

Faith Under Fire: Thriving in a Hostile World

Countering End Times Anxiety 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5

Introduction

Four weeks ago we learned from the last half of 2 Thessalonians 1 the value of suffering for the coming kingdom. Such suffering shows the worth of God's kingdom. It vindicates God's wrath against His enemies. And it reveals the glory of the Lord.

God uses times of suffering in our lives. They are sensitive seasons. But they are also times we can be more vulnerable to temptations and lies. That's where Paul turns our attention as we begin chapter 2 of 2 Thessalonians.

¹ Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, ² not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. ³ Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, ⁴ who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the

temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.
⁵ Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things?

1. The Comforting Reality of Christ's Coming (1)
2. The Deceptive Cause of Anxiety (2-3a)
3. The Divinely Established Timing of the Day of the Lord (3b-5)

1. The Comforting Reality of Christ's Coming (1)

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers,

In the original text, "we ask (beseech, exhort) you, brothers" comes first. Paul and his companions are coming alongside his readers to remind them of the comfort the return of Christ should bring to those who belong to Him.

This verse summarizes what Paul wrote them in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

1 Thessalonians 4:15, 17-18

¹⁵ For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.

¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds

to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.

18 Therefore encourage one another with these words.

At the time Paul wrote his first letter to the Thessalonian Christians they were worried that their fellow church members who had died were going to miss out somehow on the blessing of Christ's return, but not so. They would be raised from the dead first, and the living believers would join them to meet the Lord in the air.

The coming of the Lord is His presence, like that of a royal visit in person from a person of power and authority. Further, His coming and our being gathered to Him are described here as one event.

We learn in the following verses that this time, the anxiety some members of the church were suffering had to do with false teaching that had wormed its way into the community, that the day of the Lord was at hand, that meaning that it had already come or was in process.

Before Paul gets down to the doctrinal error on which their fears are based, he introduces the topic with this reminder of the comforting reality of the Lord's return.

Remember that from the beginning the believers in Thessalonica experienced great pressure and affliction from the enemies of Christ. It would be easy to assume that the troubles that had broken upon them were end time calamities, and there were those who had capitalized on this vulnerability.

Whenever things are topsy-turvy in our world, there are always those who will use such turmoil to unsettle even believers, because they know that the end of the age will be characterized by such mayhem.

But we are safe and secure in Jesus Christ our Redeemer. Fretfulness does not commend the gospel. We have grace and peace through the gospel of Jesus Christ. So the way Paul begins his comments here remind us that *when we think about the end of the age and the events that will be part of it, our chief focus needs to be Christ Jesus Himself. Seeing Him face to face is what we eagerly anticipate and is what gives our hearts comfort*, whatever difficult circumstances swirl around us. Trouble should turn our hearts toward the Lord. Because we are made in God's image, we as humans instinctively know this. In a society dismissive of prayer and God, looks what happens when a professional football player suffers cardiac arrest on the field. Everyone turns to prayer, and no one files a lawsuit over it.

Applications

- What events and circumstances in the world tend to unsettle your heart?
- How can you make it your default practice to turn from the turmoil to eager expectation of the Lord's return and the comfort of being gathered to Him?

2. The Deceptive Cause of Anxiety (2-3a)

² not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. ³ Let no one deceive you in any way.

Notice how Paul describes what's happening to the Thessalonian believers internally:

Quickly shaken in mind

Alarmed

Let no one deceive you in any way

What is causing this disturbance?

By a spirit

A spoken word

A letter seeming to be from us

These descriptions reveal that the teaching that has entered the community of believers is passing itself off as reliable apostolic doctrine from the Lord. Sometimes false teaching tries to calm people with peaceful lies when they need to be alarmed about their

sin and their need for repentance, as in the days of Jeremiah.

But among the people of God, false teaching often creates disturbance, division, fretful fear, and anxiety, as it did in the church of Thessalonica. Correct doctrine tends to settle and establish our hearts in the truth. False teaching is unsettling.

Psalm 119:165

Great peace have those who love your law;
nothing can make them stumble.

The preceding verses in Psalm 119 mention that the Psalmist is experiencing persecution from powerful people around him. But the Word of God makes his heart steady.

How often God comes to His people with the words, "Fear not. Take courage."

What was the lie disrupting the peace of the believers in Thessalonica?

Paul says it this way: to the effect that the day of the Lord has already come.

The day of the Lord is not just one day, but the time when the Lord brings judgment on His enemies and vindicates His people. Throughout history the prophets (like Isaiah 13 and Joel 2) refer to various times of such judgment from the Lord, warning that the day

of the Lord is near. They are small doses of the ultimate day of the Lord that will come at the end of the age. These prophecies appear to have both immediate and distant fulfillment in view.

In the NT the day of the Lord includes the tribulation period and the pouring out of God's wrath at the end of the age.

In 1 Thessalonians 5 Paul had taught them that the day of the Lord would come like a thief in the night and bring inescapable sudden destruction. But as children of the light, Paul continued, you are not unaware of the coming of the day of the Lord like those who are in darkness, living life as if they're asleep or drunk. God has not destined us for wrath but has given us faith, love, and the hope of salvation. So armed, we are to be busy encouraging one another and building one another up.

But the false teachers were claiming that the day of the Lord was already breaking upon them. Times were tough, to be sure, but Paul wanted them to know that they were not suffering through the day of the Lord. That final period was yet future. What they were dealing with was the suffering believers face in a world hostile to God. They were still safe. And when you read what the apostle John writes later about the outpouring of the wrath

of God on the earth during the day of the Lord, what they were encountering was small by comparison.

You don't have to look far to find this same kind of false teaching today in books, blogs, and podcasts, trying to link current events to what the Bible says will happen during the day of the Lord. Beware the secret codes and supposed new discoveries when it comes to biblical truth.

Throughout history people have feared that the end of the world has come, or that a particular world leader is the predicted antichrist. It's important to keep in mind what we learn in our passage this morning.

Applications

- What teaching have you come across that claims to be biblical but turns out to be distorted and disturbing?

If your heart is responding to so-called Bible teaching with fear and anxiety about end time events, it may be that the teaching is not as biblical as it claims to be.

- What tactics, resources, and friends can help you make sure you're not being deceived in any way by false teaching?

3. The Divinely Established Timing of the Day of the Lord (3b-5)

3b For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, **4** who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.

That day will not come—it cannot come. Why? Because the God of history has established exactly when it will come and what events will lead to it.

Things are not careening out of control. They are marching toward a predetermined conclusion. Everything will happen exactly as God has prescribed. Steady your heart with that reality. If this is true of the great moments of history, it is certainly no less true of the course of your own life history. God is in control.

It has not been an uncommon thing to hear brothers and sisters in Christ express fretfulness and fear about the coming of the antichrist, or about events and trends that seem to be preparing the way for him. Look, he's coming. But not one day sooner that God has determined. And not one day later. Furthermore, we are not to fear his coming. He is doomed from the start. The revelation of the man of lawlessness is the prelude to the glorious return of Christ.

Before the day of the Lord comes, there must come first what Paul calls “the rebellion”—the apostasy; definite article points to an ultimate culminating fall away

A time when those who claim to follow Jesus fall away from Him in a widespread, willful rebellion.

Apostasy plagued Israel throughout OT history, and it has plagued the church from the NT era to this day. Much of the shame that has been heaped on the church is a result of those who claim to be Christians living like anything but. The problem is often that they are Christian in name only. Their lives tell a different story. We are not only to proclaim the gospel but to display it. It is the power of God unto salvation. If our lives are characterized by corruption we have no credible good news to share with anybody. What many are turning away from is a fraudulent version of Christianity. What they need exposure to it is the real thing.

We see enough defections and deconstructions to sense that they are a sampling and a prelude to a far greater tragedy yet to come. There is coming a day that will dwarf the previous rebellions. The apostasy of all apostasies.

The second thing Paul mentions must show up before the day of the Lord is not a thing, but a person.

The man of lawlessness—he is the personal embodiment of rebellion against God’s law, God’s truth.

But he is also the son of destruction—that is, he is doomed to eternal destruction, just as Judas the traitor was. He cannot succeed in his rebellion, though it will be worldwide in its impact.

The worst Satan can muster through those who turn away from the gospel and the most powerful leader ever who rebels against God will not succeed. It is doomed.

Paul goes on to describe this individual in verse 4:

who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.

Opposes God and every so-called god or object of worship, exalting himself above them all

He takes his seat in the temple of God—possibly a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem; at the very least this describes his putting himself forward in the apostate church as God.

Claiming to be what Jesus is—God in the flesh.

Proclaiming himself to be God.

He is against God and he puts himself in the place of God.

Antichrist means both against and in the place of.

John the apostle declares that the antichrist is coming, and there already there are many antichrists, because the spirit of antichrist was already at work in the world.

Denying that Jesus has come in the flesh, or denying the Father and the Son, or that Jesus is the Messiah, marks one as an antichrist. But there is yet to come THE antichrist.

Paul uses language here like that of Daniel 7 describing the boastful little horn of the final beast of world empires who is destroyed at the end of age when the Son of man comes with the Ancient of Days to judge the world. Daniel 8 as one who rises up against the Prince of princes but is broken, but not by human hand. Daniel 11 speaks of him as a willful king who will magnify himself above all, and talks of a time of trouble like there has never been before, followed by the resurrection.

Jesus refers to these events as well in the Olivet Discourse. He warns of the abomination of desolation Daniel 9, 11, and 12 spoke of. During the intertestamental period the wicked king Antiochus Epiphanes profaned the temple by slaughtering a pig on the altar. He serves as a forerunner of this man of lawlessness. The Maccabees fought against him. Hanukkah celebrates when the temple was cleansed and the sacrifices resumed. But Daniel also points to a later abomination. Jesus talks about that abomination of desolation standing in the holy place, and a great tribulation worse than anything in history before or after, and then the coming of the Son of man in glory.

And John describes similar events in Revelation 13 and 17 of a final kingdom pictured as a beast from the sea, empowered by Satan the dragon, and uttering blasphemies against God and through the power of a second beast that does miracles, calling on the world to worship the beast.

2 Thessalonians 2:5

Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things?

Remember . . . I told (was telling) you these things?

The corrective to deceptive teaching is the apostolic instruction. And still is.

People go off course when they add other teaching to what God has revealed through the prophets and apostles, or change it, or twist it to mean what it did not mean when it was given.

So-called progressive Christianity talks about a changing truth, deconstructing what the apostles taught in favor of so-called new truth God is revealing now through current history and ideas. Such teaching is damning.

Paul had been careful to teach the truth to these brothers and sisters in Christ. They needed to hold on to the truth he had taught them in the beginning, and not let some new twist on doctrine push them off course.

Applications

- What patterns have you established in your daily life to keep your mind focused on what God's Word teaches to protect you from the falsehoods of both tradition and trend?
- When is your time in the Scriptures each day so that you can be meditating on them throughout the day and night (Psalm 1)?
- How can knowing that the ultimate man of lawlessness who opposes God is coming but is doomed to destruction from the start, give you steady courage

in the face of the rebellions against God you see today?

Conclusion

Paul is going to continue teaching us about the rise and fall of this man of lawlessness, but let what he has taught us in these first five verses help you battle the all-too-common anxiety people experience and express regarding the end times. Don't you be part of the fretful crowd. Keep in mind—

1. The Comforting Reality of Christ's Coming (1)
2. The Deceptive Cause of Anxiety (2-3a)
3. The Divinely Established Timing of the Day of the Lord (3b-5)

Closing Song: Still, My Soul, Be Still

Summary of Applications

- What events and circumstances in the world tend to unsettle your heart?
- How can you make it your default practice to turn from the turmoil to eager expectation of the Lord's return and the comfort of being gathered to Him?
- What teaching have you come across that claims to be biblical but turns out to be distorted and disturbing?

- What tactics, resources, and friends can help you make sure you're not being deceived in any way by false teaching?
- What patterns have you established in your daily life to keep your mind focused on what God's Word teaches to protect you from the falsehoods of both tradition and trend?
- When is your time in the Scriptures each day so that you can be meditating on them throughout the day and night (Psalm 1)?
- How can knowing that the ultimate man of lawlessness who opposes God is coming but is doomed to destruction from the start, give you steady courage in the face of the rebellions against God you see today?

Additional thought/discussion questions

1. How could you turn a conversation with an unbeliever about troubling current events to the hope and peace we have through the good news of Jesus Christ?
2. How would your own peace and confidence—or the lack thereof—add or detract from the credibility of the gospel you share?