

Assured by the Lord's coming

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[0 : 0 0] Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, 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.

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, 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.

Do you not remember that when I was still with you, I told you these things? And you know what is restraining him now, so that he may be revealed in his time.

For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way.

And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming.

[1 : 3 3] The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan, with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refuse to love the truth and so be saved.

Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.

To this he called you, through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.

[3 : 0 0] Belief about the end of the world can be painful, can't it? And we might often find ourselves thinking, do I really believe this?

Perhaps it's when we're walking through a busy part of London and we hear a street preacher holding up a placard that says, the end is nigh, screaming about flames and fire and judgment.

And we hear the crowd, because we're amongst them, muttering and laughing, scoffing and insulting. And we're listening to the words, aren't we?

And we're thinking, oh, I actually believe that, I think. But we're embarrassed. Or perhaps because it flies in the face of our secular age, we find it particularly difficult to believe.

George Harrison, the famous Beatle guitarist, said this, it's being here now that's important. There's no past and there's no future. Time is a very misleading thing.

[4 : 02] All there ever is, is the now. We can gain experience from the past, but we can't relive it. And we can hope for the future, but we don't know if there is one.

Of course, our secular age is obsessed with the now. And so the idea of a certain future where the Lord Jesus Christ comes to bring history to a close, and we're to not only believe that, but profess it and live by it feels like a stretch.

Or perhaps it is just the simple fact of time. 2,000 years is a lot of time to us. And no hint, it seems, of Jesus' return.

And therefore, we can end up, because of all of these reasons, functionally living, functionally living, as though Christ will never return. That maybe Jesus has forgotten about us.

That maybe we've been left. And the temptation, therefore, to live for now will increase and increase, because deep down, we believe that now really is all there is.

[5 : 12] And so the temptation grows and grows. And so the question this morning is, how can we fight this creeping, secular unbelief in our hearts and in our lives?

That Jesus won't, isn't really coming back. That history doesn't really have an end. The primary issue in our letter, in the two Thessalonians, is ironically very, very similar.

If you have a look down with me at the reading, chapter 2, verses 1 to 2. Here's the primary issue of the letter. The reason that Paul has written is to answer this problem. Chapter 2, verse 1. Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, 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.

It's a particularly vicious little rumour, isn't it? In other words, what's happened is the church has received a letter claiming to be from Paul telling them that, sorry team, Jesus has been and gone.

Your great hope of restitution, your great hope of eternal life, gone in the wind. He's forgotten about you. He's left you. And if we remember the Thessalonian context, they are surrounded on all sides by persecutors.

[6 : 37] A mob has come from Philippi hoping to kill Paul and drove him away. They're inflicted from the outside. They're lied to from the inside. It must have been a desperate thing to think that the Lord Jesus had left them, that there ultimately is no end to the suffering.

And so the temptation for them to live for now, to put their head into the sand, to live as though the Lord Jesus isn't returning must have been great. And ironically, do you see that they end up in a very similar position to us?

I was struggling to try and formulate this. Staff member really helped in pointing out we underthink the end. They overthink the end. We're in the same position.

We don't think Jesus is returning because we don't think about it very much. They don't think Jesus is returning because they're thinking about it too much. In other words, we are both in the same position.

Both of us thinking Jesus, ending history. unlikely. And so ultimately, you will have noticed in the reading that there are some details in chapter 2 that you might not have spotted anywhere else in the New Testament and that's because they're not anywhere else in the New Testament.

[7 : 50] Man of lawlessness, the restrainer, Satan, setting himself up in the temple. You might have been thinking, gosh, I don't remember this in Sunday school. But the important thing to remember is that the main point is very straightforward.

In Thessalonians, it is always comfort. Always comfort. Paul wants to reassure the Thessalonians that Jesus has not abandoned them. That's the main point of our sermon.

We'll dive into the details, but let's not get lost amongst the trees. The main point is reassurance. Have a look with me at 2 verse 2. We ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken, in mind or alarmed.

And chapter 2 verse 16. Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace comfort your hearts.

So let's not get lost. The thrust is comfort and reassurance. And Paul wants to reassure them with two details, which are our two points there on the back of our handouts. Two details.

[8 : 54] Point number one, Jesus is history's author. And point number two, God is Satan's superior.

Jesus is history's author. God is Satan's superior. As we said, the details might be complicated, but the thrust is simple.

Paul wants to reassure the Thessalonians that the end has not come, but it will come, and that Jesus is in complete control. Have a look down with me beginning at verse 3 to 7.

And as we go through, I just want us to notice, sorry, verse 3 to verse 8, I want us to notice the certainty, the structure, the control of the end.

starting at verse 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, 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.

[10 : 08] Do you not remember that when I was with you, I told you these things? And do you know what is restraining him now, so that he may be revealed in his time? For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way.

And then, the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth, and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming.

So, whilst the details might be complicated, what is clear is that there is a definite, unmissable ordering to the end of history.

My best attempt at sort of a pattern, and you can maybe try and focus in on what you think it might be for yourself, is as follows. A rebellion will come, the man of lawlessness will be revealed, he will take a seat in the temple until the restrainer releases him, and then Jesus will kill him with the breath of his mouth.

Now, we mentioned, didn't we, that the details are somewhat harder to pass out, and I have been, needless to say, scouring the depths of church history to find out who the man of lawlessness is, who the restrainer is, and I thought an excellent place, wonderful, Augustine, who some of us will know, the great church father, possibly the greatest mind of church history, has written a commentary on two Thessalonians.

[11 : 36] How wonderful. So I dove in to 2 Thessalonians chapter 2, reading with great earnestness, thinking he's going to reveal to me who this man is. This is the man who brought us the city of God, perhaps the greatest Christian book that has ever been written, and this is, quote, what Augustine said about 2 Thessalonians chapter 2.

This is a direct quote. I do not know what it means. End quote. That was his conclusion. Sarah Tooth, a lecturer at Oak Hill, a lady who spent four years of her PhD writing just on 2 Thessalonians, chapter 2, four years, who knows how much money was spent on that education.

When she was pressed, Professor Tooth, who is the man of lawlessness? She said, quote, I don't think we can say for certain. End quote.

Which, in other words, means that if Augustine and Professor Tooth, both at the kind of beginning of church history and at the end of church history, are not certain on who the man of lawlessness is, I think it is safe to say that if we meet anyone who is utterly certain, then that should give us pause for thought.

In other words, God has not revealed to us for certain who these individuals are. And that is okay for two reasons. One, because it's humbling, that we don't need to know everything, that there are things that God has planned that are bigger than us.

[13 : 06] And number two, it means that we don't need to know to understand two Thessalonians, because God, in his sovereign wisdom, has not decided to reveal it to us. Now, of course, you're probably then thinking that's a very easy way for you, Benji, to dodge the question.

There are various theories, and if you want to discuss this afterwards, I'll give you all of two minutes before then asking how the passage applies to you, where we can talk about who we think the man of lawlessness is.

There are various theories. The language is taken from Daniel 7 about the fall of the temple and a foreign king placing himself in that temple. And it is worth noting that detail, isn't it? We see that in verse 4.

This man of lawlessness 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.

Why is that so significant? Well, for those of us who know our Old Testaments, the temple has gradations of holiness. So if you're on the outside of the temple, you're in a not very holy place, and as you move towards the center, you move towards the presence of God.

[14 : 12] So that once you are in the center, the holy of holies, that is where God dwells. And the high priest was only allowed to go in once a year. And it would be the most unthinkable, evil, sacrilegious thing to in any way desecrate the center of the temple.

In other words, if you want to offend a Jew and offend his gods, well then do something or talk about the center of the temple. And so what Paul is driving at here is this is a picture of about as sacrilegious and act, as offensive an act to God as you can possibly get, setting himself up in the temple as God.

It isn't possible, really, in one sense, to offend God more than that. And then maybe there were two historical events in mind, one in 167 BC after the Assyrians had defeated Jerusalem, Antiochus IV set himself up with a name God Manifest and he instituted pagan sacrifices in the temple.

Much closer to home, ten years before Two Thessalonians was written, Caligula, some of us might be familiar with, the Roman Emperor in AD 40, tried to set himself up a cult statue of himself as a god in the temple.

But other options have been suggested right from the Pope to Martin Luther, Joseph Smith through to Henry Kissinger, Barack Obama and Donald Trump.

[15 : 38] In other words, I'm not sure we're meant to come up with a conclusion. You know, if you've got the Pope on one hand and Martin Luther on the other and they are both options for the man of lawlessness, the point, I think, is that we are not meant to have certainty.

For what it's worth, I think, therefore, it is a pattern that symbolizes a coming, cataclysmic, unmissable rebellion. That we're not supposed to look out for the temple being rebuilt in Jerusalem today, but instead we are to look out for a cataclysmic, unmissable rebellion.

At the same, many debates have raged over who the restrainer is. Verse 6, and you know what is restraining him now. Well, we don't. We were not told.

You know what was restraining him now, but we don't. In Daniel, it is the archangel Michael. Others have suggested it is Paul's gospel. Others have suggested it is the church.

But again, we are not told and it is not essential for the overall thrust, for the overall point. But the point is, God is in control.

[16 : 44] God's in control. And note, as we close on this point, just two implications for us. And the first is the major implication that I want us to take away and hopefully talk about together over coffee.

And that is verse 8. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming.

In other words, all of this rebellion, this great, unmissable rebellion that seems that it will stretch across the whole globe, a man of lawlessness, the work of Satan, setting himself up in the temple, proclaiming himself to be God, the most offensive of offenses that you can possibly raise against God and his king.

And the Lord Jesus will bring it to an end with a breath. There's the big rebellion that will end history. It is as easy for Jesus to end history as it is for us to go, that's it.

And so we mustn't therefore miss that this is not as though there is some kind of dualism at the center of the world where evil is competing against good and we don't know who's going to win.

[17 : 58] No, history is ordered. Jesus is its author. And he can bring it to a close with his breath. The second implication, therefore, for us to think about in terms of application of this point is that history has an author.

History is ordered. Now, I like to read the telegraph. I don't know what that says about me as a person. They are terrible editors because as always, I like to try and find the grammatical errors.

But one thing I should be doing as I read the telegraph after I've read two Thessalonians too is realize that every single event that I'm reading of is fully and completely within the control of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It would not be an inappropriate thing for me to do to stick a sticky note on the top of my phone that whenever I opened up the telegraph app or the BBC News app and read of an event that had happened in history, here is the Lord Jesus Christ, author of history, inside his control.

He is in control of history. It is not random and it has an end and he will bring it to a close with the breath of his mouth. That's point number one, the reassurance to the Thessalonians.

[19 : 07] Jesus is history's author. The second point, which is looking at verses 9 to 12, is God is Satan's superior.

God is Satan's superior. There is, of course, whenever we are talking about a rebellion and talking about the man of lawlessness and Satan and his works, there is an obvious question which is why is a rebellion occurring at all?

Is there a dualism in the universe where God is fighting with Satan? Maybe Satan might win. Certainly for the Thessalonians, and we mustn't forget their context, given the amount of persecution they're receiving from outside and within, they might well be left thinking.

God is not in control. Well, there's a detail that we mustn't overlook, and that is the detail of unbelief. Have a look down with me again at verses 9 to 12.

The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing because they refuse to love the truth and so be saved.

[20 : 19] Therefore, God sends them a strong delusion so that they may believe what is false in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

The obvious question the Thessalonians would have been asking is why would God allow unbelief? Why would God allow such kind of persecution? is the sign of people persecuting us a sign that ultimately God isn't in control?

And if we pause to think about that for a second that has got to be a question that we want to know the answer to. Satan, and it was said by a great theologian that one of the most powerful things that Satan has ever done in the West is persuade people that he doesn't exist.

At one walk through the city of London and you can see idol after idol after idol, tower of Babel after tower of Babel people pouring their lives out for money, for career, for identity.

All of whom one could say well Satan has an awful lot of control in our world. And of course on a more personal basis our loved ones who don't believe in the Lord Jesus Christ well is God in control there?

[21 : 28] Is he in control? Is he even in control of unbelief? And whilst this is probably and certainly is for me having loved ones who are not walking with the Lord Jesus whilst this is a painful truth it is nonetheless taught explicitly here that while Satan does in one sense cause unbelief God ultimately uses it for his purposes.

Have a look down with me at the order in particular. We need to notice the order of these verses. The first key detail we need to see is that people refused to love the truth.

Do we have a look down at verse 10? This is the man of lawlessness and Satan acting with all wicked deception for those who were perishing because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.

Therefore what does the lawless one do? Well the lawless one by the activity of Satan deludes them further. Verse 10 with all wicked deception.

And then what is God's response? Verse 11 Therefore God sends them a strong delusion so that they may believe what is false in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but have pleasure in unrighteousness.

[22 : 47] In other words what Paul is saying is that when people reject the gospel God confirms them in their rejection. When people reject Jesus God makes it even harder for them to ever accept him.

And this is the truth that Jesus himself teaches. The most common parable in the New Testament is the parable of the sower. The Pharisees reject Jesus Jesus therefore preaches in parables so they cannot understand him as judgment so that they might never understand him.

In other words God confirms people in their unbelief so that verse 12 in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

Now the point here is not to give us an exhaustive description of what happens with unbelief but the point is to make clear that unbelief in and of itself is not outside of God's purposes and that if God wants to confirm people in unbelief he will do so.

Satan thinks that he's winning a victory when he blinds people and God turns it ultimately to his own purposes. And of course we know this as Christians because one surprising thing that we see in the New Testament is that Satan was thrilled at the crucifixion of Jesus.

[24 : 11] The crucifixion was in a sense the great success of Satan. Satan we're told in John 13 persuaded Judas to betray Jesus. It was the act of Satan that led men to kill their creator.

So in one sense the greatest success of Satan was the crucifixion of Jesus. It was also his greatest defeat. This is how God works in other words.

He uses brokenness he uses evil towards his ultimate ends. God ultimately therefore is the one blinding and deluding. That is a hard truth but it is a true and reassuring truth in that unbelief is not outside of God's control.

To begin to wrap up for us that's going to be very painful but again we need to remember the Thessalonian context and as we heard praise in our prayers this morning Christianity is the most persecuted religion in the world.

It must be an enormous reassurance to our brothers and sisters in northern Nigeria who are beaten beheaded and burned to be reassured that the persecution they are receiving is not outside ultimately of God's control.

[25 : 31] It must be enormously reassuring to the Christians in North Korea to know that Jesus ultimately despite everything that they are seeing to the contrary is in complete control and it must therefore be enormously reassuring to the Thessalonian Christians that despite all of the persecution they are receiving from their brothers and despite all of the deceit that is being sent their way the Lord Jesus is in control Satan is God's lackey.

Which is why Paul concludes this chapter with verse 16 and 17 Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and words.

In other words what Paul is saying because you have seen that Jesus is history's author and God is in control of Satan that Satan is God's lapdock because you have seen that you can be comforted and you can be established in every good work and word.

In other words you can keep going. Jesus is bringing history to a close. He's in control. We'll go on next week to see exactly what those good works are.

But that is enough to say that Paul thinks that the reassurance of Jesus' control over history and God's control over Satan is enough for them to keep going.

[26 : 58] So as we conclude we began by thinking about that truth didn't we? The functional truth that we might be tempted to no longer live as though Jesus is actually going to return.

That history actually has a conclusion. Well this is a reassurance and maybe a rebuke to us. I don't know. A reassurance and maybe a rebuke that we've not been left.

We can be encouraged to live not for now but in the certainty of eternity. Jesus will one day bring our history to a close with a breath.

The unbelief that we are surrounded by, the unbelief in others that we might find desperately painful is not outside of God's control. And so the two questions that I would like us to think about over coffee as we finish is number one for you, for me, for Grace Church, how would that look?

How would it look for us to live as though Jesus really is going to return to bring history to a close? How would that change our prayer life? How would it change what we invest our money in?

[28 : 09] How would it change where we invest our time? And the final thing for us to think about is to ask ourselves, well how do I not lose in this life?

What would it look like to live a life that isn't wasted, where I can't lose? Well it must be to live a life in light of the fact that Christ is returning.

He will bring history to a close. If we want to look back at the end of our life as we're on our deathbed surrounded by family and friends and we want to reflect on what it might mean to have lived a fulfilled, true life, well surely it must be a life lived in light of the fact that Jesus is coming back and he certainly will do it.

Why don't I close us in a final prayer? Lord we thank you for the certainty that Paul has of the Lord Jesus Christ's return. Please would you help us to think and help one another speak the truth in love, what it might mean for us as a church family and for us as individuals to live in light of the fact that Christ will one day bring history to a close.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.