



## WHEN GOD GETS THE LAST WORD

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 2 Thessalonians 1:1-12  
 First Message  
 Gary Vanderet  
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We all enjoy stories that end with the good guys winning and the bad guys losing. We can handle pain and loss as long as justice prevails in the end. We probably began to think this way as children when we were introduced to fairy tales. Cinderella was continually put down by her cruel stepmother and stepsisters. When she finally got invited to the grand ball, at the stroke of midnight her gown changed into the rags she wore earlier that evening, and her beautiful coach turned into a pumpkin. But everything would be fine in the end. The glass slipper fit her perfectly; she married the prince and lived happily ever after. I don't know how I would have felt as a child if one of those ugly stepsisters tried the glass slipper and it fit her. Another childhood character I found appealing was Robin Hood, the man who stole from the rich and gave to the poor. I wondered whether it was right to do that, but I felt it probably was because those poor people needed money more than the rich. But what if Robin Hood had a Swiss bank account? How would I have felt if he was stealing all the money for himself? That would have been tough to handle.

The reason for this is that deep down, we all want to see justice prevail. But that doesn't always happen in the real world, where the weak and helpless get pushed around. In the real world, the wicked stepsister gets the glass slipper. The people we trusted, who appeared to be selfless and loving, often turn out to be greedy self-seekers. As we see this going on all, in the words of the poet, "truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne," it's easy to become disillusioned and cynical.

That is why we read Psalm 73 earlier this morning—because our life experiences help us relate to the words of the psalmist. As we begin our studies in Second Thessalonians, I want to look first at this psalm. The Thessalonians were facing the same problem as the author of Psalm 73. As the psalmist surveyed his world, it was obvious that he lived in a world of hurt. He saw the prosperity of the wicked, and he became prejudiced against God. He could not understand why bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people. That did not make any sense to him. There did not seem to be any moral order in the universe. He was trying hard to do what was right, and God was not rewarding him for his efforts.

The psalmist opens with a statement of his theology:

**Surely God is good to Israel** [that is, he is good to his people],  
**To those who are pure in heart.** (Ps 73:1, NIV)

The author considered himself to be pure in heart in the sense that he worshipped God; he was a God-fearing man. But his theology did not jibe with his experience, as he goes on to say:

**But as for me, my feet had almost slipped;**

**I had nearly lost my foothold.  
 For I envied the arrogant  
 When I saw the prosperity of the wicked.  
 They have no struggles;  
 Their bodies are healthy and strong** [They are fat, dumb and happy.]  
**They are free from the burdens common to man;  
 They are not plagued by human ills.  
 Therefore pride is their necklace;**  
 [They thumb their noses at God and get away with it.]  
**They clothe themselves with violence.** (vv 2-6)  
 [They go through life never giving God the time of day, and yet they prosper.] Verse 12:  
**This is what the wicked are like—  
 Always carefree, they increase in wealth.** (v 12)

This leads the psalmist to conclude:

**Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure;  
 In vain have I washed my hands in innocence.**  
 [He got nothing out of the deal he had made with God.]  
**All day long I have been plagued;  
 I have been punished every morning.**  
 [He doesn't understand why things aren't going better for him. He regards the world as unjust.]  
**If I had said, "I will speak thus,"  
 I would have betrayed your children.** (vv 13-15)

This was the forgotten factor. He could not undermine the faith of the family, so he went into the sanctuary.

**When I tried to understand all this,  
 It was oppressive to me  
 Till I entered the sanctuary of God;  
 Then I understood their final destiny.** (vv 16-17)

When he looked at the Word, and saw the face of God, he learned something he did not know before about the way God is running the world and the ultimate fate of the wicked. Verse 18:

**Surely you place them on slippery ground;  
 You cast them down to ruin.  
 How suddenly are they destroyed,  
 Completely swept away by terrors!** (vv 18-19)

With these verses from Psalm 73 as an introduction, let's turn now to the apostle Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians. This short letter was written a couple of months following the completion of the first letter. About twelve months earlier, Paul had preached the gospel in Thessalonica to people who had never heard it before, and they responded to the truth. But there were a few problems he wanted to address, one in particular concerning the coming of the Lord. There was still some confusion in the church about that. In fact, many of the Thessalonians did not understand the things he wrote concerning that subject in the first letter. Don't you find it encouraging that Paul

had to write a second letter to explain his first letter?

One result of this confusion was that there were some in the church who were not working. They were freeloading off others, and justifying their laziness by saying that Jesus was coming back at any moment, so why bother working? Paul has to correct that misunderstanding. Yet others, apparently, were protesting that Paul's words of praise in his first letter were not really deserved. Finally, the apostle wanted to address their disillusionment over the state of things in the world—the same problem that the writer of Psalm 73 wrestled with. The Thessalonians had made great sacrifices to follow then Lord, and life had become extremely difficult for them.

The first two verses of the letter are a salutation. In fact, they are almost identical to the opening two verses of the first letter. This was the standard introduction to New Testament letters written during this time period. Verse 1:

**Paul and Silvanus and Timothy** [his friends who were associated with him in the ministry in Thessalonica] **to the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.** (2 Thess 2:1-2, NASB)

The Thessalonians, like us, have two addresses. They were in Thessalonica, but more importantly, they were in God. That is true of each of us too, no matter where we live. We also live "in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." How these words must have encouraged this young church in Thessalonica, knowing that God was the source of their protection.

Next, Paul offers a word of thanksgiving for these brethren. Verse 3:

**We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as is only fitting, because your faith is greatly enlarged, and the love of each one of you toward one another grows ever greater;** (1:3)

Notice here two of Paul's triad of the really important things in life: faith and love. The Thessalonians didn't have much else. Times were hard. Many of them had lost the ability to support themselves and their families. They were being pushed around, abused and opposed. Paul acknowledges these difficulties, but he reminds them of what they still have, the things that really matter. They had God; he was reliable, he could be counted on; and they had each other. These are the relationships that endure in life.

Having been Christians for but a year, however, they had only a portion of these qualities. They made mistakes. They struggled in their trust for God and their love each other. But, Paul says, "you are growing." That is what God is looking for. I am learning that God doesn't expect perfection. It is all right to make mistakes. It is all right to stumble and fall, to be weak. The important thing is that we are growing.

Paul uses two words here to describe this growing process: *enlarged*, and *grows*. The first word is descriptive of the inward process, like growth in a tree, which can't be seen. The second word has to do with the outward manifestation of that growth. It begins internally, with faith. We begin to cling to God and rely on him more; and the outward manifestation of that trust is love. We become more

gentle, caring, tender and thoughtful. By God's love, our love grows. One can't love from a vacuum. That is why, when we are struggling, the place to begin is loving someone, not gritting our teeth and trying harder. We must begin by drawing close to God, reminding ourselves of how much he loves us. It is a matter of putting our roots down into God and letting love flow out of that relationship.

Paul goes on to say that he speaks proudly of the Thessalonians, because they were believing and loving in the midst of circumstance that made it hard to believe and love. Verse 4:

**therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure.** (1:4)

They kept on trusting God and loving each other, despite the hard times they were experiencing. That's the rub, isn't it? It's not hard to love God and each other during a Sunday morning church service, when our hearts are moved by the beauty of the worship and the love of our brothers and sisters. But afterwards, we have to go home. That's when hard reality sets in. Some of you return to a moody spouse, others to unsympathetic parents, yet others to ungrateful children, or difficult employers. Then it is hard to keep trusting God and loving each other, isn't it? You wonder why you have to go through those times, "Is it ever going to end?" you ask. "Will there ever be a time when I don't have to struggle to believe? When it will be easier to love?"

Paul goes on to explain some things about the Thessalonians' suffering and struggle. Verse 5:

**This is a plain indication** [the hard times, the persecution, the struggle, the wear and tear, the hardness of life, all this, says Paul, is a plain indication] **of God's righteous judgment so that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering.** (1:5)

Here Paul is explaining the relationship between growth in faith and love and hard times. In a remarkable statement, he says that the hard times are really the hand of God upon the Thessalonians. Now let us be clear about one thing: God doesn't send the hard times. He is not behind the principalities and powers that assail us. But he *permits* the hard times. In a sense, according to Paul, that is the judgment of God upon our sin. That is a different way of looking at suffering, isn't it? It is one thing to see our suffering as the fiery darts of the evil one, and to ascribe all of our difficulties to our circumstances and those that others contrive for us, but it is quite another thing to see our suffering as the judgment of God on our sin. God hates sin so much, he will do anything he must to deal with it in the lives of his children.

This is not the only place we encounter this rather surprising revelation. There is a parallel passage to these words of Paul in 1 Peter 4. Life was even harder for those to whom Peter was writing. Nero was on the throne, and Christians were suffering imperial persecution. It wasn't just a matter of having Christian stores boycotted. These believers were being martyred in the Coliseum. They were giving up their lives for the cause of Christ. Tradition records that Peter himself was crucified upside down. Let's read what Peter says about this. First Peter 4:12-18:

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. (1 Pet 4:12-16, NIV)

And now, listen to these pregnant words, from verse 17:

**For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God;**

That gives an entirely new perspective on suffering, doesn't it? When people oppose us, that is the judgment of God on sin. When our children rebel, and use drugs, when we have difficulties in our marriages, is it God that sends these things? No, but he permits them in this fallen world. All of these events are guided and directed, screened by God's love, to the sin in our lives, to rid us of the things we are inclined to hang on to.

The fact is, we prefer to hang on to the things of this life rather than God himself. Suffering and pain wean us from the idolatries that rob us of the joy that God wants for us. Richard Foster said: "God becomes a reality to us when he becomes a necessity." God must pry our fingers loose from all our possessions, the things aren't going to last or satisfy, so that we will learn to rely on him alone.

Although it may not be apparent to us, God is making us into something very beautiful. He is taking away our fear of losing, our tendency to hold on to things too tightly, our temptation to want to control everything, so that we can be sweeter, wiser, mellower, easier to get along with. Thus we have the words of Paul in this letter: "For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God." To what end? The apostle tells us, in 2 Corinthians: "This momentary light affliction is producing in us an eternal weight of glory."

Now there is another side of the issue. Not only is God judging his people, the church, he also will judge the world, those who oppose us. Verse 6:

**For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, (1:6)**

This is the other side of Jesus, the side we don't talk about much. This is Jesus in the temple, his eyes flashing, overturning the tables of the money changers and driving them out. This is not "gentle Jesus, meek and mild." This is Jesus as judge.

And one of these days he is going to pay back trouble to those who trouble you. Verse 7:

**and {to give} relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, (1:7)**

Paul assures the Thessalonians that God is going to even the score. He will repay with affliction those who afflict, and bring relief to them. That word *relief* is the Greek word *anesin*. This is probably the word from which the pain relief product got its name. You could say that Paul is telling the Thessalonians to take a couple of *anacin* and wait till

the Lord comes back!

Next, Paul identifies those whom the Lord will repay. Verse 8:

**dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed—for our testimony to you was believed. (1:8-10)**

One day, when Jesus comes back, he will judge those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel. Some people listening to this are probably thinking, "That's just what I thought about God! What about these poor, ignorant people off in Africa or in the Australian outback who have never heard about God? You say that Jesus is going to come back and judge them all? That is just what I thought Christians believe."

If that is what you are thinking, you should know that Paul makes it very clear in the opening chapter of his letter to the Romans that *everyone knows God*. No one is ignorant of God. Did you know that? The knowledge of God is written on the hearts of everyone who was ever born. Everyone has an instinctive knowledge that there is a God. And that knowledge is corroborated again and again by nature. There is an enormous amount of revelation in nature.

A number of years ago I read a fascinating book entitled *Life and Death in Shanghai*, by Nian Chang. The book is a marvelous testimony of courage. After the communists overthrew Chiang Kai Chek in 1949, Nian and her husband decided to stay in Shanghai, where he was a general manager for Shell Oil Company, the only multi-national company that chose to remain in China. When he died, in 1957, Shell hired Nian as a special advisor. In 1966, Mao Tse Tung launched his proletarian revolution, and Nian was arrested. She was beaten and put in prison, where she remained in solitary confinement for over six years.

One account in her book parallels what Paul is saying here. One afternoon, in her second or third year in prison, a spider crawled into her cell and began to climb up one of the bars. She said, "I watched it climb steadily up the iron bar, and it was such a long walk for this tiny, little creature." When it reached the top, it swung out and descended on a silken thread spun from its body. After it secured its thread to the other end of the bar, it crawled back to where it had started and swung out in a new direction. She said she was fascinated by the fact that this spider knew exactly what to do and where to take the next thread, without any hesitation or mistakes. The spider knew its job. When it had made the frame, it proceeded to make a web that was intricate and absolutely perfect, with all the strands evenly spaced. As Nian watched this architectural feat, she was flooded with questions: "Who had taught that little spider to make the web? Could it really have acquired that skill through evolution? Or did God make that spider and endow it with the ability to make a web so that it could catch food and perpetuate its species?" The spider helped her to see that God was real and he was in control. From then on, Mao Tse Tung and his revolutionaries seemed much less menacing. She says, "I

felt a renewal and a hope surge inside of me.”

There is a world of revelation in nature. No one is shut up from that knowledge.

When Paul speaks of “those who do not know God,” he is not saying they are ignorant. He is saying they have *closed their minds* to the knowledge of God. This is not a problem of ignorance; it is a moral problem. They have decided they don’t want to know God. They don’t want to acknowledge him. They don’t want to listen to the gospel, the good news that God loves us so much that he came to earth to die for us. They have closed their hearts to all of that. Paul says there are people who have resolutely set their hearts against God. They don’t want him in their lives.

And tragically, in the end, God will give them what they want. God will not force truth upon people. If we do not want to know God, to love him in response to his love for us, he will let us have what we want. As C. S. Lewis put it: “we will have the terrible freedom that we have demanded.” That should not make Christians happy. It should fill us with deep sorrow that there are people who do not want God in their lives. Lewis is right when he says that hell is ultimately a provision of God’s love: God is merely letting people have what they want.

This passage is perhaps the most graphic description of hell to be found anywhere in the Bible. Paul describes hell as eternal separation “from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.” If people don’t want God’s presence and power, then he will let them have what they want: eternal separation from God. Can you think of a sentence more terrible than that?

In this life we never experience total separation from the presence and power of God. Even the most resolute atheist has never felt that. In this world, even to those who have turned their backs on him, God has given love, laughter, families, health, and the beauty of creation. He gives us our minds, our intellect. He even gives us the ability to contrive arguments against his existence; even that is a gift. It is what theologians call “common grace,” grace that is given even to unbelievers. God gives to everyone the ability to enjoy life. But eventually, he will give people what they want. If they don’t want God, then he will let them go.

I want to quote a section of a message on hell by Bill Hybels, which brings into focus the terrible separation of that place:

One writer calls it the bottomless pit. And that conjures up dreamlike feelings of falling away—falling, falling, falling. You’ve all had dreams like that, where when you woke your heart was beating because you were falling. Picture in your mind hanging over a precipice, and God is hanging onto you, and you’re hanging onto him. And you decide you don’t need him anymore. So you let go. But the moment you let go you know you made a mistake. You’re falling and every moment you know you are falling further and further away from the only source of help and truth and love, and you realize you made a mistake and you can’t get back up and you fall further and faster and further and faster into spiritual oblivion, and you know you’re going the wrong direction and you’d give anything to go back but you can’t and you fall and you fall and you fall and you fall. How long? Forever. And all the while you’re falling, you’re saying, “I’m further now, I’m further. I’m further from the only source of hope, truth and love. In hell there is never the bliss of annihilation. You’d give anything for annihilation, but it’s unavailable, only the conscious continuation of emotional anguish, physical anguish, relational anguish, and spiritual anguish forever.

God will one day let go of those who do not want him in their lives.

Paul now concludes this opening chapter with a prayer. Verse 11:

**To this end also we pray for you always that our God may count you worthy of your calling, and fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power; in order that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ. (1:11-12)**

Notice that Paul doesn’t pray that God will bring the persecution to an end. What he prays is that God will continue to judge the church so that it can become everything that he wants it to be. This whole process of judgment is what is causing Christians to be worthy of their calling, making them more believing and more loving. The apostle prays that all of those good desires we have deep down to be what God intends for us would be fulfilled.

And there is only one way to get there: it is through the hard things: the tests, the pain, the sufferings of life. These are the tools that God uses to shape us into the people he wants us to be.

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## SIGNALS OF THE SECOND COMING

Catalog No. 1054  
2 Thessalonians 2:1-12  
Second Message  
Gary Vanderet  
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Our text today from Second Thessalonians is an extremely difficult passage to interpret. One commentator describes these verses as “the most obscure and difficult in all of Paul’s writings.” Although well-meaning Christians disagree about it, however, our different interpretations need not separate us.

In our last study we learned that a group of persecutors were disturbing the peace of the Thessalonian believers. Life had become hard for these new Christians, and they were struggling with the injustice of it all. Certain false teachers were in their midst as well, stirring up controversy with regard to the second coming of the Lord.

Before we get into the text, I will make a couple of preliminary comments. First, I want to reiterate that all authentic Christians believe that Jesus is coming again. I don’t know of any real Christians who dispute that truth. Jesus said it. The angels confirmed it. The apostles wrote about it. In this passage, Paul describes the Lord’s coming in very clear terms. At Jesus’ ascension, the angels said, “This same Jesus who you have seen go will come in like manner.” C. S. Lewis said, “The pages of the New Testament rustle with the rumor of hope.” So this notion that Jesus is coming again is woven through the warp and woof of the Scriptures. I don’t see how you can take the Bible seriously and fail to believe that one of these days, our Lord is coming back to set things right.

My second comment is this: The final manifestation of human history is going to be an extremely difficult time. Here is another thing that all Christians agree upon. Jesus described the consummation of history in terms of childbirth. As we get closer to the end of age, the contractions that bring about the end of history will increase in intensity and frequency. And the last great historical contraction will be unlike anything that has ever been seen before. The Scriptures describe this time as a period of great tribulation. Some would limit it to a finite number of years (seven, actually), while others hold that this seven-year period is a symbolic way of describing a completed portion of time. In other words, God in his sovereignty determines the amount of time that this final great convulsion, this spasm of evil will exist.

It seems that in the end, God simply takes his hand off of men and women and says, “All right. You can do what you please.” All along he has been restraining evil, but now he will allow people to do what they have

been wanting to do. When that happens, everything that is in the hearts of men and women who do not love God will come out. And the Scriptures teach that all of that evil will be embodied in one person, an individual who is described in various places as “the man of sin,” “the man of lawlessness,” or “the antichrist.”

As we come to our text now, we see that this is the person of whom the passage speaks. Second 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 may 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. (2 Thess 2:1-2, NASB)**

The word Paul uses for “coming” here was used in that day of the appearance of a dignitary who put in an appearance. The apostle says that one of these days, our Lord will come; he will put in an appearance (*parousia*); and when he comes, he will gather Christians to himself. Now it is clear from this passage that this is the second coming, because later in the text, Paul describes our Lord meting out judgment to the man of sin. So this will be a visible, obvious coming of Christ; and at that point, we will be gathered together with him. This is the passage that has led many to believe in the improbability of a pretribulation rapture, i.e., that the church will be taken out of this time of trouble, either before or during this period.

The Thessalonians, however, thought that the Lord had already come, and they were already in this period of trouble. A letter, purportedly from the apostle Paul, was circulating, or some rumor of a prophetic utterance was being reported, saying that the Lord had already come. We don’t know what the Thessalonians thought that coming was like; perhaps they thought it was like the first coming. But they were confused and shaken by it. That word “shaken” here means to be shaken from one’s convictions or composure. It was used of ships being forced from their moorings by the pressure of a storm. Furthermore, the tense of the verb “to be disturbed” seems to imply a continuing state of anxiety.

The Thessalonians needed a word of instruction to help steady them from the effects of this rumor. That is why Paul says, “Let no one in any way deceive you.” According to the apostle, that day, the coming of the

Lord Jesus, will not arrive until two other things have happened: a certain event must occur, and a certain person must appear. Verse 3:

**Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God. (2:3-4)**

If the church were to be raptured before this great tribulation, the simple answer to their dilemma would be, "No, this is not the day of the Lord. If it were, you would not be here; you would already be with the Lord." But Paul doesn't say that. Rather, he says there were certain signs they needed to be looking for that preface the coming of the Lord, certain indications that that event was imminent. Paul lists two of these signs: A great rebellion or apostasy (a general turning away from the truth); and the manifestation of the "man of lawlessness," as he is described here, the one who takes his seat in the temple.

A little background information will help us understand what Paul is saying. There is theme in the Scriptures, particularly in the Old Testament, that says that occasionally in history, the evil that is in the hearts of mankind becomes embodied in one individual. When that happens, we see ourselves for who we really are. At the climax of history, however, there will be one man who more than any other will epitomize the spirit of lawlessness that is resident within all of us, apart from God's activity. This person will be a visual aid of what everyone would be like if God did not restrain the evil in us.

Throughout history, there have been various personages whom we could call the "man of lawlessness." The prophet Daniel was in captivity in Babylon in 586 BC, during the time when the Babylonians destroyed the temple in Jerusalem, the edifice that was built by Solomon, in the 10th century BC. Daniel was deeply distressed by the desecration of the holy place, but God revealed to him that there would be a series of desecrations of the temple. Actually, there are four desecrations described in the Book of Daniel. The first was this Babylonian destruction of the temple.

The second was the destruction of the temple in the middle of the second century BC by the Syrian general, Antiochus Epiphanes. He called himself, Epiphanes ("God manifest"; he claimed to be God). The Jews, in a word-play on his name, called him "Antiochus Epimanes"—"Antiochus the madman." This man desecrated the temple by offering a pig on the altar. Daniel describes in great detail the character of this individual, referring to him in terms of the embodiment of evil. If you want to see what evil looks like, then picture this man, seated on the throne of God, claiming to be God himself.

The third destruction of the temple took place in AD 70, when the Roman armies burned it to the ground.

Now there is a fourth destruction that is yet future. It was future from the standpoint of Daniel, and it was future from the standpoint of Jesus. (Jesus actually refers to it in Matthew 24.) And this destruction is future from the time of Paul. This is the revelation of the man of lawlessness who takes his seat in the Temple of God, claiming to be God, as Paul describes. This is the final revelation of what mankind is really like, apart from the grace of God.

Apart from that grace, we would all consider ourselves to be God. That is our fundamental problem: We want to be God. We want to have everything revolve around us and everyone pay attention to us. We want to enthrone ourselves as God. All of this began back in the Garden of Eden. When you hear someone saying that we are "one with the earth," what they are actually saying is that man is God. We ought to hear the hiss in the background. This is the lie that was first voiced by the serpent when he slithered up to Eve and said, "You can be like God." That is the big lie that pervades the human race. And Paul says that in the end, that lie will be embodied, epitomized in one person, who will actually enthrone himself in the temple and claim to be God.

Howard Butt, in an article entitled "The Art of Being the Big Shot," puts man's pride in perspective when he says:

It is my pride that makes me think I can call my own shots. That feeling is my basic dishonesty. I can't go it alone. I can't rely on myself. I am dependent on God for my very next breath. It is dishonest of me to pretend that I am anything but a man, small, weak, limited. So living independent of God is self-delusion. It is not just a matter of pride being an unfortunate little trait and humility being an attractive little virtue. It is my inner psychological integrity that is at stake. When I am self-dependent, I am lying to myself about what I am. I am pretending to be God and not man. My independence is the idolatrous worship of myself, the national religion of hell.

Now I want to refer to two New Testament texts. First, the letter of 1 John. Chapter 2, verse 18:

**Dear children, it is the last hour;** [The world is getting old, John says. He is referring to the period in which we live, which began when Jesus came the first time and will close when Jesus comes the second time.] **and just as you heard that antichrist** [the one who personifies evil in the world] **is coming, even now many antichrists have arisen;** [This prefix "anti" in Greek can mean both "against" or "substitute for." This person who comes will be much like Jesus. We might expect him to be a dirty old man, but he is not manifested in that way; he is very much like the Messiah.] **from this we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not**

**really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us [i.e., with the apostles]; but they went out, in order that it might be shown that they all are not of us. But you have an anointing from the Holy One, [You have the Spirit of Truth, who has spoken through the apostles; you have the word of God] and you all know. [You don't know everything about everything, but you know everything you need to know about God.] I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it, and because no lie is of the truth. Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son. (1 John 2:18-22)**

Whenever you hear someone say that Jesus is not the Messiah, that Jesus is not God, that is the "spirit of the antichrist." It is not necessarily the antichrist, but it is this spirit of antichrist that pervades society today. People are saying that Jesus is not God, man is. That is the message we hear on all sides, the notion that we don't need God, we don't need a savior. Man is the measure of all things, we are told. We merely need the resources that are resident in ourselves.

What this is saying, of course, is that man is God. We hear that lie in the popular songs we hum, in the television shows we watch, in the movies we flock to see. It is the subtle lie that is insinuated into all of society. It gets through our defenses, and after awhile we start believing it. So John says, "Beware!" There will be many antichrists along the way. But then, there will be one who will embody this lie.

Now, a text from Revelation 13, verse 1:

**And I saw a beast coming up out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads, and on his horns were ten diadems, and on his head were blasphemous names. (Rev 13:1)**

The dragon in this passage (he is first mentioned in verse 2) is the evil one who is responsible for the evil that is going on now, and will go on in the future. John sees a beast coming out of the sea. This creature is usually identified with certain political entities. Certainly, it referred to the Roman Empire in Paul's day. But it also seems to refer to some latter-day manifestation, some political entity at the very end of history, just before our Lord comes back. Then, nationalism will be elevated to the level of idolatry, and people will worship the state. This is what people did in John's day. A cult of the emperor developed, which became a form of antichrist. Christians were commanded to substitute the words *kyrios kaisar* ("Caesar is Lord") for their Christian confession, *kyrios Jesus* ("Jesus is Lord"). Citizens of the Roman Empire had to bow down to the Caesar. If Christians refused to do this, they were taken to the arena.

In verse 11, John says he saw another beast coming out of the earth:

**And I saw another beast, coming out of the earth; and he had two horns like a lamb, and he spoke as a dragon. (Rev 13:11)**

This is a very significant statement. This beast looks gentle, benign. He seems a grandfatherly sort, thoughtful and kind. But he speaks like a dragon. In other words, what comes out of his mouth is the lie of the evil one, the lie that says, "Believe in man." He speaks like Satan. That has been the lie of the beast since the beginning. We all know people who hold this viewpoint. That is what makes the lie so seductive—because many who believe this seem to have their lives together. They seem to have wonderful families, to be caring people. And yet, when they speak to us, we hear the lie, "Believe in yourself."

John goes on to say, in verse 16, that those who follow this second beast receive on their forehead a mark:

**And he causes all, the small and the great, and the rich and the poor, and the free men and the slaves, to be given a mark on their right hand, or on their forehead, and he provides that no one should be able to buy or to sell, except the one who has the mark, either the name of the beast or the number of his name. Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for the number is that of man; and his number is six hundred and sixty-six. (Rev 13:16-18)**

We need to understand the symbolism here. I don't believe John is talking about a literal number which some will bear during this period of great tribulation. He is referring to something that is in the head (it's in the attitude), and on the hands (it's in the actions). And it has to do with man. John says "for the number is that of man." Six is the number of man; three appears to be the number for God in Scripture; and six tripled is man elevated to the level of God. It is secular humanism again.

In contrast, John describes the 144,000 in chapter 14 who have Jesus' name and the Father's name written on their foreheads. In other words, they have made the Lord the center of their lives, in contrast to those whom John describes as the "earth dwellers," those whose perspective goes no farther than what they can see, hear, touch and taste—those who center on themselves. John says that there are really only two kinds of people in the world: those who center on themselves and those who center on the Lord. But behind the philosophy of self-centeredness is the evil one, whose purpose is to destroy.

Getting back to Second Thessalonians now, Paul describes this process as "the mystery of lawlessness." Verse 5:

**Do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things? [Here is another reason this passage is difficult to understand: We are not privy to "these things" that Paul is referring to.]**

**And you know what restrains him now, so that in his time he may be revealed. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way. (2:5-7)**

This is the “mystery” that we have talking about: this notion that man is God. That is what causes lawlessness. Paul makes that clear in 2 Timothy, when he says that the trouble with the world is that people love themselves rather than God. That is what is at the root of all our struggles in our marriages and homes. That is why there is abuse and abortion and war—because we are centered on ourselves.

Paul says that this is a mystery, something we would never discover on our own. That is why good laws, good government and penal reform don't work—because they don't deal with the heart. The problem is far greater than ignorance, the environment or whatever. More education won't solve it, because it goes clear to the heart. The problem is that we are self-centered. And that attitude is going to continue to pervade society until the very end, when the one who is now restraining it, as the apostle puts it, is “taken out of the way.” In other words, God will simply take his hands off us. Then we will see what we are really like, when everything that is in our hearts will come out. So Paul says, “Don't be deceived.”

Next, Paul refers to the revelation of this “lawless one,” and his character. Verse 8:

**And then 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 is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive**

**the love of the truth so as to be saved. (2:8-10)**

Like Jesus, this one has a “coming” (the same word used for Jesus' coming). He will work miracles and wonders, just like our Lord, but they will be counterfeit. And he will have disciples (“those who perish”). There is a supernatural power at work that gives him his authority. He looks so good that he is going to deceive virtually the whole world, except those who have the mark of the Lord Jesus. Those who perish, according to Paul, do so, *because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved.*

So Paul concludes this discussion of the “man of lawlessness,” in verse 11:

**And for this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they might believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness. (2:11-12)**

In Matthew 24, Jesus describes the coming of this individual. He says that he will sound so plausible that were it not for the intervention of God, even the elect would be deceived. That is the problem today, isn't it? These appeals to be your own man, your own woman, sound so good. Live your own life, we are told, you have everything it takes. But we must be warned: We are easily deceived.

The text leaves us with the question: How can we avoid being deceived? How can we guard against being overwhelmed by the lie? Notice what Paul says. It is not that God wants everyone to be deceived, but when we choose to be deceived again and again, after awhile, God will let us believe the lie. He simply will take his hand off us. The only way to protect ourselves is to love the Scriptures. Read the Bible. Follow it and allow it to do its work. Paul has already said that the word of God is “at work in us who believe.” Here he says that the mystery of lawlessness is at work in the world. The lie is going out alongside the truth, and the only way to be kept from being deceived by it is to love the truth.

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## LIGHT FOR DARK DAYS

Catalog No. 1055

2 Thess 2:13-3:5

Third Message

Gary Vanderet

March 10th, 1996

It's a crazy world we live in. We only have to look at our culture to realize it is perishing. We have broken from our traditional past and are stumbling into a dark new age. As Bob Dylan said in the sixties, "the times, they are a-changin'". Here is how Dartmouth professor Jeffrey Hart put this:

A great many things happened all of a sudden in this country in the very recent past. Without going into the right and wrong of every case, I list them objectively. Within living memory, abortion was a felony in virtually every state in the nation. Today abortion is commonplace in America. Demands that it be federally funded are alleged to be rooted in the Constitution.

Within living memory, hard-core pornography was largely kept out of sight, usually by a rough agreement between sellers and authorities. Now the hard-core stuff is available on your newsstand.

Within living memory, school children recited the Pledge of Allegiance every morning, and in many schools simple prayers. At Christmas time, they sang Christmas carols. Suddenly all fell under proscription.

Within living memory, homosexuals were for the most part discreet. Suddenly, we find that they demand public legitimization of their peculiarity, stage parades and demand representation in governing bodies as a legitimate minority. Is there any question that a revolution has in fact been imposed on an unsuspecting nation?

Yes, we live in a crazy world. We kill human babies with impunity, but we protect baby seals. We censor lofty ideas that used to be believed and taught, but we tolerate all kinds of filth and pornography.

Living in such a world as ours takes a terrible toll on families. Parents feel impotent as the media seem to capture our children's minds with cold brutality and insane sexuality. And, as the apostle Paul points out in his second letter to the Thessalonians, it's going to get much worse before it gets any better. Faced with these conditions and that forecast, how can we live without compromising or giving in to despair?

If that is how you feel this morning, you are not alone. Believers in first century Thessalonica shared your concerns. In our text today, however, Paul shares certain truths with them, and with us, too, that are wonderfully comforting and assuring. Here is the good

news that counteracts the bad news. Chapter 2, verse 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. And it was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word {of mouth} or by letter from us. 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. (2 Thess 2:13-17, NASB)**

These verses are packed with profound truth. Here the apostle reviews the Christian's salvation. He reminds the Thessalonians of what has taken place in their hearts, recalling some theological truths that, although invisible, are just as real as the circumstances they found themselves in. There is an enormous amount of comfort in this paragraph that will help us endure the cold and loveless days in which we live.

First of all, Paul reminds us that the process of standing firm in the midst of a troubled world begins with the love of God. Regardless of how many unloving people are in your life, no matter how many have left you, God loves you and he will never forsake you. The apostle puts it this way: "But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord." Despite the detours, the moral lapses, the failures and the shortcomings in your life, God still loves you.

Yet we seem to resist this truth, despite how much emphasis the Bible puts on it. We are so conscious of our own failures and the mess we have made of our lives that we have a hard time believing that God really likes us. But that is where it all begins. Ray Stedman often quoted this little jingle:

*Isn't it odd  
that a being like God  
who sees the facade  
still loves the clod  
that He made out of sod.  
Now isn't that odd?*

Odd, but tremendously encouraging! Here is the answer to that low-grade depression that assails us, to the

lack of fulfillment and satisfaction that we so often feel. The only thing that produces security and significance in life is abiding in the love of God. The most significant truth that Jesus wanted to leave with his disciples was that he loved them. Do you know that love this morning? Maybe no one really cares about you. Maybe your spouse is cold and uncommunicative. Well, be assured that Jesus loves you. You are very important to him.

Now the most critical responsibility a Christian has is to understand and count on that love. That is what Paul describes in Ephesians as “being rooted and grounded in love,” or as the New English Bible puts it, “to have deep roots and firm foundations.” Like a well rooted tree or a well built house, these are pictures of stability. And the underpinning of that stability is love. Love is to be the soil in which our lives are rooted and built. To be “rooted and grounded in love” then is to live lives in which all our thoughts and actions spring from an awareness of how much God loves us.

Do you believe that? Do you believe that God is good even though life is tough? Or have you quietly given up the battle and taken over responsibility for your own well being? If you doubt God’s love, read the Psalms. They are filled with affirmations of his affection for us, stated in the oft-repeated words, “His lovingkindness endures forever.”

That is the first thing we need to know: that we are dearly loved by God.

The second thing is that we are chosen by God. Notice how Paul puts it: “because God has chosen you.” This could be translated, “for himself.” The mood of the verb indicates that this is a very personal thing. Many of you have wrestled from time to time with the issue of sovereignty and free will; how God’s choice works in concert with our human responsibility, and the seeming freedom we have to choose to be for or against God. I used to try to figure out those issues, but not any more. Now I am content with leaving them up to God. I don’t know how those two truths can work together, but they do. It seems the closer we get to God the more issues we discover that we don’t know much about. I don’t know how God can choose us and yet give us responsibility and freedom, and yet I know that this is what the Bible teaches.

The word that Paul uses for election here is not the term he normally uses for choice. Actually, the word occurs in only one other place in the New Testament. In Philippians, Paul is concerned about the two options he has in life, either to live or die, and he says he doesn’t know which he would prefer or which he would “choose.” That is precisely the meaning of the term “prefer.” God prefers us. This is the word that is used for picking certain pieces of fruit, choosing them because they are preferred. That is what we need to understand. In eternity, before you even were a twinkle in your father’s eye, God preferred you. He chose you. Have you ever been one of the last people chosen when

someone picked sides to play a game? What Paul wants us to know is that even though you may have been de-selected many times in your experience in this world, God chose you before you were even born.

In the very beginning, God loved you and chose you.

And not only did God choose you, he called you. When Paul uses that term, he assumes that we will respond. God invites and beckons us to himself and we come in response to that call. We may not realize it, but the longings that we have, the odd hungers and unsatisfied feelings we have that nothing can satisfy, are really God’s voice calling us to himself. We think that what we want is a successful career, a perfect family, or financial security, and yet we always struggle with that sense of dissatisfaction, that sense of restlessness that nothing will satisfy. That is God’s voice beckoning to us, calling us home.

And the purpose of that call, according to Paul, is salvation. Somewhere along the line God saw to it that someone shared the gospel with you. Perhaps it was in a Young Life or Campus Crusade for Christ meeting—it may even have happened just recently. God saw to it that you received enough information to respond to the gospel.

God loved us, he chose us, and called us to himself.

And then, says Paul, he began to sanctify us: “God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth.” Just as our choice and call are linked together, so this sanctifying process is linked with the work of the Holy Spirit and the work of faith. Our part is to believe the truth; God’s part is to sanctify us through the Spirit.

There is a great deal of mystery in this process. The Holy Spirit is working inside us, little by little, conforming us to the character of Christ, and at the same time we have a desire to respond in obedience to the truth. Both of these things are true. God is willing and is working inside us to do his will, and he is changing our hearts. And we also are willing, and the yearning of our hearts is to obey the truth. Our part is believing the truth. When we read the Scriptures, we take seriously what God is saying. We recognize, in contrast to those who “believe the lie,” that this book is truth, it is reality. It is true that the poor in spirit are blessed. It is true that we should love our wives as Christ loved the church. And that living Word of God that is planted inside us begins to grow. As Paul said earlier, it does its work in us, conforming us into the image of Christ.

And God uses all the circumstances of our lives to this end. Suffering plays its part here, rubbing away the rough edges, making us gentler and kinder. God uses our failures, teaching us to recognize our own inadequacy and how little we have to bring to any situation. He is more concerned that we learn humility than he is that we do everything perfectly. If we did everything right we would think that we were well under way. That is all part of the sanctifying work of the Spirit. And

delay is part of the process. God is not in a hurry. He is conforming us into the image of his Son Jesus Christ, and in the end we will be saved.

Notice how Paul puts in verse 13: "God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation." God chose us in the beginning to be saved! No one gets lost in the process. Someone said that God has "feet of wool and hands of steel." We don't always hear him coming, but once he has us, he won't let us go. He will hang on to you till the very end. You can't disqualify yourself. You can't de-select yourself. You are a part of the family.

And God is going to see to it that that sanctifying work goes on until we see our Lord Jesus face to face, and we find ourselves like him. That is what the apostle describes here in verse 14 as "gaining the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." That means that we will appear like our Lord Jesus, perfect in mind and body and spirit. What a staggering promise! No matter how obscure and unknown you may be here on earth, one day God will unveil before the whole universe what he has been doing through the centuries in bringing together a people who will share his glory. Remember the Transfiguration account in Matthew 17, where the Lord took Peter, James and John up on the mountain. Matthew wrote that Jesus was "transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his garments became as white as light." They saw his glory. It was a preview of his glory and their glory as well! That is the promise: one of these days we are going to share his glory.

The apostle Peter describes that process in these words from his first letter:

**Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade —kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. (1 Pet. 1:3-6)**

That is why Paul exhorts the Thessalonians, in verse 15, "So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word {of mouth} or by letter from us." Don't give up, he is saying. Don't become discouraged. Don't give in. Stand firm. During the Battle of Britain, the Prime Minister of England, Winston Churchill, attended the graduation ceremonies at his old public school. He was asked to say a few words, and he delivered a nine-word address. He said, "Never give up! Never give up! Never give up!" That is what Paul is telling us, too.

And secondly, Paul says, "hold to the traditions which you were taught." When the hard times come, go back and review what this book tells you that God has given you. The apostles, by means of the Holy Spirit, were given the thoughts of God, and those thoughts

were translated into words by means of the Holy Spirit. Those words then were written down on paper, given by the Holy Spirit. Those words then are preached by means of the Holy Spirit, and they are received by means of the Holy Spirit. It is truth from the mind of God. That is the process by which reality comes from the mind of God into our minds. So when the tough times come we need to hang on to God and never give up. Hang on to what you know is true. These are the mighty resources of God. Don't read the Bible to learn a list of rules. Read it to get to know God and to see what he has for you.

Some of you are living in circumstances where you desperately need faith in the unseen realities. I know, because many of you have told me as much. There are no promises that God will make your home into the home you long for, but he has promised to give you stability and supernatural help when the heat is on and all hell breaks loose. Can you trust him even though others never come through? Can you trust him that he is there even though you can't see him? Can you stand firm and hold onto the traditions?

Maybe you struggle with an habitual sin in your life. Just when you see progress, you fall on your face. Yet God tells you that "sin will not have dominion over you." Can you keep trusting his word? Can you pick yourself up and go on even though you keep falling down? C. S. Lewis once said, "No amount of falls will really undo us if we keep picking ourselves up each time. We shall of course be very muddy and tattered children by the time we reach home...The only fatal thing is to lose one's temper and give up." Can you believe that one day you will be perfectly pure? Will you trust Jesus and side and struggle with him against your sin?

Some of you are out of work. You are depleting your precious savings. You are beginning to wonder if the right job will ever come along. Can you continue to believe that God will not leave you or forsake you? that he knows your needs and will not withhold any good thing? that you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you?

Are you suffering physical or emotional pain which seems to have no end? Can you believe Paul's words that "this momentary light affliction is producing in you an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison"? Can you believe that your suffering is making you into a man or woman of God, drawing you to him and purifying you of self-interest and self-glorification so that *his* glory can be seen? You can, if you "look at the things which are not seen" (2 Cor 4:17-18).

We must remember that nothing will ultimately satisfy us in this life. We need to count on the resources that we have in Christ, and hang on to him until he comes.

That is why the apostle prays now, because prayer is the means by which truth is translated into life. Verse 16:

**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. (2:16-17)**

It is that grace that is the incentive for good works. When we learn that, we know that it is not because we deserve God's goodness that he gave it. It is not because we earned it or because we have selected God. It is because he has selected us. The bottom line is grace. It is a gift. It came through love. The good news is that you are greatly loved of God. He chose you from the beginning for himself. He has called you into a relationship with himself through the gospel. He is sanctifying you, conforming you into the image of Christ. And one of these days he is going to call you home, or he is going to come back to get you and you will share his glory. That is the good news.

And that is why, after asking for the prayers of the Thessalonians that the word of God might penetrate the wicked city of Corinth (from where he was writing), like it did in Thessalonica, and that God might protect him, that Paul ends by reminding them of the faithfulness of God. Chapter 3, verse 3:

**But the Lord is faithful, and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil one. And we have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you are doing and will continue to do what we command. And may the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ. (3:3-5)**

God is faithful. You don't have to worry about him. He will never fail you. He will give you the motivation and the strength you need today to obey him.

The apostle prays that the hearts of the Thessalonians will be focused on two things: the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ. That is what our hearts need this morning. Are you keeping yourself in the love of God? If you are, that is what will give you a sense of security and worth. And in that love you will find the endurance you need to wait and watch him work things out. Our Lord is our example here. He did not despair through the pain and trial he endured. He "entrusted himself to him who was able," and he waited for him to work.

I want to end by reading a poem by Ruth Calkins from her book *Tell Me Again Lord, I Forget*:

God  
I may fall flat on my face  
I may fail until I feel  
Old and beaten and done in  
Yet Your love for me is changeless.  
All the music may go out of my life  
My private world may shatter to dust  
Even so You will hold me  
In the palm of Your steady hand.  
No turn in the affairs  
Of my fractured life  
Can baffle You.  
Satan with all his braggadocio  
Cannot distract You.  
Nothing can separate me  
From Your measureless love:  
Pain can't  
Disappointment can't  
Anguish can't.  
Yesterday, today, tomorrow can't.  
The loss of my dearest love can't.  
Death can't  
Life can't.  
Riots war insanity unidentity  
Hunger neurosis disease -  
None of these things  
Nor all of them heaped together  
Can budge the fact  
That I am dearly loved.  
Completely forgiven  
And forever free  
Through Jesus Christ  
Your Beloved Son.

May these truths comfort and strengthen your hearts, and provide the light you need in the dark days ahead.

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## YOUR DISTINGUISHING MARK

Catalog No. 1057

2 Thess 3:16-18

Fifth Message

Gary Vanderet

March 24th, 1996

Baseball season is upon us. Those of you who have children in Little League spent a couple of hours yesterday watching a game or two. I endured parts of three games myself.

The game of baseball teaches great lessons about life. A favorite Charlie Brown cartoon shows Schroeder, garbed in outsized catcher's mask and chest protector, walking to the mound. He hands Charlie Brown the ball and laments: "The bases are loaded again, and there's still nobody out." Charlie Brown asks: "So what do you think?" Schroeder ponders the question for a moment and then replies: "We live in difficult times."

Indeed we do. "If it's not one thing it's another," a friend of mine complains, "and some days it's both." Terrible things keep happening to us, cruel events that seem devoid of sense and meaning. Bitter ironies thwart our desires, foil our plans, frustrate our hopes and break our hearts.

And it doesn't stop. We think that things will get better and life will get easier as we grow older, but that's a fool's dream. The hardest tests are yet to come. Earl Weaver, the manager of the Baltimore Orioles and the bane of American League umpires, used to charge out of the dugout bellowing: "Is it going to get any better or is this it?"

I hate to tell you, but this is it.

Life is indeed difficult and demanding. In just the last few weeks I've been made aware of marital breakdowns, impending divorces, rebellious children, loss of employment, horrible accidents, medical traumas, and emotional meltdowns.

Can there be any doubt that the thing that we need most in this world is peace?

Today we come to our final study in the apostle Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians. The last verse of this little book, Paul's final greeting to the church there, dictated by the apostle to his scribe just before he wrote his own distinguishing mark, keeps ringing in my ears in these difficult times:

**Now may the Lord of peace Himself continually grant you peace in every circumstance. The Lord be with you all!** (2 Thess 3:16, NASB)

That is why it is so important that Jesus came: He is the Prince of peace! Oftentimes when we face a problem we actually have two problems—the problem itself, and the problem of our anxiety over the problem. What we

desperately need is the assurance that we can face these things with the Lord's peace.

Peace is something that Jesus gives, and he gives it supernaturally. Once he was on the Sea of Galilee with his disciples when a fierce storm struck. The disciples were competent mariners; they had navigated their way through storms on that lake many times. But now, the storm swirling around them, they were stricken with terror, and they panicked. The wind probably ripped the sail to shreds. The boat began to sink, and they were paralyzed with fear.

But all the while, Jesus was sleeping. At last they woke him up, crying in terror: "Don't you care that we are drowning?" Do you remember his words to them? First, he said to the waves: "Peace! Be still!" The wind died down and it was completely calm. Then, turning to the disciples, he said: "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" They still had to row the boat to other side, but Jesus had settled the issue of their anxiety.

During these difficult days we must remember that Jesus is the One who brings tranquillity and peace to our hearts in the midst of all the problems we have to face. The Lord is with us.

My friend Marty Mathiesen shares his favorite cartoons with me. A recent one shows a scruffy-looking prophet carrying a placard that reads: "The end of the world is not at hand. You gotta learn to cope." There is truth in that statement. We don't know when the Lord is coming. He may come in our lifetime. He could come very soon. That is our sure hope that keeps us steady. But he hasn't come yet. In the meantime, the way we cope is by knowing that the Lord is with us.

On the night before Jesus was crucified he spent an extended time with his disciples, preparing them for his departure. They were deeply troubled that he was leaving, but he told them: "It's all right. I am coming back. I have provided for your destiny, and I have taken care of the interim as well. I will provide my presence. I will come back and then I will not only be with you, I will be in you. I will dwell in you through the person of the Holy Spirit. And you also have my Word. These are sufficient to give you peace. That is all you need to keep you together until I come back."

These are the resources that are available to you and me today. They are the same resources that the apostles had. They had the indwelling Christ, and they had his

teaching. We have the same. We have his presence and his Word. These are what will give us peace.

That is why Jesus could say to his disciples: *"Peace I leave with you."* Are you troubled and frightened? Are you confused and anxious? Jesus has given you the elements that produce peace. He is not going to pour a bucket of peace on you. That is not what he is talking about. Peace is not something that comes from nowhere. Peace comes from the awareness that Jesus is present and in control, and we have all the resources we need to cope with our circumstances. We have his presence and his Word. These are what make us adequate to handle anything that life brings our way.

*"My peace I give to you; not as the world gives, do I give to you."* The peace that the world gives is short-lived. It's always dependent on circumstances, things like success, how other people think about you, a sports score, or some foreign substance. But the peace that Jesus gives endures. It is the unqualified sense of well being that comes when we realize that he is with us. That is why he can say to us: *"Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful."*

There are many things that make life worthwhile, but there are two things we cannot do without: the presence of the indwelling Christ, and the Word of God. These are the essential parameters, the fixed points around which everything else revolves. If we don't have these, we don't have anything. These are what we need. You don't need a husband. You don't need a wife. You don't need to have children. You don't even need a job. You don't have to have health. What you need is God and his Word.

Over the next couple of weeks we will celebrate the cross and the resurrection of our Lord. His first words to his disciples after he was raised are the same as the words he shared with them before he was crucified. It was Easter Sunday evening, and the disciples were having the first Sunday evening service. They were squeezed into a house in Jerusalem. The doors were locked, because they were afraid that at any moment a policeman would arrive with a warrant for their arrest, and like their Lord, they would be tried and executed.

As they were sharing their experiences of the day, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them: "Shalom" (Peace). I always imagined that Jesus passed through the wall, but I think what probably happened is that he was there all the time, listening to their conversation. He was invisible, and he became visible.

Later, when our Lord ascended into heaven, we are inclined to think there was a short vertical ascent, and then he disappeared. I don't think that heaven is somewhere "up there," however. We use those spatial terms simply because they are useful to us. I believe that heaven is another dimension. It is all around us. It is the realm of the unseen, but it is just as real as the realm of the things that are seen.

I believe our Lord is right here today in this room,

just as he was in that room in Jerusalem. He is with you as you drive home today. He will be with you at that picnic you are planning. He is with you when you go on dates. He is with you on business appointments. He is with you in school as you sit at your desk. He is with you in the kitchen. He is with you in your office, in your shop, in your garden, at your computer, on the baseball or soccer field. Wherever you are, our Lord is there, present with you.

So the first thing Jesus said to the disciples on that first Easter Sunday was: "Peace be with you." That was the standard greeting in that day in the Middle East: *Shalom*. Jews still use it today. But I think our Lord had more in mind than a mere greeting. He wasn't just saying, "Good Morning" or "Good Evening." In fact, three times in that passage he says, "Peace be with you." That is because his legacy, his inheritance, what we receive as a result of his presence with us, is peace—peace, inner calmness, tranquillity.

Jesus said: "I will never leave you or forsake you." He used a double negative. We don't do that in English, but they did in Greek. "I will never under any circumstances forsake you," he promised. Friends fail us, spouses walk out on us, parents disappoint us, therapists refuse to return our calls, but the Lord is with us every moment of the day. We need to make ourselves think about his presence; to acknowledge that he is with us, as real as he was in the days of his flesh. He will never say "Good-bye."

Will you remember that today when someone forgets to do what they were supposed to do and you are alone and feeling resentful? Will you remember that the Lord is there, and that his word to you is: "Shalom: My peace I give to you"? When you are all alone at night and there is no one else to share your bed (or maybe there is, but you still feel that nobody in the world cares or understands), know that he is there in the room, just as real as he was in that room in Jerusalem, and he still offers that peace. That is where true peace comes from.

When the husband that you depended on for many years to make decisions is no longer there, remember that Jesus is there. Don't run from the pain. As Richard Foster says, "God becomes a reality when he becomes a necessity." We sometimes don't know that God is all we need until he is all we have. And his first words are an offer of tranquillity.

If we had Paul's original letter, we would discover that the last two verses are written in different handwriting from the rest of the text. At this point, the apostle took the pen in hand, and scrawled his own signature, *Paulus*. He wrote this final greeting (verse 17):

**I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand, and this is a distinguishing mark in every letter; this is the way I write. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. (3:17-18)**

God is with us. Of that there is no doubt. Let us remember to think about his presence, to acknowledge

that he is with us, as real as he was in the days of his flesh when he walked with his disciples amid the sorrows and the haunts of this world.

One of my favorite stories in the Old Testament is told in 2 Kings 6. The prophet Elisha and his servant were in the city of Dothan. The king of Syria, Ben Hadad II, was upset with Elisha because he kept tipping off King Joram of Israel to Syrian troop movements (God was providing the inside information for Elisha). Ben Hadad decided to put an end to the prophet. He stormed in with his entire army to besiege the city of Dothan, where Elisha and his servant were staying.

During the night, the Syrians circled the city and waited for dawn. The next morning, Elisha's servant rose early and looked out over the walls. When he saw the Syrian army he panicked. He woke Elisha and told him the bad news. "It's all over," he said. "What are we going to do?" But Elisha said to him: "Don't worry. There are more of us than there are of them." Imagine the look of bewilderment this statement drew. But Elisha prayed and said: "'O Lord, I pray, open his eyes that he may see.' And the Lord opened the servant's eyes, and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha." Elisha and his servant captured the entire Syrian army and led them off to Samaria.

We cannot evaluate a situation in terms of what we see. What is observable is real, but it is not the ultimate reality. In a materialistic world like ours the only real things are those that we can detect with our five senses. People say, "What you see is what you get." But there is another realm of reality, one that is more actual, more factual, more substantial than anything we can see, hear, touch, taste, or smell. It exists all around us. It is not out there somewhere; it is right here. Behind what we see is the all-powerful, all-loving God. We must remind ourselves daily of this reality.

And we must grow eyes that "see." This happens as we feed on God's Word. Faith comes from hearing the message, Paul told us. One of the questions we can ask ourselves as we spend time in God's Word, is this: Has it enabled me to see?

Seeing is also a gift of God given in answer to prayer. And so Paul prays that the eyes of our hearts may be enlightened that we may see what otherwise would not be seen. Prayer is the means by which we receive all of God's good gifts. It is the highest expression of our dependence on him. Prayer moves that which we know from our heads to our hearts; it bridges the gap between what we know and what we are.

Horatio Spafford, a dynamic Christian attorney who was influential in the founding of the Moody Bible Institute, lived in Chicago at the turn of the century. Following the great Chicago fire in 1871 he put his wife and children aboard ship and sent them to Europe. He wanted to get them out of the city while it was being rebuilt. As they were crossing the Atlantic Ocean their ship was struck by another vessel in the middle of the night, and both ships sank. This mother saw her four children drown. She was struck by a falling mast, but she was miraculously saved. She fell on some floating debris and later was picked up and taken to Wales.

While she was in a hospital there, she telegraphed back to her husband these two words: "Saved Alone." Horatio Spafford took the first ship to Wales. As it was sailing across the Atlantic, near the spot where the ship had gone down, Dr. Spafford walked along the deck and contemplated all that had happened. That was when he was moved to write the hymn that we sang earlier this morning, *It Is Well With My Soul*:

*When peace like a river attendeth my way,  
When sorrows like sea billows roll;  
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,  
It is well, it is well with my soul.*

That is the message that Jesus wants to communicate to us this morning. Whatever my lot, he has taught me to say, "It is well with my soul." Or, as the apostle so beautifully puts it here at the close of his letter: "*Now may the Lord of peace Himself continually grant you peace in every circumstance.*" That is the key to contentment. That is the secret that enables us to rest.

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