

Back to The Future
2 Thessalonians 2:1-12
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At this time, I want to invite our children who are four years-old to 1st grade to be excused to their time of children's church as we together turn to 2 Thessalonians 2. If we were to read the letter of 2 Thessalonians out loud, as one commentator said, "It would take us all of about 15 minutes." It tells us a little bit about the ad hoc situational nature of Paul's letters. He was responding to the situation on the ground as he received reports of the church. And in 1 Thessalonians, the first letter which we looked at together, he looks at the day of the Lord. And these two letters have been the ground of a great deal of ink being spilt over the centuries in trying to ask the question, what in the world is Paul talking about?

And that's a good question. What is Paul talking about? And this doesn't make it any easier because this passage today contains one of the most cryptic and difficult to understand material in all of the entire letters of Paul. So, you're not going to leave here today with a lot of answers because there isn't a lot of consensus except around some themes. But he does return to the whole subject of going back to the future.

You remember that great 1980's film, right? He just wanted to go to the lake with his girlfriend. He just wanted to have a rock n' roll band. But faced with a situation, he was disrupted in his life. And lo and behold, he discovered a way to travel back in time. And in doing so, he learned that if you change the past, you change the present. And that begins to unfold all kinds of consequences, many of which will be unwelcomed. If you've not seen the movie, I'm not going to give anything else away. There you go. Go see it.

But the same is the case here. These Christians are seeking to walk with the Lord. And yet, we discover that they in their walk with the Lord have been disrupted and concerned about what they should believe with regard to the Lord's return. And they understand that if this has happened in the past, then this does affect their present. And the reason why Paul gives himself to the subject is he recognized the same thing. That which has happened in the past affects the present, which is the whole nature of the gospel. Because Jesus has died and because He was buried and because He was raised on the third day, that changes everything. If the resurrection didn't happen, then we are to be pitied above all people. Because if the resurrection didn't happen, then what we're doing in the present in this very moment is a waste of time. And so, we need to be established in the truth. And he wants to talk about what has happened and what will happen.

And so, we look at 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12. Hear now, God's word.

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. 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, 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. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? 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. 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. 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. 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. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Goodnight. Good morning. We'll see you later. Let's pray, may the Lord give us wisdom.

Lord, we ask you by your Holy Spirit, open up this, Your word, to us. Open it because it is your truth. You mean it for our building up, for our strength. Lord, we ask that you would establish us in this truth in such a way that we would walk in greater dependence on you. And above all else, may we be able with all the saints today and in all eternity give praise to the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Lord of life. Help us, we pray. And help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

You see in your outline following the outline of the text, it says, do not be shaken verses 1-2; do not be surprised, verses 3-7; and finally, do not doubt, verses 8-12. Do not be shaken, do not be surprised, do not doubt.

So, as we look at verses 1-2, one of the things which he establishes very clearly, he establishes the situation at hand. Yet, it is a slight shift. You'll recall in the first letter if you were with us, one of the things that he was addressing was the concern that there were those who had perished who had converted to the Lord Jesus. And the concern of some in the church was that because they had died prior to the Lord's return, that they would not be able to participate in the resurrection of the Lord. Paul rightly corrects this concern, and says no, that is not the case. That all those who are in the Lord Jesus will experience resurrection whether they have fallen asleep – that is his metaphor for death – but they, too, will be raised as will those who are alive at the time of Christ's coming again.

But those were not the only concerns within the church. There were other concerns within the church. And this is what he is addressing, which is simply that there are those who either by letter, according to verse 2, or by word of prophecy had given the teaching that the resurrection and the coming of the Lord had already happened. And they were rightly concerned, if that is in fact what has happened.

Now, this may seem far removed from us. But I was reminded last weekend when I was in Philadelphia that it is not far removed from us because as I was walking the streets with River Hill choir, I learned that it was inundated with Jehovah's Witnesses. Jehovah Witnesses teach that the Lord Jesus returned privately in 1914. Now, that was after a number of failed prophecies. And they still teach this very thing because they have shifted not from the word of truth alone, but they've established other letters which they adhere to, other teachings. And herein lies the main, why? The "why" of this teaching is not to get at all of the "what," if you will, of the Lord's return. But it's to get at the "why."

The "why" is because we cannot shift from the truth. So, he says, "Do not be shaken." It doesn't mean, do not be shaken in your knowledge. Do not be shaken by believing some other teachers that are not apostolic. When he says, "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." What he is establishing is both a command that is inherent within these two verses and also an application point.

First, the inherent doctrine is the inherent doctrine of establishing apostolic authority and the written letters of the apostles that had been received by the church as having authentic apostolic authorship or connected as those with the apostolic party. And so, what Paul is saying here is if we didn't write it, don't believe it. Because what they're establishing is something completely different than what we have taught you. Hold to the truth of what you have received even if it comes with great passion, great demonstration, whether by spirit or by word or even by letter. Particularly, if it's seeking to overturn that which we have taught you.

There's the application as well, inherent in that. It is not our emotion that establishes the word of truth. In other words, it's not because I feel that the word of God is truth that makes it truth. It's not that the word of truth works for me, so then therefore, it's truth. That is one of my greatest concerns for us as a people and for the church of Jesus Christ. And I'm not alone in that. I was taught this by Francis Schaefer. Francis Schaefer established well over 40 years ago that his greatest concern for the church at the end of the 20th century is that we would depart from truth and we would be beholden to what seems to work for us.

But Paul says, oftentimes, the truth doesn't work for us. Oftentimes, it tells us the truth, that we will experience persecution and suffering because of the name of Christ. It will cause us, perhaps, to lose friendships which were once dear to us, but now because we're followers of Christ, we're rejected, or we're scoffed at. Oh, you believe these myths. Oh, please, this is the 21st century. Or, we'll subtly fall into the trap of: well, I believe the Bible to be true because thus far in my life, it's gone pretty well.

That is not what establishes truth. What establishes truth, yes, I recognize it may sound like circular logic, but allow the Bible on its own terms to establish what it says it is. It says that it is the word of God. It says that it has been uttered through the teachers and the prophets of the Lord. And Paul says here, do not depart from it. Do not be shaken or alarmed. Hold to the truth.

He then goes into this idea of what is about to happen, because now he needs to counter what they've been taught. And here, "do not be surprised," meaning the rebellion has not yet happened. The Lord's return has not yet happened. And so, then he establishes through very interesting language. So, let's look for a moment at what he is saying beginning in verse 3. "Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first." What is the rebellion? Well, the rebellion is led by this man of lawlessness in verse 3, but then changes the language a little bit when he calls him the "lawless one" in verse 8.

But here in verse 3, it's "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." Here, Paul is drawing on the language of Daniel 11:36. Daniel himself prophesied that there would be this antichrist, this one who is a man of lawlessness who opposes all that which should be worshipped and establishes himself as one who is to be worshipped. Now, here, Paul appropriates that language. Jesus even appeals to it in the gospel of Matthew. Jesus says that the prophecy of Daniel was not yet completely fulfilled and is yet still to happen. Here, Paul goes one step further and says, hey, the Lord's not going to return until this happens.

Now, we need to take into mind verse 5. It says, "Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things?" So, here, Paul is referring to an in-person verbal teaching which he had with the church which means there's a gap between what Paul is saying here and what we're able to know. We're coming into the middle of a conversation only half of which we are hearing, and it's not even the half that gives us all the details. But what he is establishing is that there will be a great rebellion.

Verse 5 has not been enough invitation to humility for teachers and theologians throughout the ages across theological traditions to try to peer into this to figure out, who is this man of lawlessness? Who is this one? And then secondly, who is the one who will restrain him? That's verse 7. "Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way." So, wait a second. There's someone who's restraining the man of lawlessness, but then that person will be removed? So, there is mystery here.

Now, the way we understand mystery is, we can't know it. That's not how the Greeks understood mystery. The idea of mystery is that which has not yet been revealed. It's a very different thing. So, what Paul is essentially saying to the church is, listen, I've taught you all the details before – which we're not privy to. We also know that it's not yet been revealed. We also know that he doesn't tell us who the man of lawlessness is. So, that is the second invitation to humility. We need to stop and say, we don't know.

But that's not been enough, has it? Because we can go all the way back to the Old Testament after Daniel's prophecy. Just consider from that point to now, these are the folks who have been considered to be the man of lawlessness or the antichrist, or the one representing the antichrist. There was General Pompeii, Roman general, in 63 B.C. used these words to set himself up as one to be worshipped. Caligula in 40 A.D. also established himself as one who is to be worshiped. In fact, one could say that about all the Roman leaders. There was the Jewish war that maybe Jesus was referring to between 66 and 70 A.D. where the temple was finally destroyed. That is considered to be a possible candidate for the lawlessness. They are not so much a person, but an event, a rebellion. And then from there you have Nero, a very evil leader who sought to persecute the church of Jesus Christ in very horrific ways. There have been various popes who have been seen as the man of lawlessness. Napoleon was considered one. Keiser Wilhelm, Hitler, Stalin, and whoever your most hated politician is.

The point is, we are trying to find definitive answers for who this man of lawlessness is, but the scriptures have not told us. What is has established is that, do not be surprised. And here, he's writing, it's not the Christians who will be deceived. It's those who do not believe, who have rejected the truth of Jesus Christ, who will be deceived. But he's saying to them, do not be surprised because this rebellion has not yet happened. Fortunately, there has been, if you will, a restraining.

And now, here's opinion, pure opinion. Having done the reading, have us pastors talking about it and leaning on our own training, the word there in verse 7, "only he who knows restrains," the "he" there is both neuter but it's also masculine which means it can be a person or it can be a pressure, a situation. Which is it? Well, whatever it is, it will be removed out of the way. To a degree, I have sort of landed in my own understanding that the one who restrains the man of lawlessness and the general outbreak of violence is really the establishment of justice through the state, various forms of government. Because the various forms of laws around the world, yes, have been the source of evil. But they've also be ones that have restrained a lot of violence as well. But there will be an overthrowing of that power, that there will be such a violence and such an outbreak of joy in wickedness that law will be overthrown. And at that time is the man of lawlessness to be revealed, whoever he or it might be. But it is very clear that it is under satanic power.

Now, thanks be to God, thanks be to God, that Satan himself is a fallen angel, meaning he is a created being which means he does not have the same power as the Lord. He is not everywhere present, he is not all powerful, and he is not all-knowing which means he's not God. He doesn't know everything you're thinking in your mind, yet he's still powerful because he doesn't need to know what's in our minds to tempt us. For we are tempted according to our ways. And so, he is very much as work through various powers to raise up opposition against the Lord God. And this will happen as the antichrist is the one who is revealed and there will be a rebellion. But thanks be to God this will happen, do not be surprised.

Let me pause here before I go any further. If you're new to this church, you may be thinking to yourself, wow, this is wacky. I get it. Let me borrow the language of a greater pastor of a different generation, John Stott. John Stott in quoting opposition to the teaching of these things quoted another man who said, "Only those who believe the legend of the antichrist really are only to be found among the lower classes of the Christian community among sex and eccentric individuals and fanatics." Stott responded by saying, "If that is the case, then I for one would be happy to be numbered among the lower classes of eccentrics and fanatics. I do believe in the reality of Satan."

I do believe that the scriptures teach that he has set himself up against the Lord God. That he is the one who is the father of lies including that he doesn't exist. He is the one who seeks to distract, to destroy, to tear down, and to oppose all that which the Lord has called good. Satan is never original. He is only a thief. He takes all that which God has called good and all that which God has created, and he seeks to turn it upside down for our own joy, but he really leads us to destruction. The scriptures teach that he is real. The scriptures teach that he is opposed to Jesus and that he will lead a rebellion.

But I also believe this. Let's look together at verse 8. In verse 8, you hear this great establishment of: do not doubt. "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." That the lawless one will be revealed, that the rebellion and the revolt will take place but will not be victorious in the end. At His revealing, Christ will be revealed, and He will come again, and He will bring victory in His wings. He will take to Himself that which Paul has already taught us. He will take to Himself all those who believe in His name and unite them to Himself whether they are dead in their grave or that are alive, and they will be resurrected, given new bodies, new minds, and the world will be renewed and restored in a new heavens and a new earth. And that He will be victorious.

But it will also come, as well, with the Lord's judgement. And that is where he also turns. It's not only: do not doubt that Jesus will be victorious. Also understand that the Lord will allow the lawless one to deceive and that those all with the wicked – now, here, the "wicked" is not a general wickedness. It is those who have opposed the Lord, who have rejected His truth, and reject Jesus as Lord and Savior and find themselves enjoying in leaning into wickedness. It becomes a pursuit which we learn in verse 12, "in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness," or pleasure in wickedness.

Now, notice what it says. "Therefore, God sends them a strong delusion," it's not that the Lord delights in allowing others to be deceived but understand their judgement has already come. They have rejected Him as God, they have rejected His Son as Savior, they have rejected the word of truth, and therefore find themselves establishing themselves in their own truth. And He will allow them to be deceived and will allow the great deceiver to continue in his deception of them because they will get what they've always wanted. What they've wanted is to be God. And what they will find is that they will be god, lowercase "g," of that which they wanted. That is, knowing that He is Lord but never experiencing His grace, knowing that He is Lord, but it's being established only in His judgement and being under the one which they gave themselves to even though they did not realize it.

And that is the problem with pleasure in wickedness. I never in a million years would've thought that what I was doing was wickedness before I knew the Lord. Oh, sure, I tried to put it on a balance scale. I'm not as bad as... But the truth is, I had departed. I had rejected the Lord. And I enjoyed it. Although, at the time, I wouldn't have thought it as such. Only now as I look back at before I came to know Christ, how much I hated Christians and enjoyed it. I loved the ridicule. But also, how quietly and desperately longing I was for something more. I was utterly and profoundly lost, and yet I was built up and puffed up in my own pride.

Some of you may be just like that who are sitting here who are sitting here this morning. This is a hard word. But this word is only for those who ultimately reject Christ. In the name of Christ, I invite you to know the one who is not the father of lies, but the Father of grace and love, the Father of forgiveness and redemption, the one who says to us, yes, you have an end, and that end is eternity to know me and to know life at its fullest. Now, you are lost because of your rebellion, but you will know my grace in redemption. He invites you today to know Him because the promise is do not doubt, that the Lord will be victorious, but His victory will also come with judgement that not only will the man of lawlessness be defeated at His appearing, so those who have rejected the Lord will be judged in all of their wickedness. But thanks be to God, today is a day of grace. And He invites you.

And if you are a Christian, I want to remind you of a couple of things before we close. First, our discomfort in the present does not change the promises of God. Someone else's passionate conviction or word of prophecy, no matter how eloquent or passionate in its delivery should never be considered truth if it departs from the word of truth. And no amount of our present discomfort changes the will or the promises of God.

Secondly, from the youngest to the oldest, we are to be established in the word of truth over emotion and over speculation. Where the Lord has not yet revealed, we ought to humbly stay away but

receive it as a word of truth and ask that the Holy Spirit would lead us in all truth, John 14, to seek to walk. Because remember this, not one ounce of this letter, no matter how inscrutable it might be, no amount of any prophesying of the Lord's return ever once changed the call to preach the gospel. Not one ounce of the prophecy of the Lord's return ever changed the work of the church. We are to always preach the gospel because the Lord's return is up to Him. Until He comes, we await His return, but we do so faithfully preaching the gospel, but also by God's grace, living it out.

This is what we are called to do established in the truth. The word is the word, but it's more than ink on a page. If the Holy Spirit, according to John 14, takes all truth and applies it to our hearts, that means this word in black and white is very much living and active. And we are to give ourselves to it by reading it, just reading it and establishing ourselves in it. And when the difficulty of the present comes, funny how the Holy Spirit works, and we're reminded of that which we have read. "No temptation has seized you except that which is common to man, but when you are tempted, the Lord will provide a way out so that you may get out from under it." That was the very first I ever memorized as a Christian. And that verse has been my light in the darkest of places. When my circumstances or your circumstances as we visit together and we prayed, and your circumstances scream out that the Lord is not really working, we are reminded that in the valley of the shadow of death, there He will guide me. And when we are uncertain of our future or asking the question, why is this happening? We're reminded of the great proclamation of the scriptures; the Lord is good to all that He has made. If while we were yet His enemies, Christ died for us, how much more, then, will He not love us now. Sometimes, it's fragments of the word. Other times, it's whole chapters. And we sit before the word as people established in the truth. And this is what gives purpose in the midst of our now.

So, when we think about the future, the Lord holds it in His hands. But today we are established in His truth. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for this, your word. We thank you for establishing us in this truth. May this church of Jesus Christ in this small part of your worldwide vineyard, may be increasingly be established and rooted in your word, not the trends of our day, not all the talking mouths of distraction that keep us, or thinking that all we need is this other program or this idea. Lord, it is your word that has established us. It is your word that proclaims our redemption. It is your word that does not change. Lord, we ask you, establish us again that we may not be distracted, that we may not be deceived, that we may walk in humility and trust. Father, for those who do not know you, may your Holy Spirit, may "the hound of heaven," as Lewis wrote, may you pursue them with your love, and may they know your irresistible grace today. In Jesus's name. Amen.