

STUDY 2 - 2 THESSALONIANS 2:1-12

This section of the letter is probably the reason why it is not as familiar or taught on as much as 1 Thessalonians. Difficulties seem to abound – who is the man of lawlessness? Who or what is holding him back? How does this teaching fit with the emphasis of the New Testament which seems to be that we can't know when Jesus will return (and by implication the thought that he could come at any minute)?

As we read and study these verses in our groups we should not set ourselves up for a difficult study or approach this passage with trepidation. After all, as Paul writes he doesn't see himself as writing "difficult" things. After all, he was only in Thessalonica a few weeks, yet he managed to find time to cover this when he was there – these verses are a reminder! (see verse 5). Also, we must notice that this passage is not unique in the New Testament, Jesus himself said similar things in Matthew 24 (particularly verses 15-30).

In 1 Thessalonians Paul has already reminded this church about the return of Christ, and has told them that those believers who have died before he comes will not be at a disadvantage, and that it is our responsibility as Christians to be ready for his return. Those truths should be taken as givens when we approach these verses.

Don't Be Alarmed (2:1-3a)

An important factor not to miss when we study these verses is that this letter has been prompted by a situation facing the Thessalonians. It is not a theological essay on the second coming that has landed from heaven without any context. This letter has been prompted by another letter that has come to the church in Thessalonica which was a forgery – it claimed to come from the apostles but wasn't.

(In passing it is interesting to note that even in these early days Paul's name was seen as carrying authority in the churches. This shows that it simply isn't true that the church in later centuries promoted Paul's letters to having Scriptural authority, he was already recognised as an apostle with authority as his letters were being written).

The surprising thing this letter said was that “the day of the Lord has already come”. No wonder this was unsettling! However we shouldn’t rush to think that the Thessalonians were stupid to worry about this. Notice that the false letter did not say “the coming of the Lord has come”. Perhaps this letter was saying that the promises of the Old Testament linked with the day of the Lord had already occurred – great judgement and the full blessings of salvation. If so, then it would have been similar teaching to the kind of “health and wealth” we have it all now kind of theology that is sadly not uncommon today.

The way Paul corrects this is to show that there is a link between “the coming of our Lord Jesus” (which refers to his second coming) and “the day of the Lord”. There can be no final day of blessing and judgement without Jesus’ return.

Don’t Be Deceived (2:3-7)

To stand firm against false teaching we need to be armed with right doctrine. An under emphasised feature of the Bible’s teaching on the return of Christ is that certain things do need to happen before he comes. We are told this not so that we can chart when his return will be (so we tick these events off and predict the time and date), this would be a fruitless and disobedient activity given Jesus’ repeated warning that “no one knows”. We are told this precisely so we are able to stand firm against deception and are not unsettled by what happens in these last days.

Paul warns us of a “rebellion”, and a “man of lawlessness” who sets himself up in opposition to God but in God’s place, in his temple. “Rebellion” can have a political meaning, or it can be focused on a departure from the truth – a rebellion from within the visible church against the truth – which is more likely given what is said in verses 8-12. The man of lawlessness here seems to be a single figure who sets himself up as a God in God’s place, in the church, God’s temple (see 1 Cor 3:16 where we are now described as God’s temple).

Before we get carried away in our imaginations about this we need to recognise that this language is common throughout the Bible. It deliberately picks up on some of the prophecies in Daniel. In 1 John 2:18-19 John writes about the fact that many antichrists have come as we are living in the last hour

(the period of time prior to Christ's return), and in Revelation, particularly chapters 12 and 13 there is a vivid picture of the devil's continual work in the time before Christ returns in deceiving and trying to take the place of Christ.

Piecing this together then, as we live in the last days there will always be those who try and deceive even God's people, and try and take the place of God. As Paul says in this passage in verse 7 "the secret power of lawlessness is already at work". We can see it as we look back through history. The reformers were not wrong to identify the pope as an antichrist.

This passage says that this will come to a head in one figure. However we do not know who the "man of lawlessness" is and we should be hesitant to identify him. When we face this kind of opposition we can be comforted by the fact it is expected and not out of God's control whether or not we are facing "the" man or one of the many antichrists who take the worship only due to God.

Verses 5 to 7 are difficult verses and it would be good not to get too bogged down in them in our groups. The John Stott commentary has a helpful summary of differing interpretations. The basic principle seems to be clear though – God in his providence and care is holding back (or using something else to hold back) the full force of lawlessness until the end. This is great cause of praise and should give us hope. God does not let evil triumph completely.

Don't Be Afraid (2:8-12)

Even though God will let go of the restraints put on lawlessness and rebellion at the very end, this is only so he can be seen to triumph. The man of lawlessness will appear so that Jesus Christ will destroy and overthrow him at his coming.

We should not be terrified at all this though. The man of lawlessness (and the secret power of lawlessness) intentionally copies the work of God – in terms of miracles, sign and wonders, and he/it is deceptive (it won't be obvious), but the promise is that it won't deceive the elect. How then are we protected by this? By loving, believing and teaching the truth. Those who are taken in by the delusion are those who "refuse to love the truth and so be saved".

There is a real warning to all of us in verses 11 and 12. We should take seriously how we hear and act on God's word. We cannot play around with him. If we refuse to listen and enjoy sin and harden our hearts against him there may come a day when he confirms that response in us – like he did to Pharaoh (in Exodus 7-12) and Hophni and Phinehas (in 1 Samuel 2). If we love God, hear and respond rightly to his word then although life will get hard as we wait for Christ's return we can have the confidence that he will keep us and triumph.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Remind yourselves of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11. What has Paul already told this church about the return of Christ?

What has prompted this section of the letter? What has been happening?
What does Paul want them to do (or not do)?

Why is wrong teaching about the day of the Lord particularly unsettling? Are there examples of this today that you have come across?

What must happen before Jesus returns?

What are we told about the man of lawlessness/the lawless one? What kind of language is used to describe who he is and what he is like?

Will the man of lawlessness triumph?

Who will be taken in by the man of lawlessness? What have they done (or not done) first which has left them vulnerable to him?

What steps can we take to ensure we are not taken in by him?

Do you think this part of the letter was written so we may know exactly when Jesus is going to return? If not, why is that a wrong/unhelpful application of these verses? Why are we told this? How should we feel/respond to this?