

THE WAY THE WORLD ENDS



2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

Ninth Message

Bernard Bell

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SERIES: FAITH, LOVE AND HOPE

“This is the way the world ends, Not with a bang but a whimper.” Often quoted, this is how T.S. Eliot ends his poem *The Hollow Men* (1925). He wrote this before nuclear weapons and the fear that the world would end in the catastrophic bang of mutually-assured destruction. Before the Doomsday clock which inches back and forth a few minutes before midnight. The Biblical words Armageddon and apocalypse have crossed over into popular vocabulary to describe a final climactic bang. Now they are increasingly used of climate change and global warming.

Interest in the “End Times” among Christians peaked in the 1970s with Hal Lindsay’s book *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970) and the movie *A Thief in the Night* (1972). Interest revived twenty years ago with Tim LaHaye’s 16-book Left Behind series (1995-2007). There are still many Christians who are fascinated in the End Times and in detailed timetables of the events that herald the end.

The Thessalonian Christians were interested in the end times but they were confused, uncertain and anxious. Several times in his two letters to them, Paul addresses the end times in order to assuage their concerns. Today we come to one of the most difficult passages in the New Testament. We need to remember that in all these passages about the end times, Paul is providing pastoral counsel for confused Christians. But I dare say that many have read today’s passage and come away only more confused. But there are others for whom this is a favorite chapter for it invites speculation about future events and characters. So I am aware as I speak to you that some of you have no idea at all what this chapter is about, while others of you have pored over this chapter a great deal, have read much about it, and have formed clear ideas of what it describes.

The church in Thessalonica was a young church, perhaps a year old. Because of hostile opposition, Paul had to flee the city after only a few weeks, cutting short his instruction of the new believers. A few months later Paul wrote two letters to the church in quick succession. It is clear from both letters that the hostile opposition continued. The church in Thessalonica was suffering persecution, in which some have died. This persecution has raised a number of questions in the minds of these young believers. In both letters, Paul addresses these questions pastorally, seeking to put the Christians at ease.

Today we come to the second chapter of the second letter, in which Paul responds to yet another concern about the end times.

I. The Concern (2:1-2)

Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers and sisters, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by the teaching allegedly from us—whether by a prophecy or by word of mouth or by letter—asserting that the day of the Lord has already come. (2 Thess 2:1-2 NIV)

In these first two verses Paul describes the problem, and it is clear

enough. The topic is “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him.” And the problem is that the believers are scared out of their minds because someone is telling them that the day of the Lord has already arrived.

The coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him: these two events belong together as a pair. Paul has already addressed them together in his first letter (1 Thess 4:13-18) to answer the church’s concern wondering what happens to those who have died, presumably in the persecution. Paul counsels them that their grief, which is natural, should not be the grief of those without hope. The Thessalonian letters are about faith, love, and hope, but the most important of these is hope. He reminds them of this hope in the return of Jesus.

When the Lord returns, the dead in Christ will rise in resurrection bodies, those who are still alive will join them, and together they will meet their returning Lord. The word for this return is *parousia*. It is a term that would have been familiar to them living in a Roman provincial capital. The word was used to describe the arrival of a senior dignitary, such as the emperor or a governor, to make an official visit to a city. As he approached the city, the leading citizens would come out of the city some distance to meet him and escort him in. Paul applies this imagery to the return of Jesus. The dead and the living Christians are gathered together and together they are gathered to the Lord whom they escort to earth. “And so we will be with the Lord forever” (4:17).

Though Paul has reassured them about this in his first letter, they are again anxious. Somehow, word has gotten back to Paul that they are unsettled—we could better translate that as scared out of their wits. What has caused this alarm? Someone has been telling them that the day of the Lord has already come. Paul doesn’t know how they have picked up this idea. He wonders if it is a word of prophecy or a word of teaching or a letter that someone is claiming to be from Paul. The source is unknown but the effect is clear: the believers are scared and troubled.

Some readers suppose this means that they think the Rapture has happened and they have been left behind. Perhaps they are now singing “I wish we’d all been ready.” The Rapture is the idea that Jesus returns secretly to snatch the church out of the world for some years prior to his visible return, during which interval there is tribulation on earth. But the idea of the Rapture is a recent misunderstanding of the idea of *parousia*, a term which was well understood in the first century.

The *parousia* of Jesus will usher in the day of the Lord. This day is a familiar concept in the Old Testament. It is a day with two aspects: salvation and judgment. These two are opposite sides of the same coin. It is the time when God puts things right, bringing judgment upon his enemies and salvation for his people. The Thessalonians had previously been concerned about this also, so he addressed it in his first letter (1 Thess 5:1-11). It seems that they were worried that on the day of the Lord they would be recipients not of salvation

but of judgment. Paul reminds them that “God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ...so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him” (5:10-11). He assures them that they are God’s people in Christ, that God looks with favor upon them, and that their destiny is salvation. On the day of the Lord they will be reunited with their dead brethren, and they will all be together with the Lord.

Now the Thessalonians are scared witless. A false teacher, claiming to speak for Paul, has led them astray by asserting that the Day of the Lord has actually arrived. They are afraid because they fear they are under God’s judgment, as indicated by their persecution and suffering. God must be angry with them. How will Paul reassure them and restore their hope? His answer is complex to say the least!

Paul does not give a simple answer. Instead he gives a much bigger picture to show how their persecution fits into the great drama of salvation history. There is more going on than they are aware of, more than their specific persecution in Thessalonica. There are unseen forces at work. There is a cosmic conflict over power and truth.

2. Paul’s Counsel (2:3-12)

2.1 Not until (2:3-4)

Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God. (2:3-4)

Paul assures them the day of the Lord has not yet come. It cannot have come because there are two things that must happen first: the rebellion comes and the man of lawlessness is revealed. There is an event: the rebellion, a defiance of the established order. And there is a person who is described in four ways: he is the man of lawlessness, the personification of lawlessness or rebellion. He is the son of destruction, the one who brings destruction in his wake but is himself doomed to destruction. He is the enemy, the one who opposes. And he is the self-exalter, the one who has an undue sense of his own self-importance. Putting these four descriptions together, whom do we have? The whole package is of one who sets himself up as equal to and opposed to the one true God, a creature who refuses to worship the Creator; more than that, who exalts himself as equal to the Creator and sets himself up as one to be worshiped. Paul doesn’t tell us who this individual is, but certain people would have come to mind. Paul knows that this is going to happen because there has been a string of people throughout history who have behaved this way.

Pharaoh fits the bill. Indeed many Ancient Near Eastern kings did. More particularly, the kings of Babylon did. And Pharaoh and the kings of Babylon persecuted God’s people. Our kids’ message was of Daniel in the lion’s den (Dan 6). Our Scripture reading was of Daniel’s three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, in the fiery furnace (Dan 3). In each case they were condemned to brutal death because they refused to acknowledge the king as god. King Nebuchadnezzar erected an enormous statue to which all were required to fall down and worship. King Darius issued an edict that people could pray only to him, not to God. The faithful Jews refused, even though they knew that they would face the fiery furnace and the lions’ den. They stood firm and remained faithful in the face of intense pressure. They remained loyal to the true God and refused

to give their allegiance to a human being, even the king, even a king who held over them the power of life and death. Our kids’ song expressed Daniel’s resolve:

Dare to be a Daniel!
Dare to stand alone!
Dare to have a purpose firm!
Dare to make it known!¹

The self-exaltation of the Babylonian kings was repeated in subsequent empires. In Paul’s day it was manifest in the Roman empire with its growing imperial cult that worshiped the emperor as divine. Paul knew that this pattern of rebellion against God was repeated again and again, and that behind this self-exaltation to equality with God was a cosmic power in rebellion against God, who uses human beings as his tools. But finally, this rebellion of the creature against the creator will reach its climax and the rebel will be revealed. Only then will the end come. Only then will the day of the Lord arrive.

Paul next explains the current situation and why the end has not yet come.

2.2 And now (2:5-7)

He begins with a little aside, a parenthetical comment:

Don’t you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things? (2:5)

We can be sympathetic with these Thessalonian Christians. Paul’s stay among them was cut short, and they had a lot to learn. But this does indicate that Paul’s early instruction of a new church included giving them the big picture of this cosmic conflict. He continues,

And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. For 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. (2:6-7)

There is a cosmic battle between good and evil. Evil is present but it is limited. The lawless one is being restrained. The power of lawlessness is already at work, but the Restrainer is holding it back until the proper time. Who is this restrainer? There have been many suggestions that range all over the map. The more common ones include Rome, the church, the Holy Spirit, the gospel, or the archangel Michael. The lack of consensus suggests the actual identity of the Restrainer is not central to Paul’s argument. He assumes they know who it is, for he used to talk with them about such matters.

To us today it might seem that the restraint is not working very well. People suffer. We are suffering under the pandemic. Has the restrainer lost his grip? There is evil and disorder in the world. As a result, people suffer whether they are Christians or not. But persecuted Christians suffer because they are specifically targeted for being Christians. Though we may not see it, the big picture is that God is in control. The Restrainer is acting under God’s directive. At the right time, the restraint will be removed.

In verse 8 Paul turns to what will happen then.

2.3 And then (2:8-10)

And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming. 9 The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with how Satan works. He will use all sorts of displays of power through signs and wonders that serve the lie, 10 and all the ways that wickedness deceives those who are per-

ishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. (2:8-10)

When the Restrainer is removed the Lawless One will be revealed. But, he is effortlessly overthrown by the Lord Jesus, who will destroy him with the breath of his mouth and annihilate him with the manifestation of his coming, the epiphany of his parousia. The revelation of the Lawless One is so that he might be destroyed by the returning Lord Jesus. There are two comings here: the Lawless One will come and the Lord Jesus will come. But it is not an equal match: the Lord Jesus effortlessly overcomes the Lawless One.

The coming of the Lawless One will be in accordance with how Satan work. How does Satan work? What is his m.o.? What is his SOP, his Standard Operating Procedure. Satan is the master of deception and lies. The Lawless One seems powerful; he performs signs and wonders as evidence of his power, but they are deceptive. They serve the lie not the truth. And the Lawless One, following Satan's pattern, uses every manner of wickedness that deceives people. There is a great deception that promotes the Lie, orchestrated by Satan the father of lies. Lies and wickedness go together. What you believe and how you behave go together.

But those who fall prey to the Lie and to the deception are heading to destruction. The Lawless One, operating as the instrument of Satan, is himself the Son of Destruction, the one heading to destruction. Operating according to Satan's playbook, he deceives humans who, as a result are themselves heading to destruction. The Lawless One seeks to exalt himself but in the end he is just leading his followers, or his victims, headlong into destruction. They have refused to love the truth and so be saved. They have refused to receive the gospel which is the power of God unto salvation. Instead, they have believed the Lie. Engulfed in the Lie they engage in wickedness: they are persecuting those who do love the truth, those who have received the gospel. They are persecuting the Thessalonian Christians who have received the word (1 Thess 1:6; 2:13), who have welcomed the gospel unto their salvation.

In verse 11 Paul returns to the current situation.

2.4 Therefore now (2:11-12)

For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness. (2:11-12)

Those persecuting the Thessalonians refused to receive the gospel when Paul proclaimed it in their city. Therefore God, in judgment, has sent them a powerful delusion so that they believe the Lie. They reject the truth and delight in wickedness. And this wickedness is being worked out in their persecution of the Christians who have accepted the truth and delight in it.

This may sound offensive to us that God should send a delusion upon people. But he is handing them over to a choice they have already made. They have rejected the gospel whereby they may be saved. They have chosen the Lie and so God hands them over to the Lie. This is the same message Paul would later write to Rome. "They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator... Because of this, God gave them over" (Rom 1:25-26). The fundamental sin is refusing to worship the Creator, instead worshiping created things. God gave them over to the sinful desires of their hearts. He gave them over to shameful lusts. He gave them over to a depraved mind (Rom 1:24, 26, 28).

In this handing over, "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness." But "in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed" and "it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom 1:16-18). Anyone can escape the Lie by embracing the gospel, as the Thessalonian Christians have done. They now love the truth and worship the Creator.

Paul has revealed the cosmic conflict behind the scenes, a conflict between the Truth and the Lie, a conflict between the Creator and creatures who set themselves up in the place of God. The SOP of the Lie is self-exaltation in opposition to God, even equality with God.

Isaiah describes this mindset:

**How you have fallen from heaven,
morning star, son of the dawn!
You have been cast down to the earth,
you who once laid low the nations!
You said in your heart,
"I will ascend to the heavens;
I will raise my throne
above the stars of God;
I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly,
on the utmost heights of Mount Zaphon.
I will ascend above the tops of the clouds;
I will make myself like the Most High."
But you are brought down to the realm of the dead,
to the depths of the pit. (Isa 14:12-15)**

This was addressed to a particular king of Babylon, we don't know which one. But this was true of all the kings of Babylon, as we see in the book of Daniel. It was true of all the ancient empires and their emperors. It was true of Rome. It is true of the Lawless One and of Antichrist. But this opposition to God, this self-exaltation as equal to God, is Satanic. This is not what God has created human beings for. Those who exalt themselves this way will be brought low.

The world today is full of such self-exaltation, full of people who have been deceived into the Lie. They use power and position to advantage themselves and disadvantage others. I'm sure some of you experience this, for this mentality runs through the business world, Silicon Valley, academia, politics.

But the Bible also shows another way, the way followed by Christ Jesus:

**Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used
to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!
Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:6-11)**

The pre-incarnate Christ had power and position within the Godhead. But instead of using it to his own advantage he humbled

himself. He entered human history and became one of us. He endured suffering and was faithful to the end, even unto death. Therefore, God has exalted him. It is fitting that every knee should bow to him. Christ Jesus humbled himself to serve God and advantage others, even us.

And we now are urged to be like him, for Paul prefaces this hymn, “In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:5). If we have power and position we are not to use it to our own advantage, but to advantage others. We are not to exalt ourselves.

The Thessalonian Christians have received the gospel that they might be saved. They have accepted the Truth. They have turned from being people of the Lie. But this has aroused hostility from their neighbors. This hostility is part of a much larger conflict. Paul has pulled back the curtain to show them the cosmic conflict. The end is not in doubt. The victor is certain. In the meantime, this cosmic view should reinforce their hope in the return of the Lord Jesus so that in the present they might stand firm and endure.

This is the way the world ends: in the defeat of the Lie and of the one who promotes it. Paul shows the Thessalonians this cosmic view not to satisfy their curiosity about end times, but to help them in the present day. To answer their crisis of confidence, to bolster their hope, and to give them the courage to endure their persecution.

This the way the world ends. There will be destruction: the Lawless One is the son of destruction; he is headed to destruction. All

those who have followed the Lie are headed for destruction. They have refused the gospel unto salvation. But the gospel is available. The persecutors can turn and be saved. Just like Paul did: he was once a persecutor.

But this is not the end of the world. Rather, it will be the end of the world only as we know and experience it. But beyond lies a world made new. A world where there will be no more hope, because hope has been realized; where there will be no more faith, for our faith shall be sight; but where love will endure. We will be fully conformed into Christ’s image, and we will worship the one who is worthy to be worshiped. Meanwhile the church is to be a foretaste of this world, living counter-culturally, or rather, living the right way up. Living the Jesus way, according to the truth, according to the gospel.

As we live in faith, in love, and in hope, may we know Jesus and make him known.

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word. (2 Thess 2:16-17)

1. Philip Bliss, *Dare to Be a Daniel* (1873).

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