

A Powerful Delusion

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[0 : 00] So we're going back, we're looking at a number of months ago, we looked at First Thessalonians in our evening worship. So we've come back to look at the second letter that Paul wrote to this young church that he had founded and he'd left and then heard about various things and wrote the second letter to them.

And we've been looking at that, we've done chapter 1 and we're looking at the first part of chapter 2 through to verse 12. We called the series of First Thessalonians chosen because it speaks a lot about God choosing His people and then we've called the second one, still chosen.

So this is a really fascinating passage. It's talking about end times and I think end times kind of really interests lots of people. It's always been a magnet for discussion, for speculation and for various interpretations in the Bible and in lots of different ways just in what's happening in society around us.

And some of us, there's a lot of younger people here tonight but some of us who are a bit older will remember some of the false claims that we've heard about the second coming of Jesus or people claiming to be Jesus, some of you might remember David Koresh from the branch Davidian in Waco in Texas in 1993.

He claimed to be the Messiah and that he had a group of followers who would usher in the end of the world. And it ended up the end of the world for them actually, 75 of them were killed when federal agents stormed the building.

[1 : 32] It was a tragic end to a really sad story of abuse and deception and misinformation. And then on the UK side of things some of you might remember David Ike, the sports presenter who one day claimed to be the Son of God returning.

I think that was probably in the early 90s as well, and there's many more stories of people who have claimed to either be Jesus or that Jesus is about to come or it was going to happen at the year 2000 or it's going to happen at some point which people want to work out.

And so when we come a passage like this, I think you'll find it interesting and challenging. Now the temptations that this early church faced might be different from some of the temptations we face today, but I think the truth of God's Word and the teaching that comes from God's Word out of their situation obviously still applies in our lives as we look at it.

I think most scholars and commentators of the Bible would accept that this is one of the hardest passages in the New Testament, and I just say that as a rider at the beginning of the sermon so that if I get it all completely wrong that you'll forgive me.

I stand on the shoulders of one of the greatest theologians and philosophers of the early church Augustine who said, particularly of verses 6 to 8, and like last time I'm going to take my old Bible to read as well just because it's slightly easier to look at.

[3 : 15] Augustine said, particularly verses 6 to 8, that really very difficult section about the lawlessness and the lawlessness of one being revealed.

He said, I frankly confess I don't know what it means, so I feel quite good if Augustine is saying that. However, we will look at this passage and try and unpack it in its context, how Paul responded to what was being taught, and then how we apply that in our own lives.

And I think as we move through it, there'll be two main things that I want us to consider as we go through the situation that was happening in the church in Thessalonica and Paul's divinely given response and as we apply it.

The first is confusion and the second is clarity. So hopefully by the end of this there'll be less confusion than clarity and more clarity.

So there was definitely confusion in this young church concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ because remember Paul had taught about this in his first letter and he'd obviously spoken to them.

[4 : 29] He said, I don't want you to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy report or letter supposed to have come from us saying that the day of the Lord has already come.

So there was confusion in this early church because either someone was, had sent a letter purporting to be from Paul or someone was teaching or giving a prophecy, it's not really that clear exactly what happened.

Paul himself doesn't seem to know there's something that has gone amiss, but it was causing great alarm and great insecurity and disquiet because they were being told that Jesus had already come back, that they had missed the second coming of Jesus that He'd already returned.

Now again, we're not sure exactly why people said that and we're not exactly sure of the circumstances that led to them saying that or what they hoped to gain by saying that, it seemed to unsettle this young church, maybe they felt that if God Jesus already had returned, they missed it, they missed it and they were left behind and they felt abandoned.

Maybe that's what they were struggling with that they were being persecuted and they think, well, what? Have we just missed out on the whole thing? Has Jesus come back and taken His followers with them?

[5 : 52] We don't know, but they were unsettled and alarmed and that was causing confusion. Not only were they listening to dodgy theology, which they were listening to hear, but they were doing so having forgotten the apostolic teaching because Paul says in verse 5, Don't you remember that when I was with you, I used to tell you these things?

Now we know from the first letter that he spoke about the coming of Jesus Christ in the last time and obviously he told them more than he wrote.

So he, they did have a fair amount of knowledge of the teaching. First Thessalonians 3 speaks about the coming of the Lord and there was clearly a degree of teaching, almost more teaching here on the second coming in these two letters than anywhere else in the Pauline epistles.

But it does remind us even at this point, just as an aside, how clearly Paul recognized his own teaching as from God. It was divinely authoritative and the church was founded on the apostolic message.

He wasn't just another prophet or another teacher. He had been given his message by God and it was Scripture and he already recognized that he was in one way challenging them about why they'd already forgotten his teaching and were listening to others who were teaching a false message.

[7 : 24] His teaching was God-breathed. It was divinely inspired. So they were confused because they were listening to dodgy theology because they'd already forgotten what they'd been taught and what Paul had said and also possibly because there was so much lawlessness in the world around them that it just made life difficult for them as believers.

Verse 7 he says, for the secret power of lawlessness is already at work. So in the world they lived in, there was a lot of lawlessness from God.

There was an anti-law, an anti-love at work, not love but hate, not justice but injustice. And there was also a subtle darkness that masqueraded as light.

We'll see a little bit more about that later. Where truth was being told in the name of Jesus but it was actually from Satan. It was actually from the king of darkness, even sometimes in the name of Christ.

And that caused confusion for them where they were hearing teaching that purported to be from the apostles or from Jesus and yet it was not the truth.

[8 : 42] So there was confusion, they were alarmed and they were unsettled as Paul says in this chapter. Confusion. So Paul comes into the situation with clarity within reason.

There's definitely a degree of clarity even though this is one of the hardest sections of Paul's teachings and I don't pretend to understand all of it by any means.

However, there are certain things that are crystal clear in this passage and it's great for us because all of us have a future to look forward to that includes this passage.

Jesus will return on that great last day. That's what he says with clarity concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and ours being gathered to Him.

We ask you not to become unsettled, he says in verse 1. And then in verse 8 and 9 he says, and then the lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of His mouth and destroyed by the splendor of His coming.

[9 : 53] Powerful picture of a future event that we will be part of. And he's coming back on that last great day.

That's a theme in part of Thessalonians, the first letter and it's also mentioned in the first chapter of the second letter that we've looked at again.

And he repeats it here. He's crystal clear and absolutely full of clarity that Jesus is coming back and he's coming back not in humiliation, not in anonymity as it were, but with power and great glory. Jesus will come back. Everything on that day will be made clear. It's absolutely certain that the future that this world holds ends in this world with Jesus coming back in power and great glory. And there's no doubt in Paul's mind and his divinely inspired message that he's got from God that there will be complete victory over evil and darkness on that day.

[11 : 00] We can see that and know that from our own understanding of the Scripture and of Jesus Christ who already has defeated the power of darkness on the cross.

On that day it will be destroyed. I've often said that, haven't I, here, on the cross he defeated, on the end day he destroys. And that's a great and powerful truth that is spoken of here.

And we see hints of that, authority and glory and power in the life of Jesus. We've looked at it over the last few months in different ways in church. We saw it recently in the way he commanded evil spirits out of Legion.

Remember that when he forced them into the pigs? He just, they fell at his feet. He was absolutely authoritative and powerful over the dark spirits.

We saw it on Wednesday evening when we looked at Lazarus and Jesus simply commanded Lazarus to come out of the grave.

[12 : 01] Lazarus come forth. No doubt, three words. There was no complicated, there was no nothing but absolute authority as he spoke.

We see it in the resurrection, Jesus Christ defeats the power of darkness and death at his resurrection. We've seen it in every single new birth when people have become Christians because anyone who is a Christian has been born again of the Spirit.

Being spiritually dead, they are brought to life by the power of Jesus Christ. And we're told that he will come on that last day for his own concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus and our being gathered to him.

We're in this passage if we're Christians. We're absolutely in the divine message that God brings here, that we will be gathered with him.

Gathered to him. He's coming for his own. We spoke this morning about home and it's a homecoming. That is our homecoming.

[13 : 10] And he's totally clear about that. He's absolutely certain. It's unambiguous teaching. We will be part of that day if we have put our faith and trust in Jesus Christ, either by being alive when he comes back or we'll be resurrected from the grave when he comes back.

It's an astonishing fact of our future that we can rejoice and give thanks for if we are Christians this evening. If you're not a Christian this evening, then you need to wrestle with this truth and wrestle with the person of Jesus and wrestle with his claims because it's really kind of all or nothing, isn't it? He's either a nutcase or he is the living God who he says he is. And we need to contend with that. And what is clearly taught here in Scripture.

So the clarity is that Jesus Christ is coming back on that last day. He's also clear about lawlessness being real until then, but also restrained.

He says that in verse 7, 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.

[14 : 24] This is what it says in the NIV in 2 Thessalonians in the ESV in verse 7. It says 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.

Augustine didn't really know what that meant and I'm not sure I do either. But it does seem to suggest that lawlessness, well we understand that, we know lawlessness is at work, we know there's a lot of evil and darkness and rebellion in the society.

We may take it from other scriptures, but not sure from here, but it clearly is restrained. It's being held back for a certain amount of time.

We're aware of good being called evil, we're aware of evil being called good, we're aware of terrible realities, but this passage and others does suggest clearly that evil is being restrained.

It is only doing what God is allowing it to do in the mystery of His providence. There's common grace, there's love, there's laughter, there's baptisms, there's food and drink and joy and happiness and whispers of God all over our existence, all over our lives this evening, pointers to His grace and love in Christ.

[16:00] And the evil is being restrained. We are not as... This society is not as dark as it could be without God's restraining grace. This world is not as brutal and evil and horrible without God's restraining grace on us.

We need to be aware of that lawlessness and of the darkness that exists and not just hide from it as if it isn't significant or important. So lawlessness is real, but it is restrained.

But there will be a day when that restraint will be lifted. There will be a day. And this is the, in many ways, the difficult, the most difficult part as we're taught here that there will be a final rebellion and that will be unleashed just before Jesus comes back.

Verses three and four, don't let anyone deceive you. In any way, for that day will not come, that is Jesus' return will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed for destruction.

And then in verses eight to 12 we have these words as well. And then the lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of His mouth, destroyed by the splendor of His coming. The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan, displayed in all kinds of evil and darkness, displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders.

[17:32] And in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing, they perish because they refuse to love the truth and be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie.

So that's a very striking passage and it's clear to Paul as he's given this message that there will be a fight, there will be, God has said to him, there will be this final rebellion, it will be unleashed before the end and this character will appear.

Now I have no idea who that character will be or what he is going to be like. The man of lawlessness, the man doomed for destruction, very possibly the Antichrist of 1 John 2.18.

It seems to be suggesting there will be a false apocalypse. 1 John 2.18, dear children, this is the last hour and you've heard the Antichrist is coming, the Antichrist, not Antichrist.

The Antichrist is coming and even now many Antichrists have come. This is how we know it's the last hour. So it's being revealed that before Jesus' return there will be an Antichrist figure just before the end and it's revealed.

[18:50] We don't know the exact time, we don't know the day, we recognize that. But what is revealed is that Christ will come back when this character has appeared.

It's an anti-Perozia, it's an anti-false apocalypse. And he speaks in verse 4 about, he will oppose everything, exalt himself over everything that's called God or is worshiped so that he sets himself up in God's temple proclaiming himself to be God.

And that is quite a picture, that is quite a character that he will be powerful enough to do counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders that whether they will be evil signs and wonders or whether they will be exposed as being evil, we can't tell.

But it seems there will be a powerful maelstrom of confusing deception and false teaching or someone who purports to be God, Koresh, Davidike, you know, in a very small way, they've tried to do the same thing.

But someone who comes potentially as an angel of light even though it's Satan. Now there's a couple of sections that speak about Satan coming as an angel of light and 2 Corinthians 11.

[20:14] No wonder for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It's not surprising then that servants, masquerades of righteousness, their end will be what their actions deserve. This is all about not being deceived.

This is all about not being naive as Christians. And then also in Matthew 24, and this is again speaking of this time, for there will be great distress unrivaled from the beginning of the world until

now and never equaled again.

In those days, if those days had not been cut short, no one would survive but for the sake of the elect these days will be shortened. At that time, if anyone says, look here's the Messiah there, don't believe him. For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive.

If possible, even the elect see, I have told you in advance. Again there's different interpretations of when this is happening. Some of it definitely seems to have happened at the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

But this is clearly speaking about the end times and a character. I don't know who he's going to be and I don't know how it's going to be revealed that this is what he'll be like.

[21 : 24] But he is deceiving those who have already refused to love the truth and be saved. Those who refuse the gospel and refuse to become Christians, God sends them in judgment a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie.

Now that coming, that anti-Perozia is short and it is, he is utterly destroyed and blown away by the coming of Jesus who we are told will overthrow him with the breath of his mouth and the splendor of his coming.

It's a great picture. The breath of his mouth and the splendor of his coming, that is the picture we're given of Christ's second coming.

Take a break. I'll just finish with some thoughts in terms of application of this difficult truth that is nonetheless got enough clarity for us to be absolutely certain of what our future as Christian holds and our place in that.

However difficult before Jesus coming back is going to be and we will be, we've been given this mystery. It's been declared to us so that we can know and be prepared.

[22 : 51] What does a 21st century believer take away from a passage like this and from the truth like this? Well the first thing is that truth matters.

It all comes all through this language in the way they were deceived, in the way that they listened to things that didn't come from the apostolic foundations that they'd been given. And it's important for us not to feel like we're left behind as Christians, that God has abandoned us or he doesn't care or he isn't interested.

And that happens when we don't understand our theology, when we don't understand who God is and what he says about himself and what he promises to do and be and give to us.

And we can't be naive about lawlessness as if when we see all these evil things we think, oh well God can't really be in charge and I'm sure He's just given up. It's too easy and it's too cheap to think like that.

We've got to be alert and vigilant. We've got to know the truth. We've got to avoid every kind of evil ourselves. And we've got to soak in the Bible and its gospel message and know it, you know, I sometimes feel very guilty.

[24 : 03] I haven't really pressed on my young people here over these years just the importance of knowing the truth and reading the living Word of God and soaking it up.

We can't fuff around with the gospel and with Jesus and with the truth. We need to love the gospel and know Jesus as He reveals Himself.

You know verse 10 speaks about that, doesn't it? That the people perish because they refused to love the truth. And if we love other things before the truth, then we are part of a deception that is far deeper and more brutal than anything we will have an experience in this life.

Vital to know doctrine because doctrine speaks of God and speaks of Jesus Christ, the knowledge of God. And the most important prayer you'll have and I have is praying for wisdom.

The wisdom that comes from knowing God and knowing His truth to let our conscience be governed by that and to be rooted and grounded as our discipleship picture from Jeremiah speaks of, rooted and grounded in the living water.

[25 : 25] That is the Word and the Person of Jesus Christ, that law of love and the parameters it gives us to live in a certain way that is glorifying to God.

Because what you love and what I love rules our heart and rules our choices. There's so much false teaching going around.

You only need to tap on your keyboard in any spiritual subject and recognize the amount of false teaching that is teaching that sometimes our itching ears wants to hear.

What are you listening to? What are we listening to? Even what you're listening to in the name of Jesus. Oh, well, that's in the name of Jesus, it's fine. It might just be false doctrine and heresy that is going to lead you astray.

It's important that we remember the apostolic foundations, the truth of God's Word, the revelation as it's given, the Word of God is living and active sharper than a double-edged sword.

[26 : 27] And we need to remember within that the deceptive power of evil because he counterfeits all that's good, isn't it? You think Satan's going to come at you with a red face and two horns?

That's not how it works. He comes as an angel of light. He comes as an angel of light. And we need to recognize that he is destructive in all he says and does and sin is destructive.

I was given a great book a few years ago actually for some of it, a couple that I married and it was the most unusual gift I'd ever been given for doing a wedding which was a book by Platynga called A Reviry of Sin, marvelous book, great book.

And he quotes there about sin. He says, everything sin touches begins to die but we do not focus on that. We see only the vitality of the parasite glowing with stolen life.

We mustn't be taken in by the deceptiveness of sin and recognize that truth matters. So that's the first thing. The second thing is the future is in God's hands, not ours.

[27 : 35] Isn't that great? That's the perspective. We live today in the light of the first apocalypse, Jesus first appearing.

We live in the light of what He has done on the cross. And we live in the knowledge that our times are in His hands and time itself is in His hands as He ushers in His second glorious apocalypse. So let's avoid speculation as to who the man of perdition might be. There's been lots of speculation in the past, the Roman Emperor's popes, Napoleon, Mussolini, Hitler, the UN, Saddam Hussein. Interestingly Ronald Wilson Reagan was regarded by some as the anti-Christ because he's got six letters in each of his names, 666, and he did recover from a serious wound, which Revelation speaks of.

There's lots and lots of people in there that have been touted as the man of perdition or the anti-Christ.

[28 : 47] Let's focus on preparation, not speculation. We will absolutely know when that day comes, and it's in His hands.

And we are part as believers of something unbelievably great. The mystery has been to a degree anyway, revealed to us, and let us trust and pray that God will open our eyes.

1 Corinthians 2, 6-10. We do not speak a message of wisdom among nature, but the wisdom of this age, or of the rulers of this age, you are coming to nothing.

No, we declare God's wisdom a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would have not crucified the Lord of glory.

However, as it is written, what no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, what no human mind has conceived, the things God has prepared for those who love Him.

[29 : 48] These are the things revealed to us by the Spirit. The futures in God's hand, we have the mystery of Godliness revealed.

And the last thing that I want to say in application is, and I certainly don't mean this flippantly, is that Jesus wins.

Jesus wins. There's only one victor. This is a complete and utter mismatch to think that evil has any, in any way, is alongside Jesus in power and glory.

Jesus is the King of kings, and Jesus wins. And you need to ask yourself on whose side you're living and who you think will win for you, win through for you in your life if it's not Jesus Christ and in what you're trusting.

Jesus wins. And so how are we called to live? We're called to live simply. We are to love mercy, walk justly, and live humbly before our God, Micah 6, verse 8.

[30 : 59] Live with that obedience and faith. And we ever need to prioritize, I would say, plug coming up, praying together, praying together to this one we meet tomorrow morning at 7.30 online.

You don't even need to get out your pajamas. Just come and join us in prayer. We're praying for the lost. We're praying for the deceived. We're praying for those who don't know Jesus.

You will do nothing more important than that 40 minutes tomorrow. Nothing. Just come if you've never been before. If you're new to the congregation, just come along and pray.

You don't need to pray out like that, but your encouragement, your face on the screen will be a great encouragement. We need to encourage one another in the light of the opposition we face. We're bound together in order to reach out in love.

If ever, if we ever had confidence to live in enemy territory and share the gospel of Jesus, it's when we read a passage like this.

[32 : 04] Amen. Let's pray. Father God, we pray that we would recognize the deep truth in a passage like this, truth that's very difficult to unpack.

Truth that obviously Paul spoke to the church in Thessalonica about in ways, in more detailed ways than we're given even in Scripture. For their situation and their time, they were persecuted people and they were afraid and confused.

And we're often afraid and confused, we question you and we challenge you and we doubt you and we shake our fist at you sometimes. And we think you're not important.

We think you're weak and powerless. Forgive us for all these thoughts, even when they just sneak into our mind. When we don't even want to think like that, forgive us we pray.

We confess our sins and we ask Lord God that you would show us your glory, that you would open up your truth to us, that you would keep us from deception, that we would learn more and more, that we would hunger and thirst after righteousness, that we would find that the most practical applicable truth for our day-to-day living when we know and our focus on the majesty and the beauty of our Savior, that's the greatest motivation for living our lives of beauty.

[33 : 27] We pray for the young people here at the onset of their lives, that they would be founded well in Jesus and the scripture and truth, that they would learn to hunger and thirst and that nothing we do as older people would be a discouragement or a disincentive or anything.

Lord God, we pray that in Jesus' name. Amen.