellion and deception. That will be a time unlike we have ever seen or ever will see again in this world. That time will culminate with the return of the King who will vanquish his foes and sentence the enemy and all of those who were willfully deceived to an eternal punishment.

But whether the restraining power is the archangel Micheal, or human government, or whichever other solution you might suggest, the point is that THE DAY OF THE LORD HAS NOT YET ARRIVED. THAT is why Paul is writing to these brothers and sisters. This isn't meant to tickle our curiosities. It's meant to lift up a church that feared that they had missed the return of their King! Paul says, "NO! You haven't missed him! Don't you remember what Jesus said? Don't you remember what I taught you? Before he returns there will be a great rebellion and a man of lawlessness. Have you witnessed any of that yet? No? Then press on and don't let these false teachers discourage you!"

There is an extremely important lesson here for the church: Eschatology MATTERS! This church was shaken in mind and alarmed because they hadn't done their homework. Their eschatology was

⁴ Jeffrey A.D. Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 532.

lacking, and it left them susceptible to false teaching. History repeats itself. We need to be students of the whole counsel of God's Word.

Finally, after Paul brought clarity to the church and sorted through their confusion, he also ministered some words of comfort.

Comfort

Look with me at verse 13. There Paul writes:

But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. ¹⁴ To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14 ESV)

The first comfort that Paul gives to this church is one that he has mentioned time after time in these two letters. He tells them:

1. God chose you!

And God keeps what He chooses!

If God wants you – if God DIED for you – then do you really think He's going to lose you to a time of cultural rebellion? Do you think He's going to lose you like a pawn in a chess match with the devil? NO CHANCE! Times will get tough, but He will hold you fast!

Listen: Meditation on God's electing, choosing, keeping love is the answer to so many of the problems that we face. I've heard it said that we talk too much about election in this church, but I can't help but wonder how those people would feel if they ever sat under the Apostle Paul's ministry. He comes back to this ALL THE TIME!

God CHOSE YOU! Your standing with God is not contingent upon your merit, or your feelings, or your intellect, or your ability to persevere in the faith – no – your relationship with God is

secured by the blood of His Son Jesus Christ whom He sent to die on the cross to make atonement for your sins before you EVER DID A THING!

When Jesus returns, you're going to know about it. Do you know why? Because you are his blood-bought, chosen-before-the-foundation-of-the-world, precious-in-his-holy-sight people! False teachers are going to come. They're going to say some ridiculous things. But don't let any of that nonsense cause you to let go of this comfort.

God chose you.

And finally, Paul gives this one last comfort:

2. You have all the revelation that you need

Now, I want to be careful that you don't hear that the wrong way. Remember that, at the end of his first letter Paul warned the Thessalonians not to despise prophecy. From time to time, it appears that God will speak through our brothers and sisters to build us up in the faith, and we are thankful for that gift! However, we have all of the information that we NEED to live the life that God has called us to live right here in the Scriptures. Paul commends the church in verse 15:

So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter. (2 Thessalonians 2:15 ESV)

Remember, the confusion in Thessalonica was caused by people who claimed to be bringing a fresh new word from Paul. Here, Paul says: "No, no, no. You have all the information you need. Don't let the "new revelations" or the novel interpretations throw you off the path. God is holding fast to you; now hold fast to His Word that He has given to you."

When you listen to that latest theologian who claims to have found a reason why you can disregard whole swaths of Scripture, you put yourself in peril. When you indulge in those YouTube clips that incite doubt and speculation about the veracity of the Scriptures, you put yourself in peril. And not only do you put yourself in peril, but you dishonour God by distrusting His provision.

Imagine a father who gave his son a sword. He looked his son in the eye and said, “Son, you are going to need this in the days to come, and I promise you that this sword will NEVER fail you. With this sword, you will not lose a single battle.”

Yet, when the son left his father’s house, he immediately took the sword to be inspected by a blacksmith. The blacksmith, with suspect motive, replied, “This sword needs some work. Why don’t you let me heat it up and hammer it into my liking? THEN it will be formidable!”

Still unsure, the boy asked his friends to weigh in, and they suggested that he trade it in for another, or perhaps apply some new paint to the outdated hilt.

He tossed and turned at night wondering if and how he should modify the blade. His father said that it was perfectly sufficient, but the world said otherwise. Who should he trust?

But before he could make any of these suggested adjustments, the war was upon him. It was there, on the battlefield, that he discovered that the sword which his peers had been so quick to criticize was everything that his father promised it would be. It deflected every blow. It struck down every foe.

Friends, the world has plenty of opinions about the word of God, and they always will. They want to add to it. They want to subtract from it. That’s what was happening in Thessalonica. A few “new revelations” about the Day of the Lord nearly shipwrecked the faith of these new believers.

Stop listening to every fresh wave of novelty and nonsense. Stop sanding off and polishing out all of the pieces that don’t fit with your cultural preferences. Don’t listen to the scoundrels that would seek to add their thoughts to God’s living and active Word. You already have everything that you need!

Stand firm!

Hold fast!

And as you hold fast to His truth, remember that He is holding onto you! What an ironic tragedy it is that choosing and keeping love of God is one of the parts of the Bible that often gets sanded away first.

Many will be deceived by the Antichrist when he comes, and many are currently deceived by the spirit of antichrist which is at work in the world today. Many will find themselves unprepared for the Day of the Lord when it comes.

But not you! Because God has chosen you, and He has given you everything that you need for clarity and comfort.

¹⁶Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, ¹⁷comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word. (2 Thessalonians 2:16-17 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.