

I've told you once... (v5)

I was (not!) greatly encouraged when preparing this sermon, to read these words in a commentary that Alan leant me:

2 Thessalonians 2.1-12 is in fact one of the most challenging chapters in all Paul's letters, so you may need to invest a little more time in studying this section. (Motyer & Motyer, 140)

One of my own commentaries says this:

'This passage is probably the most obscure and difficult in the whole of the Pauline writings and the many gaps in our knowledge have given rise to extravagant speculations.'
(Leon Morris, quoted in Stott, 161)

So, then: one of the most challenging sections of a book written by one of the Bible's most challenging authors. I seem to remember that the last time I preached at this service, it was on Jesus' woes to the scribes and Pharisees. I don't know what I've done to you John, but I'm very, very sorry! I think I'd

better check what I'm down to preach on next term!

So what do we do when faced with difficult passages like this one? We must be very careful not to twist the words to mean something we'd like them to mean.

One of the key verses in this passage is actually v5:

Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things?

Paul is not giving a full teaching here, he is reminding the Thessalonians of the important bits of what he taught them, in full, when he was with them.

So, in order to get a faithful idea of what this chapter means, we have to look at other, similar passages of the Bible. That's why I asked Steve to read Mark 13. He could have read Daniel 7 and 9, Matthew 24, Revelation 13, 16 and 19, and 1 John 2 as well—and maybe even 2 John, for good measure! These are the passages that talk about the 'abomination that causes desolation', the 'antichrist' and the 'beast', along with the 'man of lawlessness', the various different names that the Bible gives to the same man, who will lead a global rebellion against God.

Are you sitting comfortably? We aren't going to look at all those chapters, but only 2 Thessalonians 2 with some Mark 13.

The Confusion (v1-3)

So, what is it that Paul is concerned about? Why did he write this chapter to these people? Well, Paul is worried that the Thessalonians have been tricked by a word of prophecy, some teaching, or a letter supposedly from Paul himself, leading them to think that the day of the Lord has already come (v2).

This false teaching, to be honest, sounds totally ridiculous. In Mark 13.26-27 Jesus describes ‘the day of the Lord’:

‘At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.’

How could this happen without the Thessalonians realising?!

But actually, this false teaching still exists today. Charles T. Russell founded the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and calculated that the world would end in 1874—and then revised this to 1914. When Jesus didn’t return, Russell’s successor, J.F. Rutherford, said that Jesus *had* come, on 1 October 1914, but in *secret*.

This may not seem like a big issue, but the word translated ‘easily unsettled’ refers to ‘ships being forced from their moorings by the pressure of a storm’ (Stott, 157).

But: *what we think about the way things will end impacts the way we live now.* [Repeat]

Having identified the error Paul combats it in two ways. First, he says that Jesus *will* return, and *all* his people *will* be gathered to him. He insists: these things *will* happen.

Second, Paul reminds them of the *order* in which things must take place. Jesus' return will be sudden, but it will not take believers by surprise, because they know what must happen *first*. Before Jesus returns, there will be a time of great evil.

Here Paul draws on Jesus' teaching in Mark 13.5-8:

‘Watch out that no one deceives you. Many will come in my name, claiming, “I am he,” and will deceive many. When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are [but] the beginning of [the] birth pains.’

The purpose of Jesus' teaching—and Paul's—is not to cause alarm, but precisely the opposite; Jesus says, ‘When these things happen, *do not be alarmed.*’ We are told these things is so we won't be deceived, but will be prepared.

The Man of Lawlessness (v3-4)

So, what does Paul tell us about the coming of evil? He refers to it as the ‘rebellion’—global rejection of God, and full-scale rebellion against him. In Revelation 13.7 we read about ‘the beast’ making war on the saints, and in Revelation 16.16 and 19.19 the beast gathers all the kings of the earth to war against God—at the place called Armageddon.

The leader of the rebellion is the beast, or the antichrist, or the man of lawlessness, or the abomination that causes desolation; as I said earlier, these are different names for the same person.

2 Thessalonians 2.4 says this of the man of lawlessness:

He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshipped, so that he sets himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God.

At the heart of this rebellion will be a leader who not only opposes God, but sets himself up in God’s place, as the only object of worship. At the heart of this rebellion is idolatry.

Using this identifying feature, different people in history have been identified as the antichrist, from Hitler and Stalin, to the Pope and John Wesley. We need be careful. *The* antichrist is a specific person, who will come at the end of time.

The Mystery of Lawlessness (v7a)

But Paul is also talking about a *pattern* which can be discerned in history. Paul alludes to an infamous event in Jewish history.

In the second century BC, the king of Syria was a man called Antiochus IV, and Israel was part of his kingdom. He believed he was an incarnation of the Greek god Zeus, and so took the name 'Epiphanes', meaning 'appearing on earth'. On his coins he called himself, simply, 'god'. He banned daily worship in Jerusalem, and set up a statue of Zeus over the Temple altar. After a three-year revolt, the Jews kicked him out, and proper worship was restored in the Temple.

In Jesus' day, most Jews agreed that the prophecy in Daniel about the 'abomination that causes desolation' was fulfilled by Antiochus Epiphanes. But in Mark 13.14 Jesus takes this language and prophesies that the Temple would be desecrated and destroyed *again*, as indeed it was by the Romans in AD 70.

So, when Paul says that the man of lawlessness will 'set himself up in God's temple,' he is referring *both* to the pattern prophesied by Daniel and by Jesus, partially fulfilled by Antiochus Epiphanes and the Romans, *and* to the coming of the antichrist at the end of time.

Think of it like this. If you take a telescope you can see things that are far away... yes? Are you still awake?! Telescopes have a lens that enables us to see things that are too far away for us to see otherwise.

In the same way, Paul helps the Thessalonians to see future events through the lens of recent or current events. ‘When the man of lawlessness comes,’ Paul says, ‘it will be like the time when the king of Syria took God’s place in the Temple in Jerusalem. But before that happens, this lawlessness is already at work in the world, so you need to watch out.’

Paul does not tell us all this so we can identify this or that historical figure (whether Hilter or the Pope) as *the* antichrist, as *the* man of lawlessness. As John wrote in 1 John 2.18,

Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now *many antichrists have come.*

This is the ‘secret power’, the ‘mystery’ of lawlessness that is currently at work in the world. Rather than going around pointing the finger and shouting, ‘antichrist!’ at different people, we should be identifying the *pattern* of lawlessness, which reveals where evil is at work in the world. And then we must fight against it.

We have already seen one aspect of the pattern of lawlessness: *opposition to God*. There are two more aspects of the pattern, which help us to identify where it is at work: *deception*, and *persecution*. But before we look at these, we must go back a bit, because we've missed out v6.

The Restraining of Lawlessness (v6-7)

Now, to be honest, these are probably the two most difficult verses in one of the most difficult passages in the New Testament. Paul had obviously taught them all about this; he says, '*you know* what is holding him back.' When I read that, I want to shout at the page, 'No I don't! Tell me!'

Christians have agonised over the identity of the person or thing that is 'restraining', or 'holding back' the man of lawlessness. The main suggestions are: God, the devil, Paul himself, the proclamation of the gospel, the work of the Holy Spirit, and the Roman empire.

When St Augustine, one of the early church fathers, wrote about this verse in the fifth century, he declared, 'I frankly confess I do not know what he means!' (Stott, 168)

I prefer to go with the preaching of the gospel.

In Mark 13 Jesus says:

v7: ‘Such things must happen, but the end is still to come.’

v10: ‘And the gospel must *first* be preached to all nations.’

Remember, Paul is reminding the Thessalonians of what must happen *first*, before Jesus returns, to reassure them that, as these things haven’t happened yet, so the day of the Lord has not yet happened either.

So: while the gospel is being preached around the world in the strength and power of the Holy Spirit, the man of lawlessness is being restrained. But when that task is completed, *then* the restraint will be lifted—much like the chocks being taken away from an aeroplane—and *the* antichrist will be revealed.

At Stockton recently I posed the question: why the delay before Jesus’ return? What’s going on, why has it been two thousand years since Jesus left to be with the Father?

The answer is this: to allow the gospel to reach as many people as possible. The delay is an act of mercy by God, to allow the gospel to spread, so that many more may repent. What that statement means for the church today is obvious. God has mercifully granted a long period of time for the gospel to reach the nations; *so let’s get it there!*

The Revealing of Lawlessness (v8-12)

Here Paul reveals the one who is the power behind the man of lawlessness: the devil. The NIV doesn't get the translation quite right in v9: 'The coming of the lawless one is *by the activity of Satan*' (ESV). The devil will use all his power, all his tricks to put on a powerful deception. There will be great signs and wonders as the devil tries to lead us away from God.

Here, Paul is referring to Jesus' teaching in Mark 13.21-23:

'At that time if anyone says to you, "Look, here is the Messiah!" or, "Look, there he is!" do not believe it. For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. So be on your guard; I have told you everything ahead of time.'

Powerful and deceptive signs and wonders are another aspect of the pattern of lawlessness. If you can remember that far back, the first aspect was opposition to God. This second aspect is the 'wicked deception' (v10, ESV) of the human race.

But wait a minute... v11 says,

For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie.

Is Paul suggesting that *God* deceives people? Well, no. I would suggest two things here. First, we are responsible for our own deception. Look at v10: those the devil deceives are perishing because they ‘refused to love the truth and so be saved.’ They will be condemned for rejecting God’s truth. Second, the devil deceives (v9), as he tries to undermine God’s rule. But God uses even this demonic deception for his purposes. *The Message* puts it like this:

And since they’re so obsessed with evil, God rubs their noses in it—gives them what they want. Since they refuse to trust truth, they’re banished to their chosen world of lies and illusions. (2 Thessalonians 2.11-12)

So, then, the first two aspects of the pattern of lawlessness are: *opposition to God* and *deception*. The third is *persecution*.

This comes not from 2 Thessalonians but from the other passages I mentioned earlier. Remember the way the beast gathers together the kings of the earth to make war against God *and against the saints*.

In John 15.20 Jesus says, ‘A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.’ And in Mark 13.13 he says, ‘And you will be hated by all for my name’s sake.’

The *final* battle will be fierce, but so will the fighting *before* Jesus returns. He has told us and warned us, so that we know what to expect, now and at the end of all things.

And the Lamb Wins! (v8)

Jesus and Paul teach us about the future to warn us, so we can be ready and on our guard when the time comes. Jesus says, 'So be on your guard; I have told you everything ahead of time.'

But they also teach us about the future to encourage us. I did a placement last year with Simon Ponsonby, the pastor of theology at St Aldate's in Oxford. His favourite phrase is to say: 'I've read the end of the book, and the Lamb wins!'

In v8 Paul says that Jesus is so much more powerful, he is so much greater than the man of lawlessness, he doesn't even need to fight. Jesus' *breath* is too much for the antichrist; the splendour of Jesus' coming destroys evil once and for all.

Brothers and sisters, we are on the winning team! The Lamb wins... the devil doesn't stand a chance. Jesus, the Lamb who was slain, is the all-conquering Lion of Judah.

Stand Firm... Be Strong (v13-17)

Finally—you've been longing for me to say that, I'll bet!—I would love to spend another half an hour on the last five verses of this chapter. They are a wonderful expression of Paul's love for his brothers and sisters in Thessalonica.

He was concerned about them being alarmed and unsettled. He reassured them (v1-3), and corrected the false teaching that led them to be unsettled (v3-12).

Now, he gives thanks for them (v13-14), urges them to stand firm and hold fast to the truth (v15), and prays for them to be comforted and strengthened (v16-17).

Thanksgiving (v13-14)

He gives thanks, because (1) they *have been chosen* by God to be saved; (2) they *are being sanctified* by the Holy Spirit as they believe the truth; (3) they *will share* in Christ's glory when he returns. Notice that the focus throughout is on the work of God. It is not we who defeat the powers of evil: it is Jesus. It is not we who choose and sanctify ourselves: it is the Father, at work in us by his Holy Spirit. Thanks be to God!

Exhortation (v15)

Having corrected the false teaching, Paul urges them to hold fast to the truth, to stand firm in what they have been taught by the apostles. I quoted Jesus earlier, in Mark 13.13: ‘And you will be hated by all for my name’s sake.’ But the verse continues: ‘but those who stand firm to the end will be saved.’

Paul knows the dangers that are out there, the powers at work in secret to bring down God’s elect. But God is stronger. His power is made perfect in our weakness, as he stands by our side and fights with us, helping us to stand firm.

Prayer (v16-17)

Finally, Paul prays for the Thessalonians, that the God who gives us eternal comfort and hope by his grace might comfort and encourage their hearts, and establish and strengthen them in ‘every good deed and word.’

In other words, ‘standing firm’, defending ourselves against the onslaught of the enemy, is not enough. It is important, because out of the *stability* that comes from holding fast to the truth comes the *ability* to fight back, to take ground for the kingdom of light from the kingdom of darkness. [*Repeat*]

Living for the Future

Right at the start I said that *what we think about the future impacts the way we live our lives now.*

If it's all going to end in fire, then there is no point doing anything. But we know the pattern of lawlessness:

- ***opposition*** to God's rule and proper worship of him;
- ***deception*** with powerful signs and wonders;
- ***persecution*** of God's people.

Friends, there are people out there who are perishing, who are living in a delusion, blinded by the god of this age—not least Richard Dawkins! What are we going to do about it?

During his presidential campaign, John F. Kennedy used to tell this story about Colonel Davenport, the Speaker of the Connecticut House of Representatives in the late 18th century.

On 19 May 1780 the sky in Connecticut darkened, and some of the representatives, glancing out the windows, feared the end was nigh. But Davenport rose and said, 'The Day of Judgement is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. If it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. Therefore, I wish that candles be brought.'

Brothers and sisters, we believe that:

- Jesus *is* coming back—the day of judgement *is* coming;
- evil *will* be defeated, once and for all;
- the delay is for the spreading of the gospel, so that as many people as possible may repent and believe.

Now, I'm not saying that like Colonel Davenport we need a load of candles..! But we must:

be ***prophetic*** in shining God's light on the secret power of lawlessness, bringing the deeds of darkness into the light;

be ***passionate*** as we worship the victorious Lamb who was slain, loving him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength;

and we must ***proclaim*** the gospel across the world, for then—and *only then*, says Jesus—will he return in glory. Then, he will command his angels to gather all his people from the four corners of the earth, and we will reign with him forever.

Friends, it is worth losing our life for the sake of Jesus and the gospel, to gain that future.