

2. A Faith which looks towards Christ's Coming

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Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] Now, if you could have your Bibles open, please, at 2 Thessalonians 2, that would be a big help. But before we look at it, let's have a moment of prayer. Lord God, we praise you that by the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, you have given to us a living hope.

And we thank you that that living hope is expressed to us in the words of Scripture. Those words which are not human words, but your words. And I pray that tonight, as we look together at this passage, that as we draw near to you, that you will most graciously draw near to us.

That you will open your word to our hearts. And that you will open our hearts to your word. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So our subject this evening is a faith which looks towards Christ's coming.

Some 20 years ago, in our early days in Durham, Easter could be a rather depressing time. Because at that time, the notorious David Jenkins was Bishop of Durham.

And he used to take great delight every Easter in telling us that Jesus Christ had not bodily risen from the dead. And what actually happened was that Easter faith rose in the hearts of the disciples.

[1 : 33] That there was no event on the third day. That was a later edition. And that all that happened was the rise of faith. That Jesus had been reabsorbed into the Godhead.

Whatever that could possibly mean. That is the kind of thing he used to say Easter after Easter. I sometimes think that the Lord really does have a sense of humor.

Because in the Times yesterday, I read an article by the present Bishop of Durham, Tom Wright, who tells us that Christians have lost their nerve. Tells us that Christians have simply succumbed to the spirit of the age.

And that only because the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead was a physical, literal event that actually happened. Do we have a gospel at all? And that's absolutely true, isn't it?

Because the resurrection has begun the judgment. Because Jesus is raised from the dead, the judgment has already begun. You remember that passage in Acts 17, where Paul is speaking to the Athenian philosophers, and he says, God has appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness, and he's shown this by raising Jesus, the man he has appointed as judge, from the dead.

[2 : 50] Now when you think of that, that's a rather odd thing to say. Lazarus was raised from the dead. Lazarus is not going to judge the world. Nor is Jairus' daughter. Nor is the unnamed son of the widow of Nain in Luke chapter 7, all of whom Jesus raised from the dead.

The point is that the raising of Jesus means that the judgment has already begun. The king is already reigning. The Lord himself is already on the throne.

Now some weeks ago, Edward led us through the first letter, and I'd like you to glance back at chapter 4, verse 14 of that first letter, because it seems to me that what Paul is saying in this passage is flowing from that passage in 1 Thessalonians.

Paul is writing to assure the Christians in Thessalonica that their loved ones who have died before the coming won't lose out.

He's telling them that when the Lord Jesus Christ returns, that they will be raised and that the living will be changed, and together we'll meet the Lord. But the point is verse 14.

[4 : 03] How do we know this? And Paul says we can be sure of this because of two things we know about Jesus, which have already happened. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

See what Paul is saying? Everything depends on the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. There, of course, can be no coming at the end of the age. There can be no last judgment.

There can be no new creation unless Jesus rose from the dead, unless he is now at the right hand of the Father. It's not enough of a spiritual resurrection.

Some people may enjoy the old Easter hymn, You ask me how I know he lives. He lives within my heart. Well, I hope he does. That's not good enough, is it? If when my heart, as another Easter hymn says, is grieving, wintry, and in pain, the fact that he lives within my heart is no great help, is it?

I want to know that he lives and reigns in heaven and earth, that he will come again on the last day to judge the living and the dead. That is the gospel. The gospel is not he lives within my heart.

[5 : 22] The gospel is he rose from the dead and ascended to heaven and will return to judge the living and the dead. That's the gospel. And that's what Paul is speaking about here.

And these verses, verses 1 to 12, are really the main part of the letter. That's why he sent this second letter, because of confusion that had arisen over the second coming.

Tonight, we're probably not getting any further than verse 8, and we'll have another go at it next week. But look at verse 1, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him.

Now, these are words taken from Isaiah 53 about the gathering of God's people from exile, of the bringing them together again after the time of captivity.

And Joel speaks about the nations gathering for judgment. That's the reference there. But you know, look at verse 7. This is not just about the future.

[6 : 27] This is about the present. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. As we shall see, these events which culminate in the coming of Christ and the beginning of his kingdom cast their shadow over the whole of the present age.

That's our starting point. The judgment has begun already because of the resurrection. The events which will particularly, if you like, be concentrated before Christ returns happen throughout the whole of the age.

So this is a passage for us tonight. It's a passage for the whole church throughout its time on earth. Now, it's a very difficult passage. It's a controversial passage. And I want to avoid dogmatism on matters on which Scripture is unclear.

So what I want to do is to ask three questions of this passage and try to answer them. First of all, what is the day of the Lord?

Verse 2. To the effect that the day of the Lord has come. What were people meaning when they said the day of the Lord has come? Now, it's Amos who uses this first.

[7 : 38] Amos chapter 5, verses 18 to 20. And he establishes the basic pattern. When the day of the Lord comes, it will be both darkness and light.

It will be both judgment and salvation. And the prophet, the Old Testament prophet, who has most to say about the day of the Lord is Zephaniah, who speaks about it as that day, or the day of wrath, when God will judge the world.

So it refers to a day in the future when God will judge the world. However, even in the Old Testament, there are hints that this is not just going to be a day, but there's going to be a whole period of time.

For example, Isaiah chapter 2 and Micah chapter 4 says, In the latter days, the mountain of the Lord will be established above the hills and the people will come to the Lord's temple, suggesting not just one final day, but a period of time.

And sometimes the prophets will use the phrase, The days are coming. So you see the principle. There will be a last day when Christ returns in power and great glory to introduce the new creation, to destroy the devil, to get rid of the curse, and to usher his people into the glories and wonders of the new heaven and the new earth.

[9 : 07] And that's when John says, and we read the passage earlier on, I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day. That's really what John is saying.

John is saying, already Christ is risen. I am the one who is alive. Remember the risen Lord says, I was dead, now I am alive, and I hold the keys of death and of the world to come.

So the last days have already begun. That's what Hebrews says. God spoke to us in these last days by his Son. Because Christ has already come, the kingdom has come.

Because of that, people are converted. Because of that, churches grow. Because of that, God's blessing is experienced richly even now. But the kingdom has not fully come.

Because of that, people are not converted. Churches decline. Dreadful things happen. Sin and death still haunt us. So you see, this message is for us.

[10:07] In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, preachers and scholars used to compare the first coming of Christ to D-Day, when the Allies landed on the coast of Normandy.

And the war was virtually then won. Nevertheless, those 18 months of particularly ferocious fighting, particularly savage fighting, but D-Day was the beginning, if you like, of the end.

And the coming again, they compared to V.E.D., the day when Hitler was finally overthrown. So you see, that's the day of the Lord is relevant to us because we're already living in the day of the Lord. We're already living in the last days. So if someone comes and says, we're living in the last days and I've got a special message for you, say, good for you. So do we. Here it is. This is the message for the last days.

The word of the apostles and the prophets. That's what is the message for the last days. Because this subject has often been the happy hunting ground of cranks. Dick Lucas once said, and I'm sure he's right, that when the devil comes across a doctrine that is going to do him damage, he raises up shoals of cranks to preach it and teach it and write about it.

[11:25] And this is what happens in relation to the coming of the Lord and to the day of the Lord in novels like Tim LaHaye and so on and other and other such works which peddle a particular line, particular timetable.

Paul is saying there is one authoritative word that tells us about the day of the Lord and that is the word of the Lord himself. Verse 3, let no one deceive you.

Because he said in verse 2, either by a spirit or a spoken word. Now remember once again, back in 1 Thessalonians 4, verse 15, he has said, this we declare to you by a word from the Lord.

This is the revelation of the second coming and what will happen then. Particular revelation to the apostle. But the Thessalonians have been receiving misinformation. A spirit, probably a prophetic utterance which is simply believed.

Now you remember of course Paul does not say that prophecies are wrong. After all, you just need to look over the page at 1 Thessalonians 5, verse 20. Do not despise prophecies.

[12:35] Do not quench the spirit. But they go and say, test everything and hold fast what is good. Simply because someone says they are a prophet doesn't mean they're a prophet. Simply because someone says they have a prophecy doesn't mean it's authentic.

So we've neither simply to accept it gullibly nor indeed of course treat it with cynicism. That's the other danger. And then, or a spoken word, that's probably what Paul is speaking about in 1 Corinthians when he talks about a word of knowledge.

Somebody saying they have special information. A word that goes beyond scripture. And over the years I've heard many such words. Words about revival breaking out and giving us the times and the place when this would happen.

Now this has not happened. Because God will not abdicate to other people the times when he will visit us in blessing. Or a letter seeming to be from us.

Now it could either be a forged letter or it could possibly be a misunderstanding of 1 Thessalonians 5 verse 2. The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.

[13:43] Remember too this is this is a young church. They've only been Christians for a short time. And yet the apostle feels this teaching is valid for them is necessary for them and the whole church needs it.

Remember these were people recently converted from paganism. First letter again who turned to God from idols to serve the living and the true God and to wait for his son from heaven.

So we are in the last days. We are in the day of the Lord but we don't know when Christ will return. And because we don't know we have to be ready. Since we don't know then he could come at any time and therefore we have to be ready.

What we cannot do is predict when it will happen. Be ready says Jesus himself for in such an hour as you think not the son of man comes. So what is the day of the Lord?

Secondly who is the man of lawlessness? Verse 3 Let no one deceive you in any way for that day. That's to say the actual coming 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.

[15:01] Now notice that he will be revealed simultaneously or immediately after the rebellion.

Now rebellion or the Greek word is apostasia which we get our word apostasy can mean both political rebellion or it can mean widespread departure from the truth.

Now the Lord and his apostles warned us that would be characteristic of the whole of the last days didn't he? Jesus said false prophets and false Christ will come don't listen to them and Paul tells the elders of Ephesus when I have left from your own selves men will arise speaking perverse things. So the man of lawlessness embodies that rebellion but look at verse 7 again the mystery of lawlessness is already at work.

Now if I were right in suggesting the best way to interpret the last days is to see it as the whole period of time between the comings culminating in the last day of all it seems to me that the man of lawlessness is not just a figure or a group of people we don't know who immediately before the coming will express that spirit of rebellion but is something that happens throughout the whole of the day of the Lord.

[16 : 24] This is the figure whom John calls the Antichrist. 1 John 2 verse 18 and significantly he says many Antichrists have come so we know this is the last hour.

John in his day towards the end of the first century is already seeing the work of the man of lawlessness the work of Antichrist. And if you read further on in the book of Revelation read Revelation 12 and 13 when you have a moment or two and that gives an amazing and awesome picture of the work of the man of lawlessness a parody of the work of God.

The devil parodying God himself summons up two henchmen the beast from the sea who is the persecuting power of the state and the beast from the earth who is the beast of propaganda and false teaching I'll say more about him next week when we come to verses nine and so on.

In many sense they're the same they're working towards the same end. In the detective stories you often get the nasty cop and the nice cop but they're both working towards the same end and the nice one is usually far more dangerous because he lulls you into a sense of security.

once again then a particular outbreak of lawlessness embodied perhaps in an individual perhaps in groups of individuals we don't know but all through the last days rebellion is taking place.

[17 : 56] What does rebellion mean? First of all he usurps the place of God who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship so he takes his seat in the temple of God proclaiming himself to be God.

Now this language echoes the book of Daniel and this reminds us that this is something that was already happening in Old Testament times as well.

After all where does the opposition of the man of lawlessness ultimately come from? It goes back to Genesis 3 doesn't it? Genesis 3 and the serpent whom the descendant of the woman will crush.

Daniel looks around at the world of his time at Babylon but he looks far beyond it. Babylon fell but that was replaced by Persia and Alexander the Great overthrew that.

Alexander died and his empire split into four parts. Excuse us a little bit of history because I think we need it to understand what Paul is saying here. When Alexander's empire split into four parts, the two parts that most impinged on the people of God were what Daniel calls the king of the north, which is the kingdom of Syria and the king of the south which are the Ptolemies in Egypt.

[19 : 15] And the king of the north, Antiochus Epiphanes behaved exactly in this way. For a period of three and a half years he polluted the Jerusalem temple, he set up a statue of Zeus which in many ways was a statue of himself because he claimed to be an incarnation of the Greek god Zeus.

He offered pig's flesh on the altar of burnt offering and this is what Daniel and what our Lord calls the abomination which makes desolate, the polluting of God's holy place, the opposition to God.

And perhaps the Thessalonians would be thinking of something that happened ten or twelve years earlier when the mad emperor Caligula attempted to have his statue set up in the Jerusalem temple.

That was prevented. But you see this kind of thing is happening. Now of course that does not mean people coming, in our terms, people coming and setting up statues here in front of the pulpit.

Basically the basic sin is the serpent usurping God. The basic sin is taking the place of God and over all the man of lawlessness and his activities we can find the footprints of the serpent.

[20 : 34] and surely one of the ways in which modern people attempt to usurp the place of God. You get it so often in liberal biblical scholarship where basically human reason is set above the word of God.

Now human reason is important. It's a great gift of God and I'm not denying that for one moment. But when human reason sits in the driving seat, when human reason becomes the ultimate umpire, then what are we doing?

We are proclaiming ourselves to be God. The man of lawlessness is at work. Another difficulty here in verse 6, you know what is restraining him now so it may be revealed in his time.

Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. Now who is the one who restrains? Many of you use the authorised version, you have the old English, he who letteth will let.

Unless of course you know your old English, you won't realise that let means they are not what we mean by it, but the opposite, to prevent, to restrain. Now notice this is both impersonal, verse 6, what is restraining?

[21 : 50] It's a force. But also a personal, he who restrains. So who is the one or what is the thing which is restraining the man of lawlessness?

Now the commentators have many pages on this, some will say it's in fact the Roman Empire or government in general, which, and government in general, and law and order is a good thing. If you lived in Zimbabwe, you would obviously believe that, that when law and order breaks down, it's a desperate thing. Of course, as we know, and particularly as happens by the time of the book of Revelation, the state itself becomes a persecutor.

Others argue that it is the Holy Spirit himself. Now it's certainly true that the Holy Spirit is at work teaching and convicting people of sin and righteousness and judgment, but I think if Paul had meant the Holy Spirit, he would have said the Holy Spirit.

It's a curious way. Sometimes people have referred to the preaching of the gospel, which of course does transform people and transform communities. Once again, we cannot be dogmatic.

[22 : 58] What we can say with absolute certainty, I think, is this, that God throughout history does not allow evil to triumph completely. He restrains it.

Obviously, the Holy Spirit restrains it. The Holy Spirit works through various agencies, through good government, through the church as salt and light in the world, and through the preaching of the gospel.

In history, the restrainer is at work. But at the end of history, when Christ comes, then evil will be completely destroyed.

Now, there are times in history when evil does seem to triumph. There are places where it seems to triumph. Nevertheless, clearly, God is restraining evil, as he always has been.

So once again, with the man of lawlessness, the one who restrains, towards the end of the age, there will be a particular concentration of evil, a particular outbreak of rebellion.

[23 : 58] Nevertheless, it's happening all the time. We don't know whether the particular evidence of it now is the final evidence or not. Christ may come within the lifetimes of people in this room.

He may not. We don't know. The point is, we do know that he is at work and he is restraining. That actually brings me to my third question. How will it all end?

And that really is verses 7 and 8. Now notice, Paul has said back in 5, do not remember, and I am still with you, I told you these things.

Obviously by public preaching and probably by private conversations, Paul had outlined many of these things to the believers. The point is, it will end. It is a definite story with a definite conclusion. You see, if there is no resurrection from the dead, there is no story with a definite conclusion. That's why the Da Vinci Code fizzles out so pathetically, begins with great razzmatazz and huge excitement, and then it fizzles out in what must be one of the most pathetic endings of any thriller ever written.

[25 : 12] But there is a big story, and that story has an end. A definite story with a conclusion. And this will, first of all, be public. The Lord Jesus will kill by the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming.

Now, once again, if you keep in mind the principle I try to suggest in the earlier parts of the passage, Jesus Christ is still to come.

We await his coming. He's not yet come from heaven in power and great glory. Nevertheless, there are anticipations of that event throughout history.

For example, in times of revival, times which are sometimes described as days of heaven upon earth, when the Lord visits his people with unusual blessing and anticipates the world to come.

Times when, on the negative side, the fall of evil systems, the fall of ideologies which have kept people in the dark. On the Sunday, after the fall of Hitler, the great preacher and scholar, Helmut Thilica, read this text from Isaiah 14.

[26 : 28] Is this the man who made the earth tremble? Who shook kingdoms? Who made the world like a desert and overthrew its cities? Who did not let his prisoners go home?

There was not the final antichrist, but surely an antichrist figure who the Lord destroyed by the flaming sword from his mouth.

So there are anticipations, both positive and negative, but none of these can be mistaken for the final coming. But it will also be personal. When he comes, everyone will have to meet him.

Everyone will have to give an account to him. The Lord Jesus, we are told, will kill with the breath of his mouth. Now the breath of his mouth, a very interesting phrase, isn't it?

In Revelation 19, the same event is described as the rider on the white horse coming out of heaven with the armies of heaven following him, and a sharp sword comes out of his mouth.

[27 : 34] Now that sharp sword is nothing other than the word which creates and which destroys. It is the word energized by the spirit which will both destroy the man of lawlessness and bring about the coming of the kingdom.

The risen Lord will reign. Now it would be a pity having ended this morning with Narnia, not to end this evening with Narnia as well.

And that's what we're going to do. The end of the last battle. When the Peter and Lucy and the others arrive, not this time in Narnia, but in the Narnia beyond, the new heaven and the new earth, Aslan says, the term is over.

The holidays have begun. The dream is ended. This is the morning. And as he spoke, he no longer looked to them like a lion, but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful they cannot write.

I'm sure old bird Lewis was, wasn't he? And for us, this is the end of all the stories. And we can most truly say they all lived happily ever after. But for them, it was only the beginning of the real story.

[28 : 48] All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page. Now at last, they were beginning chapter one of the great story, which no one on earth has read, which goes on forever, in which every chapter is better than the one before.

That's what Paul is speaking about here. And that's how the New Testament itself, isn't it, falls into silence. Even so, come Lord Jesus. Amen.

Amen. Let's pray. The Spirit and the Bride say, Come.

And let him who is thirsty, Come. And let the one who desires take the water of life, without money and without price.

He who testifies to these things, says, Surely I am coming soon. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.