

2 Thessalonians 2.1-17

Conquering through Jesus

Christ Church Selly Park

Sunday 4 December 2022

Walking Worthily [11]

Expectations

It's not very encouraging when you come across things like this when reading around a passage for a sermon.

2 Thessalonians 2.1-12 is in fact one of the most challenging chapters in all Paul's letters, so you may need to invest a little more time in studying this section.

Motyer & Motyer, 1 & 2 Thessalonians (Crossway), 140

Another commentary is even less encouraging:

This passage is probably the most obscure and difficult in the whole of the Pauline writings and the many gaps in our knowledge have given rise to extravagant speculations.

Morris, 1 and 2 Thessalonians (TNTC), 125

Why is it so difficult?

First, it deals partly with the end times – such passages are notoriously hard to understand, whenever they come up in the Bible. The best-known ones are probably the second half of Daniel, Mark 13, and the book of Revelation. They are known as ‘apocalyptic’ writings – they aren’t necessarily about end times, but ‘lift the veil’ on hidden truths, hence ‘revelation’.

Second, Paul was not giving the full picture. He says in verse 5: **Don’t you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things?** And again in verse 6: **you know** – great for them, because they were there: less so for us, who weren’t! This would – presumably – have made a lot more sense to them because of the earlier teaching he’d given them face-to-face.

Third, the Bible always gives the answer we *need*, which is not always the answer we *want*. We want to understand, to know why – especially when bad things happen, the **persecutions and trials** we looked at last week (1.4). This passage is a case in point: Paul doesn’t explain *why* all this will happen – but the clearest part of the whole passage is *who* will be victorious: Jesus.

We come to the Bible with all our questions; some are answered directly, but *all* are answered with **Jesus**: come to him, the Bible says, be forgiven, receive and learn to live new life in him.

Unsettled (1-2)

Let's dive in, and see how Paul is really quite concerned for his **brothers and sisters** (1) in Thessalonica.

This is Mandalina Marina, Croatia. I've never been there but it came up when I searched for a photograph of a marina. Apparently it is **Croatia's premier superyacht destination**.¹

What's the most important thing here – without which all of that would go *very* wrong, and some *very* rich people would get *very* upset?

The mooring ropes. They need to be strong and secure – otherwise the next time a storm passes the boats will come loose, and end up being damaged or even destroyed.

When Paul tells his Thessalonian **brothers and sisters** (1) **not to become easily unsettled or alarmed** (2) the word **unsettled** is usually used to describe **ships being forced from their moorings by the pressure of a storm**.² And the other word – **alarmed** – is actually present tense, suggesting a **continuing state of anxiety**.³ I don't know whether or not the Thessalonians wore underwear, but their knickers were very much in a twist.

But why? What were they in such a flap about?

They were worried about **the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him** (1) – in particular that **the day of the Lord has already come** (2). It seems some false teachers were spreading rumours, perhaps even falsifying a **letter** purporting to be from Paul himself, saying that Jesus had already come, and the Thessalonians had missed it.

It seems a bit ridiculous, really. We know from 1 Thessalonians 5 that Paul's teaching on **the day of the Lord** followed Jesus' own teaching, some of which we read earlier in Mark 13:

‘In those days, following that distress,’ [Jesus said,]

“the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light;
the stars will fall from the sky,
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.”

‘At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.’

Mark 13.24-26 (NIV)

How could anyone miss *that*?! **The stars will fall from the sky!** When Jesus returns it will be huge, cosmic, earth-shaking – totally unmissable, and in a sense terrifying!

The purpose of Jesus' teaching though – and Paul's as well – was not to worry people but precisely the opposite: Jesus said, '**When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed**' (Mark 13.7). Why? '**Such things must happen, but the end is still to come**' (Mark 13.8). That is the point of all apocalyptic writings in the Bible: to reassure people facing **persecutions and trials** (1.4) that God *does* rule and he *will* sort it all out one day.

The Thessalonians' mooring rope was coming loose – the false teaching was pulling them away from the truth, and they were growing anxious and afraid. Paul's aim was to tighten that rope, to remind them of the truth so they could – verse 15 – **stand firm** – the opposite of being **easily unsettled** (2).

Rebellion (3-8)

During the first lockdown our neighbour built a couple of bungalows in his back garden. At one point they needed to close the road, so they very helpfully put a Road Ahead Closed sign by the junction outside our vicarage.

I cannot tell you the number of people who drove right round it – and then found that, surprise surprise, the road ahead was closed! Humans are very good at ignoring things...

One evening I actually went out and moved it so it was right in the middle of the road – and a van literally mounted the pavement to drive round it – then of course he had to mount the pavement again to get back when he realised... the road ahead was closed.

Verse 3 in our reading is where things start to get tricky. Paul describes a **rebellion** – in fact *the rebellion*: global rejection of God, a full-scale war against him, led by Satan and his minions – described in Revelation 19 and elsewhere.⁴

This rebellion will be led by **the man of lawlessness** (3), also called the beast (in Revelation), the antichrist (in John's letters), 'the abomination that causes desolation' (in Daniel, Mark and Matthew) or 'the Rebel' by the Bible Project. He will (verse 4):

oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshipped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God.

2 Thessalonians 2.4 (NIV)

At the heart of this greatest and final rebellion will be a leader who not only opposes God, but sets himself up in God's place, as the only object of worship.

Over the centuries Christians have agonised over the question: who is he? Various people have been identified as this leader, from Hitler and Stalin, to the Pope and John Wesley, and this guy, who was pretty unpleasant.

In the second century BC, the king of Syria was a man called Antiochus IV, and Israel was part of his kingdom. He believed he was an incarnation of the Greek god Zeus, and so took the name ‘Epiphanes’, meaning ‘appearing on earth’. On his coins he called himself ‘god’. He banned worship in Jerusalem, and set up a statue of Zeus – i.e. a statue of himself – over the altar in the Temple there.

Let’s read verse 4 again: **the lawless one** (8)

will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshipped, so that he sets himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God.

2 Thessalonians 2.4 (NIV)

Seems pretty obvious that **the man of lawlessness** was Antiochus IV, right? But then Paul seems to be talking about the future – not someone who had already lived and died two hundred years before. What’s going on?

First: **the man of lawlessness**, *the Rebel*, who will lead the full-scale rebellion and war against God – he hasn't come yet. Look with me at verse 6: **you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time**. Here is where things get *really* tricky. The Rebel hasn't come yet because *something* or *someone* **is holding him back**. What is Paul on about?!

Some have suggested he means God, others the devil, others an angel like Michael, other the Roman Empire. When the church father St Augustine wrote about this in the fifth century, he declared, **I frankly confess I do not know what he means!**⁵

My best guess? I think Paul could have been talking about the preaching of the gospel, and those who preach that (including himself, and also us). In Mark 13 Jesus says:

‘Such things must happen, but the end is still to come... the gospel must *first* be preached to all nations.’

Mark 13.7 & 10 (NIV)

Remember, Paul was reminding the Thessalonians of what must happen *first, before* Jesus returns, to reassure them: these things haven't happened, so **the day of the Lord** hasn't happened yet either (and by the way, you *really* won't miss it when it does!).

While the gospel is being preached around the world in the strength and power of the Holy Spirit, **the lawless one** is being restrained. But when that task is completed, *then* the restraint will be lifted – much like the chocks being taken away from an aeroplane – and the Rebel will be revealed.

That's the first reason why Antiochus and the others are not *the man of lawlessness*. But why does the description seem to fit their behaviour so well?

It's a bit like the Hubble Space Telescope. The actual image is focused and reflected on various mirrors and lenses and sensors, so we can see things that are otherwise too far away.

Have a look with me at verse 7: **the secret power of lawlessness is already at work**. The **power** or pattern **of lawlessness** can be seen again and again throughout history, like the mirrors and lenses in a telescope. Rebellion against God is writ large in rulers like Antiochus IV, but visible in smaller ways in *all* women and men through history: in our stubborn pride, our refusal to listen to God, or live his way, or worship him *alone*, or give him the thanks and praise he is due. These images and reflections of rebellion will continue until *the* rebellion, when **the lawless one will be revealed** (8).

And how does that go for him? Look with me at verse 8:

And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendour of his coming.

2 Thessalonians 2.8 (NIV)

Pause – then breathe out.

All this rebellion, all this sound and fury and appearance of **power** – **the Lord Jesus will overthrow [it all] with the breath of his mouth.** *Breathe out.*

Friends *this* is Paul's main point: to win the victory all Jesus needs to do is *arrive* in his **splendour** – and breathe.

Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, Paul says (3): this day hasn't come yet, you can't possibly miss it when it does, and when it comes Jesus won't even have to fight to win the victory – *because it is already won* – he won it on the cross.

In all the confusion and argument about what Paul means or doesn't mean in this most challenging of passages, one thing is **certain**: *the Lamb wins. Alleluia!*

Deception (9-12)

One Sunday a minister told his congregation: ‘Over the next few days I would like you all to read Luke 25 as preparation for next week’s sermon.’ The following week he began his sermon by saying: ‘Last time I asked you to read Luke 25 before today’s service – if you did please raise your hand.’

They all put their hands up. Smiling, he said, ‘Luke has only twenty-*four* chapters; my theme today is the sin of lying.’

Paul says: **The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with how Satan works** (9). Jesus said, **‘When [the devil] lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies’** (John 8.44). Satan the liar is the power behind the Rebel’s throne; so in these next verses Paul teaches that the final rebellion – and *all* rebellion against God – is built on lies and deception.

Friends, it is easy to be deceived. Jesus has won the victory, but until his return the devil still has power and influence – and his main way of operating is to deceive with false teaching, with half-truths, with out-and-out lies that have the appearance of truth – even **power, signs and wonders that serve the lie** (9). Paul wasn’t interested in listing those lies: but to warn of the consequences.

Yet again these are difficult verses to understand (verse 11): **God sends [those who refuse to love the truth] a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie** (10-11)? What's going on here? Actually here I think *The Message* helps us out :

Since they're so obsessed with evil, God rubs their noses in it – gives them what they want. Since they refuse to trust truth, they're banished to their chosen world of lies and illusions.

2 Thessalonians 2.11-12 (MSG)

In a world of social media and fake news, the question of truth and lies has perhaps never been so critical. We need to listen to Paul's warnings, so we can **stand firm and hold fast** to the truth (15) – and then not only hold onto the truth, but share it.

Steadfast (13-17)

Paul ends this section with thankfulness. *Again!* He can't help himself. **We ought always to thank God for you** (13), because:

1. They are **loved by the Lord** (13).
2. **God chose** them **as firstfruits** – the first of many (13).
3. They are **saved** – through **the work of the Spirit** making them holy, and **through** their **belief in the truth** (13).
4. **He called** them to all this **through our gospel** (14).

And one day they will **share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ** (14). That is a lot to give thanks for – and all that is true of God’s people today as it was of the Thessalonians then.

Paul wanted to make sure the Thessalonians knew the truth of who they were in Jesus – and who will win in the end. He had told them all this in his first letter – in *this* letter he had to remind them because they were wobbling.

Remember this? By focusing on and reminding them of the truth, Paul made sure their mooring rope was tight enough to stop them drifting away. **Brothers and sisters**, he says (15), **stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you.**

Friends, this is so important. It’s no coincidence that so much of the Bible is taken up with calling God’s people away from the temptations and distractions of the world, back to the truth and solid ground of God’s word – to use Jesus’ own example, Scripture is the solid rock in a world of shifting sand.

That is the main reason why I will make sure we preach through entire books like this series. We need to listen to *all* of Scripture, even the challenging passages, because this is how God speaks to us by the Holy Spirit, teaching us, challenging us, *encouraging* us.

And we can be encouraged because no matter what **persecutions and trials** (1.4) we might face, in Jesus we can overcome because he has already won the victory. In Jesus – and in him *alone* – we are **more than conquerors** (Romans 8.37).

Paul ends this section with a prayer for encouragement and strength – and that’s where we will end as well. I’d like to pray Paul’s prayer for you, for us, now. (Please stand.)

Let’s pause for a moment – take a breath and breathe out – and picture Jesus, in whom we have the victory.

Pause

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.

2 Thessalonians 2.16-17 (NIV)

¹ <https://www.seaflex.net/case/mandalina-marina-sibenik-croatia/>. Retrieved 3 December 2022.

² Alfred Plummer, quoted in Stott, *BST*, 157.

³ Stott, *BST*, 157.

⁴ See also, Revelation 16.16 and 19.19.

⁵ Augustine of Hippo, quoted in Stott, *BST*, 168.