

3. A Faith which loves the Truth

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[0 : 00] Now, if you could have the Bibles open in front of you, that would be a great help, and we'll have a moment of prayer now. Father, we indeed praise you for the gracious, living Holy Spirit, who inspired the words that we have read, who gave us the scriptures.

We thank you for the words we have sung. He himself, the living author, wakes the life, the sacred word, reads with us its holy pages, and reveals the living Lord.

This is our prayer this evening, that the Holy Spirit will lead us to the Lord Christ himself, in whose name we pray. Amen. Amen. So our subject tonight is a faith which loves the truth.

This little series on 2 Thessalonians I've called Living Faithfully and Waiting Expectantly. We come tonight to the second part of chapter 2.

I think it was in the 1980s sometime. I remember seeing a television program where a studio audience was asked certain questions. They were asked, would you believe a politician, would you trust a politician who promised these things?

[1 : 23] The kind of thing this politician promised was that he would restore national morale, the nation's self-respect. He would get the trains running on time. He would bring the economy up to a healthy state.

And he would give everyone a job. Naturally enough, everyone said yes. And the compare said, well, this is who you'd have been voting for. And on the screen appeared the face of Adolf Hitler. Because these are exactly the things that Adolf Hitler promised to the German people. And these are the things that he seemed to be going to fulfill. Now just a quick word to put these verses 9 to 17 in context.

Last week we looked at verses 1 to 8. And in the midst of the difficulties in these verses, I suggested there were three particular certainties that Paul was saying to us.

For the benefit of those of you who weren't here, and for the benefit of those who have forgotten, which is probably everybody, let me remind you what these three certainties were.

[2 : 43] First certainty is that the day of the Lord has already begun. The day of the Lord began with the first coming of Christ, and it will continue until his coming again.

That's far more important than dates, far more important than programs, which we have no real way of finding out. The second certainty is that Satan and his Antichrist are active throughout that whole period.

At the very end, before the final coming, there will be an outbreak of lawlessness and deception. But nevertheless, that lawlessness and deception works all the way through verse 7.

The mystery of lawlessness is already at work. And the third thing is, while it's not at all clear in verse 6, the one who is restraining him, the certainty is that God does restrain evil.

Now these are all realities about the time in which we live. These are not just details for debate. They're not just things for the future. They're things for us in the 21st century.

[3 : 54] And the other thing is this. Although this passage, particularly verses 1 to 12, is unique to this letter, some of the commentators exaggerate the difference between this and the rest of what the New Testament has to say.

I suggested to you last week that you might want to read Matthew 24, and also Mark 13 and Luke 21, the so-called Olivet Discourse, where our Lord foresees and predicts what will happen during the last days.

And one of the things he says is this, in Matthew 24, 22, false Christs and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders.

The very word that's used here in verse 9, the coming of the lawless one with all power and false signs and wonders. So this is mainstream teaching.

It's the teaching of the Lord himself. It's not an eccentric little passage. So we're living in the last days. We are looking for the coming of Christ. And we're called to live faithfully.

[5 : 00] And we're called to be on our guard. That's what Jesus also says in the following verse in Matthew 24. Be on your guard, for you do not know when the Son of Man will come.

Now we're particularly going to look this evening at verses 9 to 17, which really raised two issues. First of all, verses 9 to 12, we must recognize what is false.

Now those of you who were at the Peter Jensen meeting yesterday evening will have heard him speaking about that, and it was very helpful. We must recognize what is false.

But secondly, in verses 13 to 17, we must welcome what is true. In other words, this is not just what the Thessalonians were to do in the first century.

It's what we are to do in the 21st century. So recognizing what is false. Verse 9, The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all powers and false signs and wonders, with all wicked deception.

[6 : 06] Now remember the basic principle. At the time immediately before the coming of Christ, there will probably be a great outpouring of wickedness and lawlessness. But since the fall, since Genesis 3, there has been wickedness, there has been lawlessness, there has been rebellion, all through human history.

And the point is, that as in the parable of the sower, both God and Satan are at work. They are both working in the history of the world, they are working in the lives of people, they are working in institutions across space and time.

Now, how do we recognize what is false? How does Satan work? Well, Satan works in two main ways, according to this passage. First of all, by counterfeiting the work of God.

Verse 9, The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan. Now, you'll notice there's a deliberate parallel here. The Lord Jesus, verse 8, will kill him, that's the lawless one, by the brightness of his coming.

And then in verse 9, the coming of the lawless one. So, Satan's work throughout history is to parody, to imitate the work of God.

[7 : 22] And this particularly comes out in Revelation 12 and 13. Read these chapters later. They're fascinating, they're powerful, they're extremely relevant to us.

In that, in Revelation 12 and 13, Satan tries to destroy the child, who of course is the Lord Jesus Christ himself, and we move straight from his birth to his ascension.

And then, because the devil has been thwarted, he comes down to earth with ferocious power, with great power and anger. Having failed to destroy the child, having failed to destroy the Lord Jesus Christ, he turns his fury on his followers.

And in order to do so, he summons up two beasts. One beast from the sea, who is wounded and comes back to life. The beast of persecution.

The beast of totalitarianism. But he summons up a second beast, who comes from the earth, who looks like a lamb, but speaks like a dragon.

[8 : 30] Now you see what's happening there. The devil is parodying God himself. Just as God sent the Son into the world, who died and rose again. The devil sends this beast into the world, who is wounded to death, and comes to life again.

And just as God sends the Spirit, who glorifies the Son, so the devil summons up this second beast, who glorifies the first beast.

So you see, it's a parody of the work of God. It's a counterfeit. And it's interesting that this word, signs and wonders, is used by Peter in his Pentecost sermon, in Acts 2, of Christ's own ministry. Now you see what this means. If we come across signs and wonders, we have to ask questions, because there's always different ways of explaining these.

It could be, of course, the Spirit of God. The Spirit of God, if and when he chooses, can display his power. And we cannot mandate it, we cannot claim it, we cannot say it ought to happen, but if the Spirit chooses, he can do wonderful things.

[9 : 46] But of course, sometimes there could be trickery at work. If you get in Spiritism, for example, charlatans preying on vulnerable people at a time in their lives, when their hearts are breaking.

Or thirdly, it could be the devil himself working. You read the story of Moses and the plagues of Egypt, how Pharaoh's magicians were able to counterfeit some of the things that, some of the

things that Moses did by the power of God.

So, when we are looking at the work of the devil, we are looking at something that is sham, that is counterfeit. And that's why, it seems to me, and we'll see this next week, Paul is going on to emphasize the power of the Word of God in chapter 3.

Now, I already mentioned last week that if you look back, just glance over the page at 1 Thessalonians 5, Paul says, 1 Thessalonians 5, 19, Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophecies, but test everything.

Hold fast what is good. You see, in other words, we are not to be, we are not to be silenced, we are not to be over-impressed by signs and wonders.

[11:04] We have to ask questions. Are they from God, or are they not? That's the question we have to ask. And, the other thing which must be emphasized is, the Gospel Word is not something accompanied by the power of God.

The Gospel Word is the power of God for salvation. So, when Mr. John Wimber talked about power evangelism and said the preaching of the Word would be more effective if it were accompanied by signs and wonders, they're making a fundamental mistake because the power of God is the Word of God.

It is the living Word brought to us by the living Spirit that converts, that quickens. He, the mighty God, indwells us. As we sang a moment or two ago.

So, Satan works by counterfeit. Satan parodies God. Satan tries to be God. The second way Satan works is in verse 10.

Satan works by lies with all wicked deception. Think about the great lies that dominated the century that's just passed. Marxism, Nazism, secularism, pluralistic humanism.

[12:24] All these great lies that promised everything and delivered nothing. This is the way the devil loves to work. He loves to lure people on by promises.

Promises that he not only cannot deliver but has no intention of delivering. That's how we know when he's at work. And the tragedy is that that is the way the devil has worked so successfully in the church in the West in the last 200 years or so.

If the devil can capture the pulpits, if he can capture the theological establishments, he's won a major victory. Sometimes when we think of the work of the devil, we think about the occult, black magic, Satanism and witchcraft.

Now that exists and it is very dangerous and as I've said before, all you need to do is to go to borders and look at the mind, body and spirit section and you'll see books with titles like How to Be a Witch and a dictionary of the occult and so on.

The devil works that way. But that work is largely unseen. Far better for the devil to have well-spoken and charming people who spread false teaching.

[13:40] That's a far better and far more successful tactic. Notice verse 12, did not believe the truth and even more so in verse 10, they did not love the truth.

It's not enough to believe the truth. We've got to love the truth. James tells us the demons believe and tremble. It's not just agreeing to it, it's loving it, taking it, taking it as our companion if you like. As the book of Proverbs speaks about wisdom, welcoming wisdom and having wisdom as our constant companion. See, the ultimate lie surely is the lie that lies behind all these things, the voice that was first heard in Eden, you will be like God.

That's what lies behind all these deceptions. So Satan works by lies and one of the lies that Satan particularly is fond of is in verses 11 and 12.

Satan is behind all the delusions that they may believe what is false and all they may all be condemned who did not believe the truth. One of Satan's most successful lies is that there is no judgment.

[14:58] That is the way he works so effectively. notice the words here, notice very carefully what he says, therefore God sends them a strong delusion.

You know what's happening? If we do not love the truth, we are setting in motion that process that will lead us away from the truth and to ultimate judgment.

It's rather like these terrible words in Romans, Romans 1, God gave them over, the terrible divine hands off, who take pleasure in unrighteousness, verse 12, because wrong belief leads to wrong behaviour.

And one of the ways in which a false teacher can always be recognised is because that person will never ever call to repentance. That's one of the things that Peter Jensen was saying last night, wasn't it?

The one thing a false teacher will never do is tell people they need to change, always affirming, always saying we're always saying we're alright, always saying that all that matters is love, and never ever saying that there is a judgment, never saying that God has set a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness.

[16:14] Now one of the reasons Satan is so successful in this is because it doesn't always happen immediately. It's not always obvious that that is the way that certain teaching is going.

And some of the biblical teachers of the 19th century did not seem to realize the consequences of what they were teaching. As I've been preparing 2nd Thessalonians, I've been using an old commentary, a very old commentary by James Denny, who was here in Glasgow in the 19th century, great preacher and teacher.

And many of the things he says about this book are great. He's wonderful on some of the passages. passages. But when he comes to a passage like this, he begins to wobble.

He begins to say Paul is far too subject to the spirit of his age, to the apocalyptic prophecies of judgment. And he introduces the idea that's become very fashionable in theological circles, that Paul, in these early letters, looked to the coming of the Lord, believed it was going to happen, but moved away from that.

What about Paul's very last letter, written probably only a few weeks before his death, where he says, the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me the crown of righteousness, and not just to me, but to all those who love his appearing.

[17:37] One of the great New Testament words for the coming again, those who love his appearing. Paul never lost his belief in the coming of Christ.

Obviously, he knew by then it probably wasn't going to happen in his lifetime, but that's not the point. The point is that Denny's teaching was good in itself, but it led to this slackening of belief, particularly in judgment and in the coming of Christ.

And other teachers like George Adam Smith, a very great Old Testament teacher in Aberdeen, who wrote many good commentaries, which I found useful, but they failed to foresee the consequences of that teaching.

The way that it would loosen people's faith, the way it would ultimately turn people away from the gospel. It must have been about two years ago I was at a service where some theology students were being, well in my days, they used to call it licensed.

I don't know what happens to them nowadays, at least the time when they finished their training. And one of my old teachers, a charming man, whose teaching I found very stimulating, said this, rightly, that so many ministers nowadays have nothing serious to say.

[18:58] And I thought to myself, that's true. But one of the reasons for that is because people like you have so destroyed the authority of Scripture, have so taken away confidence in the Bible, that people are left with nothing serious to say.

And therefore, they have to fill up time by talking about politics, by giving their own ideas, by expressing their personalities in some way. You see, this is the problem. With this teaching dominating theology faculties, with this teaching dominating the churches, seeing the Bible as simply a human production, something produced by people of insight and religious genius, there is nothing left to teach.

and behind it all, of course, there is the voice of the Garden of Eden. Did God really see?

Remember the words of the devil, did God really see that you would die?

And that's behind all this liberal teaching about judgment. You see, Denny says that Paul was too captured by the spirit of his age. Denny didn't realize that he himself was being captured by the liberal spirit of his age.

And it's always easy to be captured by the spirit of the age and proclaim fashionable prejudices rather than the gospel. So we recognize what's false.

[20:24] We recognize what's false because it's an imitation. It's not genuine. We recognize it because it tells lies, plausible lies, and it refuses to say that God will judge.

But then in verses 13 to 17 we come on to welcoming what is true. Now in a sense, Paul is taking up here from verses 3 and 4. Now the New Testament apostles quite often do this.

They'll appear to digress, they'll appear to have a long trip down a byway, and then they'll return to the main road, but the point is the so-called byway, the so-called digression, is actually enormously important.

You see, in verse 3 he said, we ought always to give thanks to God for you. Then in verse 13, we ought always to give thanks to God for you. And what Paul is saying here is this, now what I've told you is true.

You're in danger. You're in danger from the man of lawlessness, you're in danger from the devil, you have to keep guard, but you are safe because of God's loving purposes.

[21 : 34] Brothers and sisters, beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as firstfruits to be saved. What does that mean? That means that God has already pronounced the verdict of the last day.

God has already chosen you for a destiny of salvation. One or two things here. First of all, he has transformed us by the Spirit, verse 13, through sanctification by the Spirit.

The Spirit is the guarantee of future glory. How are we going to make it? Well, we're not going to make it, are we? If we have to rely on our own strength, and particularly we've got to rely on the kind of preaching that liberalism produces.

That's not going to help us to keep going. But we are going to keep going because the Spirit is in us. The Spirit is the hope of glory, as we sang, pledge of life and hope of glory.

glory. And he is the one. It's as if the Spirit says, Father, you've placed me in this child of yours, to bring her, to bring him to glory.

[22 : 44] And we're going to make it. It's going to be tough, it's going to be difficult, but because the Spirit is in us, we're going to make it. But notice, that doesn't mean we do nothing. Sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.

The belief in the truth is the sign that the Spirit is within us. The loving the truth, the practicing the truth, is the sign the Spirit is within us. And notice how the whole Trinity is involved.

God chose you, chose you in eternity. He called you through our gospel, verse 14, and he sanctified you by the Spirit.

The whole story from eternity to eternity struck me as I was reading this, that this is almost a kind of first draft of that great passage in Romans 8, where Paul is going to speak of the so-called golden chain, whom he called, he justified, whom he justified, he glorified.

That great passage. The Spirit guarantees the completion of the story. Our part is belief in the truth, loving the truth. So we're transformed by the Spirit, and the Spirit uses the word within us.

[23 : 55] Secondly, we stand firm in good teaching. Verse 15, so then, brothers, stand firm. Because the Spirit is within you, stand firm and hold fast, hold to the traditions.

Now, traditions are not dead rules and regulations, as opposed to the living Spirit of God. Never separate word and Spirit, because God will not do that.

God never does that. The Spirit and the word go together, all of us. It's not dead traditions, as opposed to the living Lord. Its traditions here comes very close to the gospel itself, to the faith once delivered to the saints.

The gospel is passed down from every generation, from one generation to the next. It's often been said that traditions are the living faith of the dead, whereas traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.

We're not talking about traditionalism, we're not talking about customs and practices, which have long outlived their shelf life.

[25 : 04] We're talking about the gospel as it's passed from generation to generation. And notice how either by our spoken word or by our letter, these early Christians, of course, not only had false letters, they had the great blessing of Paul ministering to them.

Of course, contemporary preachers do not have that authority. Their authority comes from the written word in the power of the Spirit. That's what gives the preachers their authority.

Remember what Hebrews says, remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you. That's what a leader is, someone who spoke the word of God to you. stand and close are very intimately related.

We're not going to stand unless we hold to the truth. And if we hold to the truth, we're going to stand. Transformed by the Spirit, believing in the word.

And finally, in verses 16 to 17, this glorious little doxology or benediction, the sense of eternity. remember the gospel is never just limited and parochial, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace.

[26 : 26] Once again, one of those little summaries of the whole story. We are part of something much bigger. It's not you in your small corner and I in mine. This is part of the great story which runs from eternity to eternity.

The devil, of course, wants us to focus on the present difficulties. The devil wants to trip us up. The devil wants us to fall away. The devil wants to deceive us, to delude us.

But Paul is saying, look back to the cross and the resurrection, to the great truth. And because Jesus is risen, because the resurrection has taken place, we have the living Lord.

And look for good hope through grace. Now, good hope is the kind of hope that's not going to be fulfilled. Sorry, it is going to be fulfilled.

Bad hope is the kind of hope that's not going to be fulfilled. I'd hoped that Newcastle would win today, but they didn't. That wasn't good hope. But this is the kind of hope that is absolutely going to be fulfilled because it's God who is going to do it.

[27 : 35] It's not an illusion. And this hope leads to behaviour and belief. Comfort your hearts, establish them in every good work and word. Notice once again behaviour and belief.

The work and the word go together. So we have the twin responsibilities, don't we, of first of all discriminating, of recognising what is evil and welcoming what is good.

And we need to, we need the spirit to do that because without the spirit we'll simply, we'll simply discriminate against the people and the things we don't like.

And we'll simply accept the people and the things we do like. The point is we need to recognise both what is true and what is false. And we need the encouragement to keep going.

It's tough, it's difficult, it's hard. And we're going to be welcoming in a moment or two some people into our fellowship. This is a great word of encouragement for them and indeed for all of us.

[28 : 41] Our path to glory cannot be thwarted. So let's live faithfully as we wait expectantly. Amen. Let's pray. God our Father we praise you that we have been called by you in your eternal purposes of grace.

We have been redeemed by the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ and we are indwelt by his spirit and we pray that these great realities will so fill us that we will indeed press on to the mark of the high calling to which you have been called in Christ Jesus whose name we pray.
Amen.