

The Return of Jesus

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[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 26th of November 2000 The preacher is Phil Muleman His sermon is entitled The Return of Jesus and is from 2 Thessalonians 2 verses 1 to 12 In the early 90s there was a church in Sydney that made it onto TV and radio because the pastor there was convinced that Jesus was to return on a certain date and time and he had stirred up many people convincing them that this would be so The day came, the day went and we are still here, it's the year 2000 He was made a mockery of by the media as well as many members of the church and from what I recall he apologised, went on TV in fact and apologised and said that he must have got the message wrong

Well earlier last century it was thought that Jesus would walk through the heads of Sydney Harbour and so a pavilion was erected on one of the beaches I can't remember which one and people would go there to watch it happen Well the day came and the day went again the prediction failed to come true Why do people make such outrageous claims and predictions about Jesus' return when scripture is clear that no one knows the day or the hour Jesus himself taught this that no one knows the day or the hour I think there are a number of reasons why Perhaps it is the need for people to draw attention to themselves so that they can leave a mark on society so they say oh well Jesus is going to return this is a good one, I'll get attention But also it comes from a misreading of scriptures and selecting passages here and there as proof text from the Bible to suit their own personal needs rather than putting it into the context of the whole of scripture as we see the whole of God's plan unfold

Now the teaching about the return or coming of Jesus and our being gathered to him together to him is one that many people have speculated about over the last 2,000 years or so and it's also an area where many false teachings have sprung up and it seems that it is a big issue for these faithful Thessalonian Christians in Thessalonica They didn't just have to contend with people persecuting them about their faith as we saw last week but they also had to contend with people that were intellectually challenging them and deceiving them about Jesus' return So in this passage which we're looking at this morning Paul goes on and he identifies two things The first one is the nature of their error in verses 1-3 and then he contradicts what they are thinking by giving a full exposition of the truth in verses 4-12 Well let's firstly look at the nature of the error

It seems that there was some teaching going on around them saying that the day of the Lord had already come Jesus has already returned Look at verses 1-2 He writes As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him we beg you brothers and sisters not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed either by spirit or by word or by letter as though from us to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here Now it's unclear as to where this teaching about the day of the Lord having already happened had come from Perhaps someone had not fully understood Paul's words while he was with them about the return of Jesus and so they started teaching their own watered down understanding And it's also possible and seems apparent here from verse 2 that someone has tried to forge a letter from the Apostle Paul with words in it to the effect that Christ's return had already occurred

Now with this letter that we have the second letter and the first letter Paul makes it very clear at the end that this is his letter Look at chapter 3 verse 17 He says I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand This is the mark of every letter of mine to show its authenticity It's the way I write Well, we don't know how this false teaching started but however it started it was false and it was deceptive and it seems it was confusing the people the Christians in Thessalonica and unsettling them So Paul makes it very clear here that in his previous letter as in his previous letter that Jesus Christ has not yet returned Well, that's fair enough, you might say I know that Jesus hasn't returned Well, that's good I'm glad that you know that Don't forget it until in fact he does return then there'll be a big party and we'll all be able to rejoice those who are on his side

[5 : 39] But people get sucked into a false belief like this and they do start to begin to following the false teachings of whatever organisation it is that teaches something like this Now a modern version of the belief that Jesus has already returned is found amongst the Jehovah's Witnesses Their founder first taught that the world would end in 1874 and that person then went on and revised his calculations to be 1914 Well, his successor asserted that Christ came back on the 1st of October in 1914 but his return was not a visible one it was invisible Now to believe this that Jesus returned in 1914 is contrary to what the Bible teaches about Christ's return for we're told that just as Jesus' departure was visible it was visible to the disciples who saw him lifted up and ascend in Acts chapter 1 we read that so too Jesus' return will be visible we will see it other descriptions of Jesus' return make it quite clear that it will be conspicuous for example in Matthew's Gospel chapter 24 verse 30 we read this

They will see the Son of Man which is a title Jesus uses himself They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory It hardly sounds invisible does it?

Don't be deceived by anyone who says they know when Jesus is returning Don't be deceived by the Jehovah's Witnesses who say that he is already here It's not true and it's bad enough that those people have been deceived themselves but it's made even worse if their deception is to draw you into it as well Don't be deceived Now regarding the day of the Lord Paul writes on at the end of verse 3 saying that the day will not come until two other things have happened The first thing he says is that a certain event must take place He calls that here in verse 3 the rebellion and the second thing a certain person must appear and Paul calls this person the lawless one and he goes on to add at the end of that verse that this lawless one is the one destined for destruction

Now another word for the lawless one is the Antichrist It's the word that we're probably more familiar with and that's how John the Apostle talks about this lawless one in his letters In fact he says that in addition to the Antichrist there are actually many Antichrists Now the Antichrist is anyone or anything that is opposed to the ways of God That is they are Antichrist Well Paul continues on in verses 4-12 giving an exposition of the full truth about the things that will happen leading up to the return of Jesus So what is it that we know about the rebellion and the lawless one?

As regards to the rebellion we have very little or no information about it Paul takes it for granted in verse 5 that his readers know what he means by the rebellion and says virtually nothing further about it But we just don't have that information with us today what he actually has told them So we don't know a great more about what the rebellion is going to be like It could be that the rebellion is a political one It could be that it's a religious one We just don't know But whatever it is though Paul has in mind here with the rebellion that there will be a time of increasing wrongdoing and general opposition to God I think that's what he's on about As we go on we discover that there will be a leader of the rebellion and that's what Paul calls here the lawless one or the Antichrist And there are four things that we discover in verse 4 about him First of all he opposes

[10:16] Secondly he exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship The third thing that he does is this lawless one takes his seat in the temple of God That is he will take some claim to divinity seeking to usurp the power of God Now I don't think there is any specific temple in mind here when he talks about himself setting himself up in the temple but the image of this man of lawlessness or the Antichrist sitting in the temple and claiming to be God is used to express the opposition of evil to God this person who is blatantly setting himself up to be in opposition to God The fourth thing we find out about this man of lawlessness is that he will declare himself to be God Deceptions and lies Again verse 5 tells us that Paul has already talked to the

Thessalonians about this when he visited them face to face and so he assumes they know what he is talking about when he writes these words to them Well it's okay for them isn't it They knew what he was talking about But it's made much more difficult for us because we just don't have all the information about some aspects of his writing and this is made even more evident when we look at verses 6 to 8 and there we see Paul writing You know what is now restraining him so that he may be revealed when his time comes what is it that is restraining him Now I've done a bit of reading about this during the week and I have to be honest and say I'm not really sure I know what it is that's restraining the lawless one from being revealed It seems likely that the restraining influence is a force for good rather than evil but even that is not 100% clear and what is clear from verse 7 though is that there is a state of lawlessness already at work in our world but it's operating in a manner that is somehow restrained and it's held back

Now we see that every day don't we We hear about evil and persecution and people and lawlessness occurring every minute of every day somewhere in this world And we tend to think the situation is getting worse by the day as well when you look at the news the reports and so on you despair But there is coming a day when the restraining influence whatever it is will be taken away and then as verse 8 tells us the lawless one the antichrist will be revealed In other words the lawless one will have his coming and his work will be in accordance with the working of Satan And so powerful is Satan that people will be deceived There will be signs lying wonders and every kind of wicked deception Now although the coming of the lawless one may be both grand for the meaning of the word coming in Greek evokes the pageantry pomp and circumstance attending the arrival of the emperor and although his arrival will be deceptive it will it seems be short lived for as we see back at the end of verse 3 this lawless one the antichrist is destined for destruction

Why? Why is he destined for destruction? It's because of what follows look at the end of verse 8 it says this The Lord Jesus will destroy the lawless one that is will destroy with the breath of his mouth annihilating him by the manifestation of his coming though Satan's power may be particularly strong and deceptive and all those sorts of things the lawless ones may be deceptively strong it will be as nothing as to the power of Jesus when it's revealed so yes the reign of this lawless one does sound scary such evil is frightening for us to conceive yet look at what Jesus will do here by his breath like the blowing out of a candle this evil will be annihilated destroyed wiped out gone forever what a great and mighty

God we have what a comfort this is to us as we face evil in this world we are on the side of a mighty victor the victory is first seen for us as we look to the cross where Jesus overcame death and it will be seen for all when Jesus return is made visible and wipes out Satan and this lawless one that we are reading about here but what will become of those who don't follow God it appears that the lawless one's coming will swallow up people who refuse to believe the truth about Jesus and those people sadly will live a life of deception and that sort of living has eternal consequences verse 12 saying those who take pleasure in unrighteousness will be condemned back in chapter one we're told those who do not obey the gospel of the Lord will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction that is they will be separated from the presence of the

[16 : 24] Lord for an eternity forever it's not very cheery is it I mean we can all be deceived at some time can't we but take heart the implication of verse 10 is that the saved those who are in Christ Jesus will not be deceived by false wonders and this implication then functions as an exhortation for Christians as it does for these Thessalonian Christians to remain faithful to what they have heard about the gospel and those of us who do love the truth as we read it in scripture should not be deceived or we will not be deceived by counterfeit miracles and wonders now notice here everything that happens when the lawless one appears is antichrist evil is the way of the antichrist whereas goodness is the way of

Jesus deception is the way of the antichrist whereas truth is the way of Jesus Jesus says I am the way and the truth and the life no one comes to the father but by me Jesus is the truth the antichrist is deception counterfeit miracles are also the way of the antichrist to fool people into believing and following him the antichrist whereas Jesus miracles were done to point people to who he was and who he is the lawless one the antichrist is the complete opposite of Jesus Christ God's son well what can we make of this passage then and the return of Jesus let me suggest to you four things firstly don't be deceived don't be deceived by anyone who tries to tell you that Jesus has returned and don't ignore the person who says that he or she is a

Jehovah's witness but don't yield to their teachings rather try and correct their false views of the return of Jesus by opening up the Bible to this passage to Thessalonians and explaining to them that Jesus has not yet returned tell them that we live in between the time when Jesus has returned and when Jesus has risen from the dead and when Jesus will return again where his victory will be seen and will be decisive secondly well also if you know people who are Jehovah's witness or something like that and goes around claiming these sorts of things pray for them pray that they will see the truth and enter into the truth the second thing is don't be deceived by those people who claim they know the day or the hour of Jesus return it's utter foolishness to think that you know when Jesus will return as I said at the beginning nobody knows the time when

Jesus will return except God himself date setting setting a date on when Jesus will return essentially constitutes a usurping of God's role and friends only God knows the future as much as we'd like to know everything that's going to happen to us over the next six months or the next ten years God's the only one who knows that the third thing that we find here is that this passage tells us that there is coming a time when the antichrist the lawless one will have extraordinary powers in this world they are there now but they will be there in an extraordinary way deceiving people in a manner which has never ever been seen before as to who the lawless one is or who the antichrist is we don't know although there are many many many people who have speculated Roman emperors have been accused of being the antichrist popes and the papacy itself has been accused of being the antichrist in the last century

Hitler Mussolini the League of Nations Saddam Hussein the Soviet Union the Ayatollah Khomeini Mikhail Gorbachev because he had a mark on his forehead which was allegedly the mark of the beast have all been accused of being the antichrist Ronald Wilson Reagan has been accused of being the antichrist because he has six letters in each of his names Ronald Wilson Reagan 666 the mark of the beast my number plate 666 when we bought the car the man who sold it to us knew I was working in the Anglican church and he said would you like me to change the number plate I didn't worry about it I have been the brunt of many jokes over the years as a result people have speculated over who the antichrist is and in the end it's all speculation it's wrong and it doesn't advance the cause of the gospel of

[21 : 57] Jesus Christ and surely we deceive ourselves if we think we can identify the master deceiver yet I'm sure that people will still persist in trying to do so today if you're going to a Christian bookstore far too much space is devoted to books and novels about the antichrist and related topics to do with the antichrist than there are books about discipleship for example perhaps this is a reflection on reader interest and demand within our society surely there are better ways to invest our time our energy and money than in a fruitless attempt to predict or read about the identity of who the antichrist is one writer writes saying church history is littered with incautious self confident but mistaken attempts to find in this particular passage a reference to some contemporary person and event let this be a warning to us to speculate over who the antichrist is it's wrong it's just speculation well the fourth thing that we can take away from this passage in the context of this letter this letter that

Paul has written to these Christians in Thessalonica he's reminding them of the word that he originally passed on to them and he hasn't changed his story in any way since visiting them face to face as well as writing to them he wants them to keep their lives focused on Jesus and serving him and growing in faith and obedience of him as well as love for one another and that too should be our aim as Christians keeping our eyes focused on Jesus growing in faith and obedience of him as well as growing in love for our Christian brothers and sisters and making Christ's name in all that we seek to do Christ will come again we say it every time we have communion we say Christ will come again and in the end Jesus has already won but in the end Jesus will be seen to have won this is a certainty of that I'm sure but how will we spend the time while we await his return and decisive victory will we waste it trying to guess the day and the hour or who the

Antichrist is or will we spend each day each moment submitting our lives to the Lord Jesus Christ and his service and standing firm as Paul writes on in the remainder of this chapter in verse 15 standing firm in the trials and the hardships along the way there's a great old hymn which reminds us to focus our eyes on Jesus many hymns do that but this one is particularly good turn your eyes upon Jesus look full in his wonderful face and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace if we turn our eyes upon Jesus the things of earth including in speculation about the identity of the Antichrist will grow strangely dim in comparison to the light of Jesus glory and grace these are the very things that Paul emphasized to the

Thessalonians and the very things we need to emphasize in this age our focus needs to be Jesus Amen shut tears go