

Stand Firm in the Faith

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[0 : 00] Now, some of you may have heard me say this before, but we all want life to be better, don't we? Whether it's the company we work for, the mobile phone that we own.

Mine's only an SE. I'm sure you've got, you know, the 9, 10, what is it up to now? 13, is it? 14, okay. Or the car you drive. We always want to buy a better thing, don't we?

Or we want our company to get better. Even the church we belong to. We want things to get better in our church. But the question I want to ask is, why must this be so? I'm not saying this is wrong to desire progress, but what guarantees that it will be?

Is there some natural law that dictates that this is so? In fact, I think the opposite is actually true. For those of you who are physicists, the law of entropy actually stipulates, yes, a few physicists there, actually stipulates that in a closed system, this order can only increase, right?

Not decrease. And so when we read the Bible, I actually think the Bible confirms this. It gives us a sobering picture that somewhat pours cold water on our desire for progress.

[1 : 26] Particularly, I think, when it comes to human righteousness and morality. So we see it in our text tonight and with other New Testament passages. There are warnings that things will go from bad to worse.

That there will be terrible times in the last days. And now as Christians, we might think, you know, Jesus has come. We have the Holy Spirit.

Surely that should make a difference. I mean, didn't Jesus come to save the world? Didn't he come to make the world a better place? Well, as we saw in our passage last Sunday, the answer to that question is yes.

Yes, but in terms of perfection, not yet. Not until he comes again. And in the meantime, we are to be prepared for things to get worse.

And so Paul continues now in chapter 2. Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, on the slide, and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers and sisters, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by the teaching allegedly from us, whether by a prophecy or by word of mouth or by letter, asserting that the day of the Lord has already come.

[2 : 43] Now remember last week I told you how the Jews had this expectation of the day of the Lord. And now the Thessalonians appear confused as to when this would occur. Some may have misunderstood Paul.

Others maybe have falsely attributed to Paul some word or prophecy or letter saying that he said that the day of the Lord had already come. Now, if you think about this, it should have been obvious to them whether the Lord had come or not, right?

It should be plain to see. They should have heard the last trumpet sound. Perhaps seen the angels descending from the heavens with him on the clouds. But remember, they didn't have TVs in those days.

No iPhones, no capturing of the images as they come, you know. And so, perhaps they did miss it. You know, they're in Thessalonica, and it happened in Jerusalem.

Maybe reports were coming out of Jerusalem that something was happening, indicating that the Lord was here or was coming. Now, we don't exactly know what the situation was because Paul doesn't go into it.

[3 : 52] But either way, the Thessalonians were formal, right? They were fearful of missing out, and so they were unsettled by it. Now, Paul assures them that the day hasn't come yet.

He says in verse 3, Don't let anyone deceive you in any way. Don't follow after the false teachers or the false teaching, or be spooked into deserting the gospel.

In fact, these false teachers are the very signs that the Lord has not yet come. For these things, Paul says, must precede his coming.

So, he goes on to say, That day will not come until the rebellion occurs, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. Now, there's a lot of intrigue regarding this man of lawlessness.

Who is this mysterious person? And for one reason or the other, whenever I listen to this man of lawlessness, or I read it here, the name Austin Powers comes to mind.

[4 : 57] International man of mystery. Now, rest assured, he's not the man of lawlessness. But many people throughout history have tried to predict who this person is.

Haven't they? But of course, as Paul says in verse 6 now, No one knows because he hasn't been revealed yet. You can guess, but actually no one knows.

All we know is that this person, this human, this man, despite his apparent power and success, is actually doomed for destruction. He's not going to succeed in the end.

And so, in the outline which I've got for you, I add three other things that Paul tells us concerning him. So, first in verse 4, Paul says that he will set himself up as a god against God himself.

He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God, or is worshipped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God.

[5 : 58] Now, the language here, I think, closely echoes that New Old Testament reading that we went through, Daniel 11, verses 36. So, I'm going to read it again, and see whether you can see the parallels.

For there, Daniel, it says, I hope you can see, many parallels, isn't it?

And wouldn't it surprise me that Paul actually had this passage in Daniel in mind when he was writing his letter. But what is in the case is that this man is going to be an authority figure, perhaps a king or ruler, who is able to exert himself, assert himself, someone who will seek for others to worship him, because what he's trying to do is take the place of God.

Now, in Paul's day, there were such rulers, the Greek and Roman emperors, or conquerors that came and took Jerusalem, they tried to desecrate the temple by erecting their own images or statues in the temple.

So, one such person, who came about 100 or so years before Jesus, his name was Antiochus IV. and he actually added a name, a title to his name, the title of Epiphanes.

[7 : 44] That actually means in Greek, God manifest. So, he proclaimed himself to be God by giving himself that title. Now, all of these people that have come before were actually men acting in defiance of God, trying to take the place of God.

So, I think the word here, lawlessness, doesn't exactly mean no laws, like we're in the Wild West with the Indians and the cowboys.

Rather, lawless here means one who rejects God's laws. For this man of lawlessness is trying to usurp God's authority by being a God himself.

He's a dictator whose own word is law or he wants to make law where he's demanding unquestioning allegiance to him.

And his aim is to be a rival replacement to God. Now, as we look through the passage, I want you to also point out to you that what Paul does here is portray this man as an opposition figure to the Lord Jesus himself.

[8 : 54] So, last week, we saw how the Lord Jesus is revealed at his coming, chapter 1. Well, here, the man of lawlessness is revealed as well, isn't he?

But prior to the day of the Lord's coming. Last week, when Jesus came or comes, we saw in verse 9 that he will punish with everlasting destruction those who disobey the gospel.

Well, this man of lawlessness will be one of those for he is doomed for destruction. And so, this contract continues in verse 5. Let me keep reading.

Don't you remember that when I was with you, I used to tell you these things? And now you know what is holding him back so that he may be revealed at the proper time. For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work.

But the man, the one who holds, who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming.

[9 : 58] Now just by way of attention, if you're wondering, although God is not named, he's actually the one who is holding the lawless one back. But the contrast here is one of the secret power.

So whereas last week we saw God's power at work in his holy people, this week, in this chapter, Paul talks about the secret power of lawlessness that is already at work among the rebellious. And that's the second point on the outline. The lawless one may not yet have been revealed, but an age of lawlessness is already upon us. This age will precede the lawless one being revealed. But during this time, the secret power of this lawlessness is actually doing the very same things that would have happened if the lawless one had been revealed. And who is behind this work? Well, Paul says, Satan. That is the third point. For behind the lawless one stands Satan and his deception. Verse 9.

[11 : 08] The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with how Satan works. He will use all sorts of displays of power through signs and wonders that serve the lie and all the ways that wickedness deceives those who are perishing.

They perish because they refuse to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason, God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.

Now again, we see here a contrast, isn't it? Satan's work is in direct opposition to God's work. He works through the lawless one who will one day be revealed and in the meantime, he works through the secret power of lawlessness.

So you see on the one hand, Satan, the lawless one, secret power, perpetuating lies and that's contrasted with God working through the Lord Jesus who will also one day be revealed but in the meantime, God's power is at work in his holy people bringing to fruition truth, the truth of the gospel. So you can see how Paul is really setting up the Lord Jesus against the lawless one, can't you? It's a straight parallel. Now, let's think a bit more about lies and deception because Paul says it's through lies and deceptions that Satan works.

[12 : 39] But the thing about lies is that no one knowingly believes a lie, do they? So if you knew something was a lie, would you believe it and go ahead and act according to it?

Anyone? No. Lies only work when people think it's true, isn't it? That's the way lies work.

Hence, we have Satan, the Bible say, masquerading as an angel of light. He uses all sorts of displays of how to mesmerize so that people look at it and go, wow, this is great.

Let's follow it. It's true. But Paul says he doesn't just use signs and wonders, verse 10, but all the ways that wickedness deceives. It's a lot more than just signs and wonders.

A lot of other ways that Paul doesn't name that Satan uses to deceive. And if you look at the Bible and you look at history, you can see this all play out, can't you?

[13 : 36] Time and time again. Now often, a lie, you know, a lie would appeal to our desires. You know, even a desire for good like progress. Maybe there's some inequality or deprivation in the world.

And then along comes someone or some ideology comes along with a promise to fix it. So they'll say, we've got the answer to save the planet.

Or we've got the answer to make society great again. Heard that one before. But of course, it's a solution invariably that excludes God.

Isn't it? It's one which doesn't take account of what's the real problem and that is human sin. Human rebellion against God. And so ultimately all these solutions are really rebellion against God.

Because what it's saying in effect is, we don't need you God. We can solve our own problems. But we will solve it by making our own laws. Not by obeying yours.

[14 : 42] And so essentially that's lawlessness. Isn't it? Not where there are no laws. But where God's laws are ignored with impunity.

And so if you look in the Bible, we saw it in the Garden of Eden with Adam. God gave him a law. Didn't want to obey it. Then we saw it in the days of Noah. We saw it with the Tower of Babel.

And we even saw it with the nation of Israel when they were in the Promised Land. Because they said to Samuel, appoint us a king just like the other nations. And what did God say to Samuel?

The people have chosen this because they have rejected me as their king by asking for a human king. All of these really reflect a spirit of lawlessness, isn't it?

Even though there's not a single man of lawlessness involved. And in each case, it accords with how Satan works. Deceiving people to think they can prosper without God.

[15 : 49] Now thankfully, Paul says, none of this occurs outside God's control. Rather, God allows it to occur. Because their intent on believing the lie, verse 11, God sends them a powerful delusion. He's almost bringing to fruition, if you like, their desire for wickedness. Now of course, what's most tragic is that when people are under this delusion, they think that what they're doing is actually good.

You know, that they're actually doing a righteous thing. And so when they think like that, they not only want to do it themselves, but they try and convince and even mandate for others to do it as well.

Now I know I'm being very critical of them, people, but the truth is, all of us have gone that way too, haven't we? Were it not for God's grace, we would be like that as well.

And Paul knows that it's only because of God's grace that the Thessalonians are able to see the truth and therefore obey and believe the gospel, the good news of Jesus.

[16 : 59] And so again, that's why even in this chapter, Paul returns to thanksgiving. He thanks God because it's really God that has made them who they are.

And so in verse 13, he goes on, But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, loved by the Lord because God chose you as firstfruits to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.

He called you to this through our gospel that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. It's very clear, isn't it? It's only because of God.

The Lord loved them and us first. He chose us to be saved. He called us. It is His sanctifying work of the Spirit that helps us to believe the truth.

only then do we share in the glory of the Lord Jesus. Well, how do we apply this passage then?

Now, if you looked at, if you were here last week, recall that I encouraged everyone, or encouraged everyone to see that Paul was asking the Thessalonians to persevere in their faith amidst persecution.

[18 : 14] This week, the message is to stand firm and hold fast to the truth despite deception. So last week, perseverance in persecution.

This week, truth despite deception. But if you think about it, those are really two sides of the same coin, isn't it? They're all about persisting despite the challenges.

We are to continue to believe and obey God's word because it's the truth in spite of everything. And so Paul writes in verse 15, So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.

And so, just again, like last week, we see how God's work go hand in hand with our obedience. God is the one who encourages our hearts and strengthens us but we are called to stand firm, to hold fast.

[19 : 24] They go together. Paul here refers to his teachings but more generally he's just talking about holding fast to God's word. And if you recall in verse 2, he said, you know, don't believe the rumors about my teaching, whether it's by word of mouth or letter or prophecy, but when you know, as he now says here, that this word or letter is from me, then hold fast to it.

Now, how are they to tell the difference? Well, here Paul makes a point of ensuring that they know this letter is for him because he signs off with his own hand.

So, if you just have a look at verse 17 on the slide, next week we'll look at it. He writes at the end, I, Paul, write this greeting in my hand, which is the distinguishing mark in all my letters.

This is how I write. So, what Paul does is that he gets other people to write the letter for him. He dictates it and they write it out, but in order to authenticate it, he signs off, normally with a little note at the end to say, yep, this is from me.

You can tell. You can see my handwriting. So, if you read other letters like Galatians, Colossians, 1 Corinthians, Philemon, he says the same thing. In fact, one of the letters he says, look with what big writing I have, or whatever, as though, you know, see, I've got such big words.

[20 : 43] But that's the way you can tell is Paul's writing. And he's able then to claim that these letters are from God because he's God's apostle, called by God.

And so, likewise, we know God's word is authoritative because of the witness of the apostles in the writing and the prophets. And this is what we use, the Bible, to test everything else we hear. Whether from me or from other pastors or preachers or from whatever else you're watching on YouTube, these all need to be tested against God's word.

And we hold fast to the truth here in God's word. Because you see, the reality is the secret power of lawlessness is always with us.

Paul wrote about 2,000 years ago, but that secret power has been working constantly over these thousands of years. Why? Because Satan knows his time is short and he's constantly at work.

[21 : 49] And so, we mustn't be surprised where there is constant attempts by him to deceive us from the truth. And unfortunately, I have to say that as Christians, sometimes, you know, we can get so distracted by trying to work out who this man of lawlessness is or when the day of the Lord is coming that we actually don't see that the danger is a real and present danger now because the spirit of lawlessness is at work already.

And I'm not saying this to create paranoia or alarm, but what I think we need to do is to be alert so that we don't fall into deception.

And often, I have to say, it creeps into churches because we're tempted, aren't we, to follow the spirit of the age. We want to be like the world. We think that that's what we need to attract others. And one good example I want to give today is, and you can come and talk to me if you think you disagree, but I think the focus at the moment on inclusion and diversity is one such thing.

If you think about it, every organization now has that on their agenda. It's part of their marketing strategy. It's what they use to attract employees. We're an inclusive workplace.

[23 : 10] And the media is obsessed with it, aren't they? So much so that it's now become the defining yardstick the measure for everything else, isn't it?

If you, as an organization, don't prioritize that as a core value, then, sorry, you're a bit backward. You know? You're even immoral as we've seen it play out.

Now, before I go on, I need to make it very clear, so please don't hear me wrong. Diversity and inclusion are not wrong in and of themselves, all right? We're not, it's wrong to exclude people because they're different.

It's wrong to ostracize and discriminate against them. That's bad. Jesus himself ate with tax collectors and prostitutes. So, diversity and inclusion are not bad things.

If you look around, we're pretty diverse, right? So, you might not think so, but you're pretty diverse from where I stand. So, it's not that as Christians we hate diversity or we don't want to include people.

[24 : 19] But what has happened now is that inclusion and diversity has become, as I said, the supreme yardstick. It's the thing that even the Bible is being measured against as to whether it stacks up or not.

It's upside down, isn't it? It's exalted itself as the law above all laws, hasn't it? No longer is God's word the yardstick that defines what's right or wrong, but this mantra of inclusion and diversity that's right and wrong, that's right actually, and everything else is measured against that to see whether they're right or wrong.

But if you think about it, there's good diversity and bad diversity, isn't there? If there's such a thing as true and false thoughts, then not all differences should be celebrated, isn't it?

we shouldn't celebrate wrong thinking. Rather, we ought to correct it. When someone is wrong, the most loving thing you can do is actually to gently correct them and help them to believe what is right.

Even in this letter, Paul warns, doesn't he, that those who disobey the gospel are doomed for destruction. He warns us, he tells them, to believe the truth, what is right, reject what is false in order to be saved.

[25 : 42] So there's really diversity to be celebrated and diversity to be discouraged. You know, when we talk about inclusion, the Bible here talks about some that will be excluded from God's kingdom.

Doesn't he? diversity. But let me say, God isn't against diversity at all. He welcomes all people. In Revelation, if you look at the picture of the kingdom there, it's one where people of all nations and tribes, men and women, gather around his throne.

But this is the diversity that God himself creates. And the people are united around him because of their faith in Jesus, washed by the blood of the Lamb.

They are not united by diversity. They are united by the Lord Jesus Christ. And all of us, no matter how different we are, no matter where we come from, we can be united in Christ.

But Jesus is the one that unites us, not our diversity. Not our identity for this or that. And so we mustn't believe what is really a lie, isn't it?

[26 : 50] That all diversity should be accepted and celebrated. It's actually true love to warn people of the truth so that they wouldn't get a rude shock when Jesus comes again.

But as I said, so strong is this worldview at the moment that there are those who wouldn't accept it that it could actually be wrong. And that's what a delusion, that's when you know it's a delusion and a powerful delusion at that.

When some idea is not willing to submit itself to reason or critique. And now I know some people say, well that's what you guys Christians do as well, right? Because you just read the Bible and take it for what?

That's actually not true because when we read the Bible, God allows us to wrestle with the text, don't we? To think it through, to reason, to work out what God is saying and be convinced that it is true.

God doesn't just force it down and say you have to believe it. No. God persuades us by His Holy Spirit. So that's not actually true. But when something's a delusion, it's not open to reason.

[27 : 56] It's not open to critique. And the only way to break that power really is by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, isn't it? And that's why we pray that the Lord will work because unless God opens our minds and our hearts, we cannot see that what we actually believe in to be true is actually a lie.

But when we believe, it's the same work of the Spirit that strengthens us to hold fast to the truth. It encourages us not to despair but to keep believing in God's Word.

Now we may probably suffer for it but God's Spirit is powerful to encourage us to keep persevering, to keep holding fast despite the deception.

And so I want to end with the prayer that Paul prays in verse 16 and 17. May our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father who loved us and by His grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope encourage our hearts and strengthen us in every good deed and worth.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.