

TUTORIAL

3.26

Don't Forget the Truth

In this tutorial, Bible presenter Scot Keen shows how Paul alleviates the fears of the Thessalonian believers. Paul does this by clarifying the day of the Lord.

Introduction

In this tutorial, we will look at chapter two of second Thessalonians, specifically honing in on Paul's response to the believers' confusion over a false letter they received. This letter claimed that they were already in the day of the Lord, and so Paul addresses this in 1 Thessalonians chapter two. First of all, he will alleviate their fears by giving clarification regarding the day of the Lord. Then he will remind them of their hope. Think of it this way. At one time, the Thessalonians were waiting for God's Son from heaven to deliver them from the wrath to come (1 Thessalonians 1:10). I think this means they were waiting on Jesus to come and rescue them, to deliver them before God's wrath comes to the earth. I take this to be a reference to a pre-tribulation rapture. In 1 Thessalonians chapter five, we found that the Thessalonians were not destined for wrath, the day of the Lord, but were destined to obtain salvation.

Clarification

In 2 Thessalonians, we find that they thought the wrath had already come, and this really upset them and confused them. So Paul wrote second Thessalonians to clarify that confusion. What were they confused about? We can find the answer in 2 Thessalonians 2:1, "Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to him, that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come." As I mentioned previously, evidently someone wrote a letter and placed Paul's signature on that letter, as if it were from him. And in the letter, they claimed the day of the Lord had come. This is significant. If Paul had taught that they would go through the day of the Lord, they obviously would not be surprised by a letter saying they were in the day of the Lord. The fact that they were surprised about this shows that they originally expected to be delivered from the coming wrath.

Alleviating fears

That is one of the major reasons why they were confused here. Paul will try to avoid being impersonated like this again in the future. When he closes 2 Thessalonians, he says, "I write this greeting with my own hand. This is a distinguishing mark in every letter." So Paul developed a trademark, if you will, to put on every one of his letters, so ensure that someone wouldn't forge his signature again. However in this case, someone had, and the believers were confused. Paul wants to alleviate their fears, "Let no one in any way deceive you, for it (meaning the day of the Lord) will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of destruction." Paul says certain things must happen first. Before the day of the Lord can come, the apostasy has to have come, and not only the apostasy, but also the man of sin, who is the son of destruction. They could not say they were in the day of the Lord because these things had not happened yet.

Let me talk about some of the phrases here. Paul says that first of all will come the apostasy and there are different ways that people can take this. Some people take it to literally mean the rapture. Of course, you know whose view that would support. That view is highly debated, and perhaps not where we should put our weight. The other and major dominant view is that apostasy here refers to a religious falling away, a departure from the faith. We see this mentioned throughout the New Testament, so that is probably what Paul means here. There will be an apostasy, but not only that. The man of lawlessness, who is the son of destruction, will also be revealed.

The man of lawlessness will be characterised by rebellion; he will oppose God's Word. Not only that, but he is also called the son of perdition or destruction. That is a Hebrew idiom that expresses character and destiny. He is the son of destruction, meaning he came from hell, and he is going to hell. That is a rough but fairly accurate rendition of that. In verse four we find that this man will oppose and exalt himself above every so-called god. Many people refer to this same individual as the anti-Christ. The term anti-Christ is John's terminology. Paul tends to call him the man of lawlessness, and there are reasons to believe that they are referring to the same individual. The term anti-Christ alludes to being in opposition to, and when the anti-Christ comes, he will offer himself instead of, or in place of Christ, and he will also stand in opposition to God's Word.

The anti-Christ will exalt himself above every so-called god or object of worship. He will claim to be God. Notice that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself as God. When 1 and 2 Thessalonians were written, the temple still stood in Jerusalem. Now the temple no longer stands, and so people today look at various individuals and call them the anti-Christ. The problem with that is no one can recognise the anti-Christ until he starts fulfilling the prophecy about himself. We see here that the anti-Christ will enter the temple of God, so the temple will have to be rebuilt before the anti-Christ can

be identified. Let me take you back to Daniel chapter eleven briefly, which Paul is alluding to here. Daniel says, "The king will do as he pleases. He will exalt and magnify himself above every god. He will speak monstrous things against the God of gods, and he will prosper for a certain amount of time" (Daniel 11:36).

Notice how Paul uses the same terminology. The anti-Christ exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship. He will enter the temple of God, displaying himself as God. Some people who have spent a lot of time looking into this would say the timing of this seems to be in the middle of the tribulation. However I won't go into that now for the sake of time. In his self-exaltation, the man of sin opposes any deity being worshipped other than himself (2 Thessalonians 2:4). He enters the temple, claims to be God, and according to Daniel chapters nine and twelve, he causes sacrificial worship to cease. He puts an end to the Jewish sacrificial system. Paul says in verse five, "Do you not remember while I was still with you, I was telling you these things?" Let's pause here briefly.

It shocks me that in the short time period in which Paul was in Thessalonica, he was able to teach them about eschatology to this extent. Paul didn't view eschatology as too debatable to mention. Neither did he see it as unnecessary. He saw it as a part of Christian teaching that was necessary, and for good reason. We saw in 1 Thessalonians chapter one that hope produces perseverance, and so eschatology was part of Paul's discipleship with the believers. He did not see it as too controversial or unnecessary to mention. Paul says, "I told you these things while I was with you." But what restrains the anti-Christ now? We get this picture that someone or something is restraining him from coming onto the scene. He is being held back. There have been different theories about who the anti-Christ is throughout church history, and one of the most common is that it must be human government. The question is asked, "Who or what was around in the first century that is still around to this day, that is restraining Satan's evil programme?"

Of course, human government has been around since then. The problem with that view is that the anti-Christ doesn't work against human government. The anti-Christ works through human government. He exalts himself as being a god, and he is a political ruler, according to Daniel, and so that brings us to the best explanation of what is holding him back. It is probably God restraining Satan from his evil plan until God's timing is ready. If you remember from the book of Genesis, God restrained Abimelech from taking Sarah as his wife. God kept Abel for his purposes. That is probably the case here. If you want to picture what it is like when restraint is removed, just look at certain countries where riots have taken place, and things have deteriorated in a hurry. I remember when Hurricane Katrina came to New Orleans years ago, and there was an onslaught of rebellion, violence, looting and things like that. When restraint is removed, we see the true character of fallen man, and so that is

what we will see in the time period of the anti-Christ. The restrainer then would have to be removed, as Paul says in verse seven, "The mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way," so the restrainer keeps working until he is removed, and then and only then, the lawless one will be revealed. Paul doesn't go into the career of the lawless one yet. He will get there shortly, but as soon as Paul says he will be revealed, Paul wants us to know how the story will end. "That lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of his mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of his coming." That terminology comes out of Isaiah chapter eleven, and it is speaking about the anti-Christ being brought to a screeching halt by the appearing of the true Christ at the end of the tribulation. Then Paul gives us more details about the anti-Christ in verse nine.

He says, "The one who is coming is in accordance with the activity of Satan." He will operate by Satanic power, and not only will he operate by Satanic power, but he also has all power, signs and wonders. This is very interesting, because that triplet, power, signs, and wonders, is used in reference to Jesus in Acts chapter two. It is also used to talk about Paul's apostolic signs and miracles in second Corinthians. This is significant because these signs and wonders were given by God to Christ and to the apostles to validate their claims of who they were. The anti-Christ comes, in the activity of Satan, and he mimics those things to validate his claims of being the Christ of God, and so he comes in the activity of Satan. Think about the magicians in Egypt who imitated the things that Moses did, to a certain degree. That is what the anti-Christ is going to do. This man of sin will perform miracles to validate his claims of being God.

I want to take you to a passage in Revelation chapter thirteen that speaks about this beast and the false prophet. The beast seems to be the same figure as the anti-Christ here. It describes the beast. His feet are like a bear's and his mouth is like a lion's. The dragon gives him his power, and his throne and great authority. John saw that one of his heads looked as if it had been slain, and his fatal wound was healed. It looks like there was a fatality and then a recovery from that fatality and notice the response. All the people worshipped the beast saying, "Who is like the beast? Who is able to wage war against him?" The reason I call attention to that is because these powers and signs that are accomplished by the anti-Christ, and through the beast and the false prophet, are so convincing that Jesus said they would deceive even the elect if possible, and so Satan is going to do everything in his power to deceive the unbelieving world. It will be very, very effective.

God is going to let the unbelieving world face judgement, which is the coming of the anti-Christ, because they rejected the Truth of His Word. He says, "They did not receive the love of the truth, so as to be saved," and that shows us that their damnation, or their eternity in the lake of fire, is due to their own refusal to believe the Gospel Message. He says in 2 Thessalonians 2:11, "For this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is

false.” I don't think that means God will simply drop a mist over the minds of people, and somehow cause them to be deluded in that way. I think the deluding influence is the anti-Christ and the false prophet that works in conjunction with him. In other words, because people rejected the Truth, God will let them embrace a lie.

In fact, God sends the liar. He allows the anti-Christ to come on the scene. This is similar to what we saw in Romans chapter one. People rejected the knowledge of God through creation. Therefore, God gave them over. It is the same concept here: God lets people believe the lies of the anti-Christ, and notice the result, “In order that they all might be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure and wickedness.” This is a fascinating verse because Paul is contrasting belief with having pleasure in wickedness. The idea is that these people had heard the Gospel message, but they were aware that embracing this Message could come with moral ramifications for their lives, and so they chose pleasure in wickedness instead. They would not believe the Message because of their pleasure in wickedness. Paul talks about what comes upon them. I want you to notice something interesting here.

We see that they do not love the truth. They chose the pleasure of unrighteousness. It is their own choice that brings about their condemnation, which is important to note. So what will happen to the anti-Christ? Revelation chapter fourteen talks about the beast and those who worship him. It says, “The smoke of their torment ascends up forever and ever, and they have no rest day and night who worship the beast and his image.” We see a similar picture to 1 Thessalonians chapter five, but it is amplified in Revelation. The day of the Lord, the tribulation, will come and unbelievers will be predicting peace and safety. They will be worshipping the beast and his image. They will have completely bought into the lies of the anti-Christ and, because of that, they will be judged.

As a friend of mine says it will be hell on earth. Then it will be hell in hell, and then death and hell will be cast into the lake of fire. It will go from bad to worse because they rejected the Message of God's salvation. Interestingly, Paul turns the tables now, and he talks about the Christian in relation to the day of the Lord. Paul reminds them of their hope. Think back to the pattern we saw in 1 Thessalonians chapter five. First Paul talked about what the day of the Lord will mean for unbelievers, and then he contrasted it with what it will mean for believers. It was destruction for them, but God has not destined us for wrath, for day of the Lord, but to obtain salvation. There is a contrast. That is the Message that Paul taught them when he was with them. That is the Message that he wrote them in 1 Thessalonians. What do you do if somebody believes your message, and then they get confused about it? You write them the same message again, and that is exactly what second Thessalonians chapter two is.

A reminder of hope

It's a mirror of 1 Thessalonians chapter five. Paul says, "This is what will happen to them, but this is what God has planned for you." Look at 2 Thessalonians 2:13, "But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren, beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation, through sanctification by the Spirit, and faith in the truth." Think about this, God has not destined you for wrath, but to obtain salvation (1 Thessalonians 5:9). See the similarity? They gave thanks to God for them, because God has chosen them from the beginning for salvation. God is not figuring out what he is going to do with people in the midst of tribulation. From the beginning, God had His plan. He chose us for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit, and faith in the Truth, and part of this package deal for believers in the church age is being delivered from this wrath.

In the context of 2 Thessalonians chapter two, that is a description of the wrath and salvation. Obviously, salvation includes sanctification by the Spirit, and we entered into that through faith in the truth, but look at the trajectory that he sets verse fourteen, "It was for this he called you, through our gospel." In other words, this is what God's plan is for you. God called us so that we may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus. Look at how the road between believers and unbelievers gets farther and farther apart. They rejected the Gospel. They love the pleasures of unrighteousness. The anti-Christ is going to come. They are going to follow his lies, and they are going to face the wrath of God when Jesus comes back. Then they are going to be thrown into the lake of fire. That is their trajectory. As for believers, we heard the Gospel Message (2 Thessalonians 1:10). We believe the Gospel, and as we believe it, we are set apart, and not only that, but as believers we are ultimately destined to obtain salvation from the day of the Lord, and ultimately to gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

A mirror-image

What I find here, then, is Paul is mirroring what he said in 1 Thessalonians. This is a strong literary feature. In fact, there are other places this happens in 1 and 2 Thessalonians. In 1 Thessalonians chapter five, the unsaved world thinks all is well and judgement comes upon them unexpectedly. That is in the context of the day of the Lord. In 2 Thessalonians chapter two, the unsaved world embraces the lies of anti-Christ. They are unsuspecting of any threat of judgement. And again, this is in the context of the day of the Lord. See how Paul is saying the same thing? He says that the unsaved will not escape the judgement of God (2 Thessalonians 2:12). God's plan for believers is different from His plan for the unsaved world, and it's marked by the contrastive term *but* (1 Thessalonians 5:4). In 2 Thessalonians, we also see that God's plan for believers is different from His plan for the unsaved world, marked again by a contrastive *but* (2 Thessalonians 2:13).

In 1 Thessalonians chapter five, God has destined believers for salvation, which in context includes deliverance from the day of the Lord. The word *salvation* cannot be understood apart from its context in the day of the Lord. Think about this. When you read the book of James, for an example, we see that the prayer of faith will save the sick. Salvation, in this context, is deliverance from physical illness. When the disciples were on the boat and said, "Lord, save us," in this context, salvation meant being saved from the storm. The word salvation has to be understood in its context, and here it means salvation from the day of the Lord. In 2 Thessalonians chapter two, we see that God has chosen believers for salvation, which in context includes deliverance from the coming wrath. Salvation cannot be understood apart from its context of the day of the Lord. When you get to the end of 1 Thessalonians chapter five, Paul says, "Therefore encourage one another." And in 2 Thessalonians chapter two, Paul says, "Comfort one another," and so the beauty of this structure is a literary parallel.

This shows us that Paul taught something that they previously believed. Then they got a false letter that confused their thinking, and then he wrote them 2 Thessalonians to teach them the same thing again, and so the two books help us understand each another. Paul is imploring the believers to continue to believe what he originally told them. They should be expecting God's Son to deliver them from the coming wrath. Look at verse fifteen, "So then brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught," traditions here not meaning like something handed down by human minds. He is talking about apostolic doctrine. He says, "Hold to the traditions which you were taught." Paul is saying, "Keep believing what we taught you," and then he prays for them, "Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace, comfort and strengthen your hearts in every good work and word."

Paul tells them to comfort one another with these truths, and when we look at it in context, he clarifies that it is in regards to the day of the Lord. First Paul says, "You are not in the day of the Lord, because it is impossible for it to be that time yet. None of this is happening," and then he says, "By the way, you're not going to be there for the day of the Lord anyway, just like I told you in first Thessalonians." So Paul is telling them to keep going and to not forget the Truth.

One last word of encouragement here. When you work in church planting ministries, you will find that the people you teach get confused at times, and you will have to teach them over and over and over again. I want to encourage you to be patient and faithful and remember all the times you have had to come back to those same basic truths that you were once taught. Keep teaching God's Word and trust Him to strengthen the hearts of those whom you serve.





DISCUSSION POINTS

Don't Forget the Truth

1. According to 2nd Thessalonians 2, why will the unbelievers perish under God's wrath in the Day of the Lord?
2. How does the previous question impact your view of missions?
3. According to 2nd Thessalonians 2, the believers had been led astray by a letter claiming to be from Paul. This passage shows us how important it is for believers to have the written word of God to cling to. How does this impact the way you view translation in a church planting effort?



ACTIVITIES

Looking through different eyes

1. Read 2nd Thessalonians 1 and 2 and make a list of those things that God has planned for believers and a contrasting list of those things that God says will happen to unbelievers.
2. Discuss the ways in which God's plan for believers differs from His plan for unbelievers in 2nd Thessalonians 2.