

A Real Hope to Stand on

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Date: 15 November 2017

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[0 : 00] Well, hello and a warm welcome to the Lunchtime Bible Talk. We continue our study on Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians today. Perhaps you turn that up whilst I pray.

Father, we thank you that you have spoken to us, that we might know you, that we might know a way to be reconciled to you, that we might know the Lord Jesus, and that we might know a wonderful, sure hope for the future.

As we turn to study your word now, we ask that you would help us to lay aside that which might hinder us, that which might distract us from focusing now on what you have said and what you still say.

So be with us in this time, for we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. We're reading today chapter 2, verses 1 to 15.

So 2 Thessalonians, chapter 2, verses 1 to 15. Now, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.

[1 : 34] Let no one deceive you in any way, for that day will not come 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, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.

Do you not remember that when I was still with you, I told you these things? And you know what is restraining him now, so that he may be revealed in his time? For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work.

Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming.

The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan, with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refuse to love the truth and so be saved.

Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

[2 : 57] But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits to be saved through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.

To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken words or by our letter.

This is God's word. We pray that you bless it to us this afternoon. Picture the scene. You're under siege, stuck in a castle, with no way out.

Your enemy is closing in on every side, and you know you have to hold out. You have a strong ally who has promised to come and rescue you.

You just have to hold out until he arrives, until the cavalry come to the rescue. Months pass. The food is running out. Relationships are at breaking point.

[4 : 10] You cling on to that hope that the knight in shining armor is coming. Then suddenly word comes that he did arrive, but his arrival changed nothing.

What now? What kind of despair would be haunting you in the midst of that? Well, that's the position that the Thessalonians find themselves in.

The last couple of weeks, we've been seeing that this is a church that faces persecution. From the birth of this church, they were well acquainted with affliction and with opposition.

And that's only continued. Being a Christian in Thessalonica was hard, really hard. And so the promise of Christ's return to bring relief, as we saw last week, his return to bring justice, to bring resurrection, was a hope that was even more pertinent and even more precious for this church. They were longing, chapter 1, verse 10, for the day when Jesus would come to be glorified in his saints. So the problem Paul addresses in chapter 2 is vital for this church if they're going to keep going.

[5 : 25] Because we see in chapter 2, verses 1 to 3, that there was a harmful rumor. There was a harmful rumor. And at heart, it was confusing them about what would happen at Christ's return.

Paul's message is, we must not be confused and led astray about what that will achieve and when it will happen. That's what was happening to this church. Paul urges, verse 2, that this church not be shaken by any rumor or letter that says Jesus has already returned.

It seems that perhaps a letter claiming to be from Paul has confused and worried the Thessalonians. The letter seems to have claimed that Jesus has already come back. Paul finishes this letter in chapter 3, verse 17, by signing it with his own hand so that they would know what was genuinely from him.

And so this confusion, this rumor, was causing such upset because the hope of Christ's return was so precious for this suffering church.

Being led to think that that hope hasn't changed anything would have been devastating for them. If Jesus had already returned, where was the relief?

[6 : 41] Where was all that he has promised? Where was the resurrection they were looking forward to? Where was there being raised to share in his glory? It was nowhere to be seen.

Maybe the whole thing was a rise. That might be what the Thessalonians were thinking at this point. Verse 2, Paul urges them not to be shaken. Perhaps they were a little.

Finding out that Jesus has already returned would have been like being in that castle under siege and finding out that the rescue you longed for had arrived and done nothing.

You see, Jesus' return isn't an abstract thing that will be detached from us. His return is the climax. It's the realization of the real and vital hope that all Christians have.

It is, verse 1, the event that will see all believers gathered to Jesus to enjoy all that's been promised. This young church is in danger of ruin if they get swept up by this confusion.

[7 : 50] After all, their day-to-day experience was miserable. They faced constant pressure, opposition, affliction, all of this just for being faithful to Jesus.

But they thought that it would be worth it in the end. They thought it would be worth it if they kept going. So if they're told that actually the thing that would make it worth it is no longer true, that would bankrupt any church of its ability to persevere.

This church that Paul was writing to, indeed any church, cannot afford for Jesus' return to be a fantasy. No church can afford for our future hope to be wrong.

If Jesus had already returned, then our hope would turn into a hoax. They long for the age to fully come that will bring an end to evil. They want their suffering to end.

They want justice, just as we would, just as we do. They want Jesus' return to do all that it's meant to do. If we allow ourselves to be deceived about what is true, particularly what is true about Christ's return, then it will blunt our witness as a church.

[9 : 07] It will skew all that we want to do and are meant to do. The Thessalonians were in danger because they knew very well the significance of Jesus' return. So if they thought it had passed, it would be devastation.

But perhaps for us, we're on the other side of the scale. Maybe we aren't in danger of thinking that it has happened or it's going to happen in two hours or tomorrow. But instead, maybe we're a little bit unclear about how significant it really is.

Perhaps some of us, in reality, don't have the fact that Jesus is coming back in our minds much at all. Maybe only thinking in some vague way that we knew Jesus is going to do something in the future, but we don't really need to think about it now.

That sort of confusion is also a road to ruin. Perhaps if we understood more clearly the impact of Christ's return and have it in our minds, then it would spur us on to more and better service.

Returning to the castle under siege. Maybe if we don't have the clear significance, maybe we don't have clear significance of what Jesus' return will mean, then we won't even bother putting ourselves in the battle.

[10:24] Perhaps we would only live as a Christian so far as we could still enjoy the maximum of this life now. As this country moves further and further away from our Christian worldview, it will begin to be more and more uncomfortable to be Christians.

We are in the minority. Many of the outspoken people in this world around us think that we're bigots. Their trajectory is only worsening.

Perhaps our charity status will soon be under threat. Perhaps meetings will soon be disturbed by people who hear our gospel. Perhaps our children in schools will be bullied in every way possible. To prepare for this, we need to have a hope firmly fixed on Christ's return. Because that says that faithfulness to God will be worth it in the end.

And so Paul moves on to tackle this issue. He's clear in verses 3 to 8 that we have a hope that is real and relevant. We have a hope that is real and relevant.

[11:34] Don't be deceived by these rumors. Paul says, instead, remember what you were taught. Verse 5, Paul says, do you not remember that when I was with you I told you these things?

Paul had taught them what to expect. He says, before Christ's return there will be, verse 3, a rebellion and someone will arise called the man of lawlessness.

Now it would be easy for us to get bogged down in some of the detail in this that's strange to us. We might be able to spend some time speculating about who this was and what's going to happen. But that isn't why Paul wrote.

What he does say is that the Thessalonians should have known because he taught them. And what he says in this passage lines up with what Jesus himself said about the future.

Jesus said this in Matthew 24 and 13. And in those passages he's pointing back to a prophecy in Daniel. The prophecy he quotes tells us that there was going to be a rebellion that would come against God and the temple.

[12:40] And the prophecy that Daniel spoke was fulfilled in 167 BC. Christ's prophecy of the same was fulfilled partially in AD 70.

But Paul's point here is that behind both of them, behind both of those prophecies, there is a greater figure that would come to rebel against God in some final way.

So Paul's point in all of this is don't worry, you're not going to miss Christ's return. It will be obvious. You will know it when it happens.

Yes, for now there are signs of rebellion against God, signs of lawlessness. Verse 7, lawlessness is already at work. This rebellion may even get worse with time.

But he also says, for now, verse 6, the lawless one is being restrained. We knew that Satan is alive and at work in the world, no doubt.

[13:43] Satan wants Christians to suffer. He wants people to oppose the church. But for now, he's being restrained. For now, there's a limit to what he can do. But Paul's clear, there is a day coming when he will be revealed in all of his fullness and the world will know it.

That day will be so dramatic and significant that we won't miss it. There will be the presence of someone so awful that he causes only chaos and destruction worse than we have ever seen. It will be someone causing more terror than Hitler or ISIS or any dictator we can imagine. But, when he is revealed fully and finally, what is his destiny?

Verse 8, the man of lawlessness will be killed by Jesus. For now, Satan and the man of lawlessness is at work, but he's restrained.

But one day when the restraint stops, his future is to be killed. There are two encouragements in this for the Thessalonians and for us.

[14:56] First, they have not and we have not missed Jesus' return. He is still coming back. It hasn't already happened. When the disciples asked Jesus the question, when would the end come?

His answer was that they shouldn't be alarmed, that they should be on guard, they should stay awake. Paul echoes Jesus. There will be such tribulation in those days that has not been seen since the beginning and never will be.

No one knows the time was Jesus' answer, but you won't miss it. So Jesus says, be on guard, be ready for it.

The one who endures to the end will be saved. So our hope is still relevant. We can keep going because it's still true.

But it's also a real hope. Rescue and relief and vindication are all coming. Take heart because whilst there is opposition now, whilst Satan does have the upper hand in some things now, whilst he can make our lives difficult now, ultimately, Jesus is going to come back and kill him.

[16:15] He is coming to deal with his enemies. He is coming to deal with those who scorn him and scorn us. He is coming to bring rescue to his people, to gather them to himself, to bring us real and lifelong union with him.

If that real hope shapes everything for us, if we don't cling to that truth, then our lives will look different to how they should. If knowing that in the end things will be made right, if that isn't in our minds, if we aren't sure that we will be raised with Jesus, if we aren't sure that the world to come, the age to come, isn't infinitely better than this one, then our lives now will be concentrating and prioritizing, maximizing the here and now.

It will mean our marriages, our inward looking, focusing on our own family, not having an open door to welcome in the rest of our church family. It will mean our relationships and friendships, how we relate to our colleagues, will prioritize life in the present, instead of investing in them for eternity, even if they don't thank us for it, we'll prioritize being liked, keeping the friendship at all costs, because the here and now is more important than what's to come.

It will affect how we bring up our children and grandchildren. Will we be more concerned with their success at school, with what university they go to, with what career they have?

than training them to live in light of Jesus' return, and implanting in them that it is far from a waste to pour out this life in serving God.

[18:05] Christ's return affects everything, how we treat wealth, health, and all that we love. For it tells us that as we carry our cross now, as we're prepared to sacrifice and suffer, we do so because we know, because we know that our future is resurrection, our future is glory, a world free from evil, free from suffering, free from sin forever.

And the more confidence we have that Christ is coming back to make all things right, then the more we'll be prepared to put ourselves out. Paul says elsewhere, if the resurrection to come isn't true, then Christians are of all people most to be pitied.

That is because the hope of resurrection, our lives here and now, in light of the hope of resurrection, our lives here and now will be freely poured out.

So if the resurrection isn't true, if Christ's return doesn't come and do what's promised, we have blown it because we've been pouring our lives out in every way possible to serve the Lord Jesus.

So if it turns out to be a hoax, we've blown it. But Paul is clear, he is coming. That's Paul's point. We have a real and relevant hope.

[19:34] And because of that hope, he moves on to say, thirdly, verses 9 to 15, hold to the truth. Hold to the truth.

Stand firm. The presenting issue for the Thessalonians was that they had been led astray about the future, which means the core problem is that they haven't remembered what Paul had taught them.

They've been led away from the truth. And if it has happened about their future, it could happen about other things as well. Paul tells us that we have an enemy that wants to derail us.

And that enemy can, verse 9, use all sorts of signs and wonders to wickedly deceive us and lead us astray. Now, in the face of being led astray, of being confused and deceived about what is true, some of us might wonder where that leaves us.

Paul's aware that the Thessalonians might be led to despair by realizing that they've fallen for this error. So he moves on to say that those whom Satan will be able to deceive are those who refuse to love the truth, verse 10, and those who take pleasure in unrighteousness, verse 12.

[20:52] It is to people who hate the truth and who love what is unholy that God will, verse 11, confirm in their delusion.

Ultimately, God is in control. Remember, he restrains Satan, and one day he will kill him. God won't let his people, he won't let those who love him, who truly trust him, who want to submit to his word, to be endlessly led astray.

The warning here is to those who won't listen to the truth. The warning here is to those who would much rather take pleasure in the here and now instead of what God wants.

The world around us is full of preachers and teachers. We are preached to every day through newspapers, through the radio in our cars, through what's on TV, through people we work with and live beside.

And most of the things that are preached, most of the things that are taught to us, are distortions of the truth. Satan wants to deceive us. He wants to turn us away from what is true.

[22 : 08] I read just this morning that in response to some of the shootings at a church in America, some celebrities and politicians were saying things like this. If prayer did anything they wouldn't be dead.

Why would we pray for them now? If prayer did anything they wouldn't be dead. That is politicians and celebrities all over the news undermining the truth of our future.

Christians know that death isn't God feeling us, but it's the route to glory. Satan wants to lead people astray but we must stand firm on the gospel tradition verse 15.

Stand firm on Paul's teaching. We must stand firm on what the Bible says about the future. If they listen to Paul, if we stick to the traditions Paul has taught, then we won't be overcome by Satan's deception because God's in control of that too.

Paul wants to encourage this church that verse 13, they have been chosen by God to be saved.

Verse 14, God's calling of them is a call that will see them all the way through to glory.

[23 : 33] Notice the turn in verse 13. We see in verses 9 to 12, those who will be deceived. Then in verses 13 to 15, Paul starts with, but, but, we thank God for you.

Paul moves to reassure these Christians because God and his sovereignty has called us all the way through to glory. And he will ensure that we get there if, if, verse 15, we stand firm.

Satan wants to deceive us, he wants to destroy us, but Paul encourages the church that God has called us. And so the only thing to do in response to the confusion, the only thing to do when we realize we've been led astray, when we're bombarded with untruth, is to stand on God's word.

to return again and again to the Bible, stand firm with what's being taught. And in this case, for the Thessalonians, they can stand on the sure hope that Christ will come back and he will bring all that's promised.

Don't despair because you've been led astray. No. Remember what has always been true. Paul says, turn again to the sure foundation of God's word.

[25 : 05] And for those who are facing opposition, for those who are under pressure and persecuted, have confidence because of what's been taught, that we do have a real and relevant hope.

You can be sure that the hope at the heart of all the gospel promises, that Jesus return, will still happen, and it will make all things right.

Returning to the castle under siege, we can keep holding out because relief is coming. That is the message of the whole Bible.

We have a glorious future, Jesus is coming back, and that is a hope worth standing on. That is a hope worth sticking our lives on.

Amen. Let's pray. Father, we thank you that indeed your word points again and again to the wonderful salvation we have in Jesus now, but much more to what is in store for us at the end.

[26 : 28] So help us cling on to that. Help us use that to spur us on to be faithful to you in this life.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. We finish the lunchtime Bible talk today by singing the hymn on our sheets. There is a hope.

Look at the last verse. There is a hope that stands the test of time that lifts my eyes beyond the beckoning grave to see the matchless beauty of a day divine when I will behold his face.

Let's sing. Let's sing. Let's sing. Let's sing. Let's sing. Let's sing.

Let's sing. Let's sing. Let's sing. Let's sing. Let's