

Living In Light Of The End

2Thessalonians 2:1-17

Have you noticed how consumed, even obsessed our society is with the end of the world? That was the lament of one New York Times journalist as he reflected on the fact that almost every movie and TV show is now either about stopping an end-of-world event (which they usually do in last-minute heroics, usually by the Americans) or about life after some near life ending global disaster.

Contagion, the Day after Tomorrow, 2012, Armageddon, the book of Eli, Snowpiercer, Interstellar, See, Geostorm, The Happening, Elysium, Sweet Tooth, Salvation, the Last ship, - the list goes on! I even found an article this week with the top 20 post-apocalyptic TV shows to watch in 2021!

But our preoccupation with the end of the world is not simply fantasy. In 1974 at Chicago's house of Public Policy, a "Doomsday Clock" was installed as a symbol of an impending apocalypse. And in January this year the clock was set to its closest time ever: 100 seconds till midnight.

With the coronavirus raging, locusts swarms across Africa, large spread civil unrest, and especially global warming, the decision it was said, was obvious. And we've seen this kind of language in our own news with the UN climate change conference in Glasgow, as leaders of various countries accused of not taking seriously the urgency and desperation of our situation.

It seems the end of the world is moving from fantasy and film to an important part of policy making – but it seems to me, with one important distinction: if you add a religious conviction to the end of the world, like the return of Jesus, then you become a unstable loony.

But for Christians, where the future is heading and how the world will end is neither speculative nor fearful. The end is certain: The Lord Jesus will return in glory to raise the dead and judge the world.

Yet for many Christians, eschatology, that is the end times or the return Jesus seems to be a subject of confusion, apathy or fear. I received this image after the earthquake in Melbourne. It is easy for a Christian's view of the end to be influenced or taken from movies and culture rather than the bible.

We've seen this a lot during the pandemic I think! But for others the whole thing is on the back burner. I know Jesus loves me, I try to live for him in the here and now, and that's enough.

Yet for others, and I suspect some even here tonight, it just seems the whole thing is too difficult or scary. I've had many Christians tell me they are unwilling or afraid to read certain parts of the bible like book of Revelation. And the whole subject just becomes mysterious and scary.

But it seems that the questions about the end and Jesus' return was of particular concern for the Thessalonians. Hopefully you remember that Paul addressed some of their questions in chapters 4-5 of his first letter that we looked at earlier this year. Eschatology was at the forefront of their minds.

Fresh of the encouragement and reassurance in chapter 1, the tone shifts in chapter 2 as Paul addresses head on the 2nd coming of Jesus. In 1 Thessalonians 4, he addressed their concern about whether believers who die before Jesus returns would miss out on the benefits.

Now their concern is that they've missed Jesus' return all together! *Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers and sisters, ² not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by the teaching allegedly from us—whether by a prophecy or by word of mouth or by letter—asserting that the day of the Lord has already come.*

Paul describes the return of Jesus in three ways: firstly, his *coming*, the Greek word *parousia*, literally his presence as Jesus comes back physically just as he left. Secondly, *our being gathered to him*, as he raises us

from the dead and equips us with new bodies for eternity. And thirdly, *the day of the Lord*, which is the OT anticipation of the decisive and final act of God to show up and judge his enemies.

All three describe the same event of Jesus second coming. And in v.2 Paul is concerned that they are being unsettled or alarmed by false teaching about this event so easily. He's concerned that this change has come about quickly as they've forgotten or abandoned what they were taught.

And he uses three words to describe how the false teaching might come: *prophecy, word of mouth, or by letter*. False teaching comes in many forms and often within the church rather than from outside. It should go without saying that not everything you hear on youtube or a podcast is reliable or true!

Just because someone sounds persuasive, leads a mega-church, has bestselling books at Koorong, or yes, even occupies a pulpit, means they are from God and speaking the truth. It's why we encourage you to always keep your bible's open, to test all things against Scripture as Paul said in 1Thes 5:21!

And it might seem strange to us the idea of thinking Jesus' return had already come. And it might be that the false teaching spiritualised his coming rather than a literal return or as the Jehovah's Witnesses suggest, it was invisible and secret.

But I think we are more likely to believe the opposite lie that Jesus isn't really coming back at all. And while no Christian would ever say that, but we believe or are deceived by that lie when we live our lives without reference to Jesus' return. When our planning, priorities, or spending are shaped only by concern for the present – as if Jesus' return doesn't change anything.

It's why these letters are so helpful for us. As people prone to confusion, apathy, or fear, 1-2 Thessalonians bring the return of Jesus into focus because as Jesus' people, we are always meant to live in light of the end, people who know he will come to bring final judgement and salvation.

Waiting and longing for Jesus to come is not an optional extra to the Gospel but central to it. As Paul wrote about the Thessalonians becoming Christian: *They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven —Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.*

We see the same from Jesus who insists we should be people ready and waiting for him: Matthew 24:⁴² *“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.⁴⁴ So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.*

Jesus' return is no mere afterthought but as we heard last week, our hope-filled glorious future when Jesus will bring final justice and vindication for his people and makes all things new. It's why we, just as American preacher Jonathan Edwards did, should pray God would stamp eternity on our eyeballs.

To see all through the lens of that certain future. So as the Thessalonians are influenced by false teaching he doesn't say just forget about it or don't worry, he urges them to be calm and collected, to think clearly about Jesus' return and to live in light of it, to not be deceived.

Which is where Paul goes in vv.3-12³ *Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction.*

Paul says they have no reason for being alarmed that Jesus had already returned because two things need to happen first which have not. And I imagine you noticed in the reading, what he says in vv.3-12 are quite complex and perhaps foreign to us.

First, there is what he calls the rebellion or literally apostasy. Before the end there will be widespread abandonment from the faith. He is echoing the words of Jesus himself: *At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other,¹¹ and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people.¹² Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold. (Matt 24:10-12)*

Or what Paul says in 1Timothy 4:¹*The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons.*

And secondly, connected to this apostasy, is the appearing of the man of lawlessness. Paul says there is a man who will come in the future who will be characterised by rejecting God's law. He is the personification of sin because as John tells us, sin is lawlessness (1Jn 3:4).

V.4 describes what he does: ⁴*He 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.*

His life and character is fundamentally anti-Christ: hence this man of lawlessness is the same person John speaks of in 1John 2 – the Antichrist. And he launches an all out assault on the worship of God. And the point is not so much that he literally wants to be worshipped as God, but that he will assume such great authority and influence over God's people as to cause their apostasy.

And he does this by setting himself up in the temple. It's unlikely that Paul means the literal temple in Jerusalem as it no longer had any role in true worship of God or connection with God's presence.

No this is a picture of seeking to exercise influence and authority in the church – which Paul says is now the temple, the place where God dwells by his Spirit (1Cor 3:16-17; Eph 2:21). So this man of lawlessness will appear to unleash a mighty attack on and in the church and lead many astray.

And how he does this may surprise us: ⁹*The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with how Satan works. He will use all sorts of displays of power through signs and wonders that serve the lie, ¹⁰and all the ways that wickedness deceives those who are perishing.*

The language and idea here is quite similar to what we see in Revelation 12-13. There we see the devil himself, this monstrous dragon who attacks the church through two beasts: the first beast from the sea represents political powers that persecute and oppress God's people, but the second beast, is like a lamb, who deceives through signs and wonders that cause false worship (Rev 13:11-15).

Persecution, as we saw last week in chp. 1, and deception, chp 2. That's how Satan works against God's people. Which is what this man of lawlessness does. A servant of Satan, the father of lies, doing signs and wonders to serve a lie and deceive. So his attack is primarily spiritual and religious! Signs and wonders are commonly used in Acts to describe Gospel ministry, but here they deceive!

And while this might shock us and leave us with questions about the who and the when and how – as many Christians have asked and speculated. But Paul makes two things clear about his coming.

Firstly, it actually serves God's purposes. Speaking of those who are deceived by him, Paul says, v.10 *They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. ¹¹For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie ¹²and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.*

God uses the man of lawlessness' coming and unleashing of wickedness to bring judgement on those who refuse the truth. His coming is the sign that God's patience has run out as those who reject the Gospel are now further deceived and condemned – along with the one who deceived them.

That's Paul's second point about his appearing: he appears only to serve God's purposes and be finally destroyed. 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 splendor of his coming.*

He appears at God's appointed time, for God's purposes, to be destroyed once and for all. And the battle isn't even fair. Jesus only needs to show up to destroy him: his breath and splendour alone are needed. As v.3 said, he is *a man of lawlessness, a man destined for destruction*.

But it may shock us to read of God sending a delusion. But here we have the final justice of God that Paul spoke of in chapter 1, as those who rejected the truth are given over to what they want. Because while we live in a culture that says truth is subjective and relative at best, v.12 set us straight.

The opposite of believing the truth is not simply unbelief, but *delighting in wickedness*. That's what our world is doing in rejecting the Gospel, from God's perspective, and Jesus the judge will come.

The language of v.8 is taken from Isaiah 11 as God promises that one day a Davidic King will come to bring righteous judgement and slay the wicked with the breath of his mouth. And though this man of lawlessness will come, so will Jesus, the just judge (which we get a stunning picture of in Rev 19).

Now you can imagine throughout church history there has been plenty of speculation about who this man of lawlessness is. For Christians in the middle ages this was Muhammad, for the reformers the Pope the papacy itself. For others it's been Hitler or Stalin and more recently even Donald Trump.

But speculating about what we can't know and aren't told us futile at best and an ungodly distraction at worst. And Paul doesn't tell us! Yet the depth of details he gives about these future events are actually to clarify what is happening in the present and the presence of false teaching.

⁶And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. ⁷For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way.

The lawless one is coming, but he is also present now, though restrained. Now there are 7 options for who or what is restraining him, but we aren't told [come talk]. Just that he is. So just as his future is certain and under God's control, so is his present influence, through real and deadly, is limited.

John says similar: ¹⁸*Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour. ²²Who is the liar? It is whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a person is the antichrist—denying the Father and the Son.*

There will always be a battle, especially within the church, for truth. To not be deceived. And this attack is subtle, what is called a *secret power* or better the *mystery of lawlessness*. It can be hard to see or detect, it might sound very persuasive and Christian, even some bible verses quoted.

We are getting a behind the scenes look: why does the church constantly face the issue of watering down or changing the bible's teaching to be more culturally acceptable?

Why do many leave the church, finding the world more attractive or compelling? Why are churches or Christians often ashamed of Jesus and so willing to retreat when things get tough? And why does love of the bible and depth of understanding seem like an optional extra for many believers?

The mystery of lawlessness at work *now*. That's why Paul makes it so clear about the rebellion and revealing of the man of lawlessness that is yet to come: to clarify what we should be doing now! Those who refuse to believe and love the truth will be further deceived and commended.

Don't let that be you! Hence the application is so clear: v.5 ⁵*Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things?* Come on! We talked about this! You know this is the case!

It's worth remembering that Paul was only with this church for 4 weeks before being driven out of town! But that was long enough he said, for me to spell this out clearly! You know the truth, but have been quickly, easily unsettled. So for many of us, we've been Christian and well taught for decades!

And yet sadly we still see this happening. I feel like the longer I'm Christian the more I see it. I've had friends leave Christianity because they watched a documentary that said it was just a moral zeitgeist. Another because the Davinci code unsettled their confidence in the historical Jesus.

One friend left her Christianity because she didn't want to pursue a same-sex relationship and feel guilty. And others I know have just drifted steadily over time, one small compromise at a time.

Forgetting what we've been taught, not letting what we know from God's Word actually shape our thinking and worldview, not testing what we hear so we know the truth for ourselves, or just a casual relationship with the bible that says we don't really need it are all ways to the devil has his way.

In C.S Lewis' novel the Screwtape Letters, Screwtape is a senior demon, a worker for Satan, who is writing letters to his nephew Wormwood. And in one, Screwtape says, "It is funny how mortals always picture us as putting things into their minds: in reality our best work is done by keeping things out."

So does love for the truth describe you? If you are not yet a follower of Jesus here tonight, this promise of a future judgement is not a harsh threat but loving appeal: hear the truth and be saved.

But for many of us who are Christian, how is our love for the truth? For many of us we might just be a bit uncomfortable with how serious and hard-hitting Paul is. The line between life and death, perishing and salvation, heaven and hell is drawn by the Gospel of Christ.

Can you say with the Psalmist, ¹⁰*I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands.* ¹¹*I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.* ¹⁴*I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches.* ¹⁵*I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways.* ¹⁶*I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word.*

It always shocks me how comfortable I am to leave church with no recollection of what the sermon was about. How I and other Christians easily and flippantly confess to how long it's been since we've read the bible for ourselves. So how is your love for the truth? Paul goes into this depth and intensity of what will happen in the future to show and urge how important our response to the truth is now!

It is confronting to think how many sermons, books of the bible, theological truths, small group studies I have been in or heard but have almost no recollection of. To say so often and jokingly that "I studied that once but I couldn't tell you anything about it..."

Spiritual amnesia comes naturally to us – yet in God's Word we have the truth, life and beauty held out to us in the Gospel of Christ, so readily available for us, but do you neglect it?

Holding on to the truth is how we stand firm as we live in light of the end. That's the focus in the final section of the chapter in vv.13-17. What was presumed in v.5 is explicit in v.15: ¹⁵*So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.*

Here the point and pastoral concern of the chapter is so clear: not to speculate about the future, not look for signs of Jesus' coming, but stand firm knowing he is coming.

And he is clear that what they have been taught already is sufficient for them to stand firm. Standing firm happens as we hold fast to the teaching we received – what they heard from him by word of mouth or letter. It's what we have in our bibles written down for us!

They only had their first letter, 1Thessalonians, but we have 13 letters by Paul and the rest of the Old and New Testament! And what we have in the truth of the Gospel is sufficient for us to stand firm.

Paul is picturing wave after wave or a mighty storm of false teaching engulfing the believer, yet with the Gospel as their anchor they do not move. Live in light of the end by remembering, going deeper, into the truth of God's Word.

In vv.13-14 Paul models this for them, showing them how to remember and delight in the truth as he thanks God for their salvation. Listen and marvel as he unpacks what it means to believe the Gospel.

¹³ *But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters loved by the Lord.* First and foremost, you are loved. That while you were God's enemy, still in your sin, spiritually dead without God and hope, God demonstrated his love for you on the cross. A reality grounded in history that does not change.

Secondly, v.13, *God chose you as firstfruits.* By firstfruits he could mean that these Thessalonians are the first of many more that will believe. But you may have a footnote that says it could be *from the beginning* (CSB) which fits better as Paul is reminding them that God chose them before the creation of the world to be his blessed people

and see the same thing in Ephesians 1:4-5).

So not only does this remind us that being loved by God was nothing to do with our own goodness or ability, but it was completely his initiative. And he chose us for *salvation*. In contrast to those who are perishing and will be condemned, the future is absolutely certain and comforting for the believer.

Spared from God's wrath, safe in his presence, and his return is the fulfilment of our hope. And chosen, and saved we are *sanctified by believing the truth*: God sets us apart as his people, who know the truth and are changed by it, bearing the likeness of our saviour Jesus.

And all this came about, v.14, when God *called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

And so just is in complete control and sovereign over the man of the lawlessness, so is God sovereign over how people, how you came to believe in Jesus. Isn't that amazing? God called you through the Gospel: whether it was your parents for years, a friend, a youth leader, a random person doing walk up evangelism, or a pastor you'd never met before, God chose, saved, sanctified, and called you.

Now the idea of God choosing those who will believe the Gospel and be saved has long troubled many Christians. To which John Stott helpfully says, "The notion of God choosing is inescapable because it is biblically rich – and while it may perplex our minds it is of great comfort to our hearts."

Can you feel the wonder, comfort, and assurance that comes from knowing your salvation, your relationship with God is entirely his plan, desire, and initiative. That because of him and now with him, you are safe whatever may come now, but also for all eternity when Christ returns.

And so in this thankfulness and delight in salvation Paul is showing them that part of holding fast to the Gospel is to take the time to remember and savour all you have in Christ. Showing us the joy and assurance we will find as we turn our minds again to God's Word.

As John Piper says, "This is how God has designed the Scriptures to work for human transformation and for the glory of God: the Scriptures reveal God's glory. This glory, God willing, is seen by those who read the Bible. This seeing gives rise, by God's grace, to savoring God above all things—treasuring him, hoping in him, feeling him as our greatest reward, tasting him as our all-satisfying good."

I think it would be so easy to read this chapter and just be overwhelmed. There's the man of lawlessness, apostasy, spiritual attack, and false teaching that could just leave us feeling small and vulnerable. And I think is so deliberate that Paul finishes on a note of supreme comfort.

Comfort in the absolute sufficiency of God's Word to enable us to stand firm, comfort in the wonder and depths of our salvation that God has achieved, and comfort in knowing that God will keep us.

So we should rest in him and the strength he provides. That's what Paul prays to finish: ¹⁶ *May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope,* ¹⁷ *encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.*

Notice that Paul prays for inward encouragement and assurance that will lead them to a life consistent with such a rich identity and hope. Holding fast, being stable as a Christian, isn't passive. We aren't to bunker down and just look out for ourselves.

As we rest in all we have in God we are strengthened to action. Because a life of every good deed and word is not just the outworking of confidence or the sanctified life that we are called to, but a clear and powerful witness to the deceived world around us.

A witness of the beauty and comfort that comes from the hope we have in Jesus, a life that adorns the Gospel and gives glory to Jesus who will certainly come.

So let's be those that live in light of the end, of Jesus' certain and glorious coming, by longing for that day, by holding fast to the truth of the Gospel, and by resting in the God who saved us, keeps us, and is at work through us. Let's pray.