

The Gospel and Deception

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[0 : 00] The nature and the timing of the second coming of Jesus has been a topic of concern for Christians for nearly 2,000 years.

! Many predictions have happened as well as well as it would happen. And the most recent prediction was from a South African pastor who claimed in June this year that the rapture, the coming of Jesus, would occur in this past week, if you were not aware, on the 23rd of September. Although there's been some confusion, it could have been any time between 23rd and 25th of September based on the different time zones and exactly when Jesus would land.

Again, social media exploded. A thing called Rapture Talk is a corner of TikTok filled with videos of content where people are getting ready for the return of Jesus on the 23rd of September.

A lot of the content is very practical in terms of tips, ensuring that the anticipation of the disappearance of Christians from the world would not leave a mess behind.

[1 : 13] Some were selling their cars, others their homes, others quitting jobs or, if not quitting jobs, applying for eternity leave from their employers.

Others were stockpiling survival kits, leaving Bibles marked with key passages. Others were unlocking their mobile phones so that those left behind could, in fact, use their mobile phone. There was the inevitable ridicule as well. One person laments that the rapture, the timing of the rapture was one day before payday.

And so therefore, a whole month of work for no pay. Others posted that it would make rent more affordable for those who were left behind. Some even pranked their Christian housemates by leaving piles of clothes randomly on the floor and hiding in the hope that their Christian friends would say, Oh no, we've missed out and we've got it all wrong.

Now, I find that kind of cheeky. But I also know that this chapter tells us that for the Thessalonians, the thought of missing the coming of Jesus produced a whole heap of confusion, hysteria and discouragement.

[2 : 40] And so this topic, while there's stuff that I've chuckled at in this last week, is crucial. Quite a lot of ink has been spilled on these verses in 2 Thessalonians 2 over the past 200 years, especially, particularly with the rise of a theology called dispensationalism from the 1830s.

This chapter, according to biblical scholars, is one of the most difficult of the entire New Testament to understand.

And it's done my head in. And we need to be careful how we interpret it, how we understand it. And the key to understanding it is to focus on the bits that we know and are certain of, rather than the bits that we want to speculate on.

The ones that we have particular questions of. And the ones that we think we've got solved. So it requires a great deal of humility and open hearts.

So I've got three points. It's on the St. Paul's app as well. The problem of deception, the power of deception, and disempowering deception. So the problem, the first thing we can absolutely be certain of is that Paul is writing these verses here so the Thessalonians are not unsettled or alarmed by wrong thinking.

[4 : 17] That is, false teaching rocks faith. It diminishes hope. And when hope is diminished, Christian lives wander. There's a lack of purpose to it.

So you see that in the second half of verse 1. The particular false teaching that has rocked them is in verse 1 concerning the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him.

This, as I said, is a massive topic. And Paul has already written a bunch about it in 1 Thessalonians 1 and last week in 2 Thessalonians chapter 1.

Thessalonians says, That's why he's written.

But for the Thessalonians, as we open up to Thessalonians 2, are their hopes dashed? You see, verse 3, the false teaching is that maybe they've missed it.

[5 : 30] Jesus has already come and they've missed it. And if they've missed the coming of Jesus, then what awaits them is what they already know of the coming. It's just purely condemnation by God on the day of judgment.

And so it's no wonder their faith has been rocked. Deception destroys. It destroys. Deception is the act of getting others to believe what is true and valid, what is in actual fact false and invalid. Very few people would say that they are easily deceived. For the Thessalonians, their deception was that they had missed the coming of Jesus.

Often our deception in the West is to so live for the moment that we don't look for the coming of Jesus.

That's more likely our deception. And the problem is in both deceptions is they call us to take our eyes off eternal hope.

[6 : 48] And when that hope, that happens, we stop living for and with Jesus in the present. And Paul does not want them or us to be deceived.

Verse 3, don't let anyone deceive you in any way. And so Paul writes this chapter, and in fact, his entire letters here to the Thessalonians, out of pastoral concern.

He doesn't want hopes to be dashed. He doesn't want faith and love to be diminished in any way. And so his goal here in this chapter is not to predict the future.

He wants to see gospel confidence. That's why these are written. Hope, faith and love is what's at stake. And so as we move into this chapter, we must not miss the forest for the trees, even if the tree is what we particularly want our attention to be attached to.

So the power of deception. This brings us to the most confusing part of this chapter with all its questions and missing pieces.

[8 : 07] It's like we're trying to put a puzzle together without pieces. Paul says in verse 3 that they haven't missed the second coming Jesus, because that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed.

And when it comes to the timing of Jesus' arrival, that's all we know. That's it. This is where it gets tricky.

Who is the man of lawlessness? So many people in the Western world, particularly, their whole focus of this passage is to identify who the man of lawlessness is.

Paul does not give us enough distinguishing features for us to point out the man of lawlessness in a police lineup. At all.

For 1900 years, Christians have been diligently trying to find a contemporary in their world that leads us to think that that person there is the candidate.

[9 : 18] They fit the bill. They is the man of lawlessness. In our current day and age, there seems to be a temperature rising saying Donald Trump is the man of lawlessness. In the early days of when Paul wrote these, the prime candidate was the Roman emperor, and in particular, the emperor Caligula, who set up a statue of himself in the Jewish temple in Jerusalem and demanded that that statue of him be worshipped.

Once upon a time, with the rise of Islam, Muhammad was the prime candidate. In the 16th and 17th century, Martin Luther identified the role of the pope, the papacy, as the man of lawlessness. They returned favour and said, no, actual fact, it was Martin Luther who's the man of lawlessness, other popular contenders throughout history, Napoleon Bonaparte, Adolf Hitler, and the list is virtually endless.

Some scholars reading this actually say it's most likely not a person, it's more likely a movement. It could be an ideology, even an institution.

The reality is, who knows? And every prediction has been wrong. Every prediction has been wrong, without exception.

[10 : 43] And verse 6 doesn't clear things up for us either. It tells us the man of lawlessness is currently being held back. Who's doing the restraining? Multiple answers to that question over the centuries.

And to add confusion, the reference to holding back is in the present tense, suggesting the man of lawlessness, whoever that is, has been held back for 1,900 years since this was first written.

That's an old person. Or is it multiple people? Or is it an institution or an ideology? It's also difficult to know what the temple is referring to in verse 4.

Scholars have confused about this one. The temple in Jerusalem doesn't exist, and there is no reference at all for the temple being rebuilt in a physical form once it was actually destroyed.

The New Testament says that the church and the individual Christian are both now the temple of God with the Holy Spirit. And so any reference to a future rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem is a misreading of Scripture.

[12:01] There are so many questions about the second coming, and yet we actually don't need to know the answers in order to have hope.

Put it this way. Understand it. Let's wind history back. If I was an Israelite reading all the Old Testament prophecies about the coming of the future Messiah, that is what we know to be the first coming of Jesus, what would I conclude about the nature and the timing of his coming, about the identity of the Messiah?

Would I have expected Jesus? No. The reality is that when he did arrive, the experts on the Messiah, the teachers of the law, did not even notice him.

And for 30-odd years, they rejected him. He was not the one they thought the prophecies were predicting, and so we need to be careful.

And make sure we focus on what we do know. So what do we do know? First of all, we know that the man of lawlessness is quintessentially lawless. Lawlessness is not the same as being a lawbreaker.

[13:35] There's a distinction here. The lawbreaker acknowledges the rightfulness of law, but fails to obey it fully. I acknowledge the goodness of speed limits, unless it gets in the way of me needing to be somewhere in a hurry.

Lawlessness means without law. That is, there's no goodness in a speed limit at all. This lawless one specifically rejects the eternal, absolute law of God.

They reject God being the determiner of right and wrong, and absolute truth. And so, therefore, the second thing we can be certain of is that they reject God.

And this lawless one does not do it by arguing that God doesn't exist. They set themselves up as God to be worshipped.

They deceive everyone to say, God does exist, but I am God. Thirdly, this lawless one will work real signs and wonders with great power, but all of it is in the service of a great lie.

[14:59] They are not false signs and wonders. They are real signs and wonders. He is empowered and driven by Satan, animated by Satan, serving Satan, accomplishing Satan's purposes.

And this means, number four, that they will have, they'll be unparalleled in their ability to deceive. Because they'll be in the place of God, claiming to be God, showing the powers and wonders of God.

Hence my picture on the screen.

When you see that, you don't automatically imagine a man of lawlessness. You're not getting what you think you're getting. However, Paul carefully records in verse 10, that only those who are perishing will be deceived.

Very crucially, the word perishing there is the same word Paul uses elsewhere in the New Testament to specifically describe those who reject the gospel of Christ.

[16:19] That's a very significant clue to the nature of the deceiving. The deceiver doesn't say the gospel doesn't exist.

The deceiver gives you an alternative gospel, an alternative good news to cling your life to. The followers of lawlessness have failed to love the truth of Christ's gospel.

Instead of loving truth, verse 12 literally says, they take pleasure in unrighteousness.

And the final certainty that we can about the man of lawlessness is that they are going to be destroyed. He is quintessentially lawless, he opposes God and so condemned by the law of God, he opposes and is therefore doomed by God.

Verse 8 tells us, the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming. Jesus will only need to exert as much effort as a mere breath to defeat the lawless one.

[17 : 38] And so what we can be certain of here is that whatever transpires in the future and is obvious from this text is that God is sovereign and he is all-powerful.

And we can be absolutely certain that the man of lawlessness is not God. God has no equal. Whatever is in the future, God reigns and all his, the deceiving of the man of lawlessness is simply fulfilling God's plans and purposes.

So to avoid deception, to avoid deception, we need to understand, we don't need to know the identity of the deceiver.

We need to know how it is that they are deceiving. What's their playbook? How do they work? And verse 7 is a crucial verse to help us understand. The secret power of lawlessness is already at work.

[18 : 54] We need to know that the secret of lawlessness, or if you like, the power of deception of the man of lawlessness is already at work right now and has been for 1900 years.

We don't need to know the secret power of, sorry, we need to know the secret power of lawlessness, not the mystery of the secret identity of the powerful man of lawlessness.

Before the man of lawlessness is revealed, lawlessness is operating secretly. The Greek word there, translated secret in verse 7, literally is mystery.

The mystery of iniquity. The mystery of sin. The power. The secret power of sin. What is the mystery of sin that is in play now?

Now? Now? Verse 4 is the key clue. He sets himself up in God's temple.

[20 : 01] Literally, quite literally in the original language, he takes his seat in the temple. Takes his seat in the temple.

We could try and work out what temple he's talking about, but more and crucially, what we need to understand is how does the Bible understand the seat in the temple? What's he saying here?

What's the nature of the secret power of lawlessness? Some have interpreted this as a man of lawlessness will be a great political leader. He will rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, and when that happens, Jesus will come back at some point.

That's not the point of this. That is importing a theological framework that began in the 1830s into this passage. This here is talking about the role and the purpose of the temple.

The temple was the place where God met with his people in the Old Testament times. The temple represents ultimate reality, and the man of lawlessness is putting themselves at the centre of the ultimate reality, that you must govern your life by this.

[21 : 24] In the centre of the temple, in Old Testament times for the Israelite, was something that revealed what was the centre of ultimate reality.

The reality of both creation and redemption. What was it? Was it a statue? Was it an image of God? No, it was a piece of furniture that pointed to an event. It was, in fact, a wooden box at the centre of the temple called the Ark of the Covenant, and that Ark contained the two stone tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments.

We, two other things that pointed to God's goodness and God's power. And both, all of that there, this thing was the sacred object at the centre of the temple and the lid on top of the temple was a, on top of this Ark was a gold slab.

And each year, once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest would come into there on behalf of all Israelites.

[22 : 50] They would come into the Holy of Holies and they would sprinkle the blood of a sacrificed animal on the top of the Ark of the Covenant, on that slab for atonement for the sins of God's people.

And that slab where the blood was sprinkled was called the mercy seat. It's very significant when it says he will take his seat.

there is no other furniture, there's no other seats in the temple. There's only one seat in the temple and it is the mercy seat.

And it's the place where God sat and dwelt with his people. And the slab there with the offering of blood, the condemnation of the law which the Ark of the Covenant held, with the offering of the blood, the condemnation of the law would be taken away and the violations of God's law were covered by the sprinkling of the blood.

And so the mystery that God gave Israel in their temple is the exact same that he gives us now. It is the mystery which says that all life flows from this mystery.

[24 : 20] and it's the mystery that all life flows. My life for yours. All of creation and all of redemption is built on that mystery.

It is my life for yours. That's the central mystery of all of reality. And the reality of lawlessness is the exact opposite.

It is your life surrendered for me and that is the nature of the man of lawlessness. That is the mystery of sin.

God's law says lay down your life for others. Sin says you lay down your life for me. The man of lawlessness will deceive for his own gain even though he knows he is destroyed and he will take everyone with him.

The secret power of lawlessness is a philosophy an ideology a belief that goes right back to the very first act of rebellion against God in the Garden of Eden where God says I have given you all of this for your enjoyment but you must obey my word.

[25 : 56] This one word and Adam and Eve say no God's holding back from me. No no no he's holding back. They believe the lie of Satan that God is not good and for my fulfillment for my realization for my desire to know what's right and wrong and to be like God I must eat of the fruit and all destruction flows.

And the destruction that flows the power of sin is that it sets people against one another it sets you against your very self it sets you against creation and it sets you against God himself.

My life for yours is the central reality of the Godhead. It's the central reality of all of creation of the Jewish temple and the Christian faith.

You see Jesus Christ at his first coming talked about the law and obeyed the law of God like no other human being. He didn't go away with the law.

He made it very clear he didn't do away with the law. He upheld the demands of the law absolutely perfectly. Galatians 4.4 and 5 puts it like this God sent his son born of a woman born under the law to redeem those under the law that we might receive adoption to sonship.

[27 : 23] How did you do that? 2 Corinthians 5.21 says that God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

What is the Christian faith? Jesus exchanged his life for ours. That's the central message of Christianity.

It's the gospel. Jesus has satisfied the demands of the law of God. In Jesus we are forgiven, we are loved by God and that creates a love for every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

The secret power of lawlessness that is at display right now utterly hates God's word and it hates the gospel which is the central of God's word.

And the great deception that's making a life, is to make the life of unrighteousness attractive. the great deception of lawlessness is to say you will not receive full complete fulfillment as an individual.

[28 : 38] In fact, it's restrictive in your life if you obey God's word. You need to reject that in order to live a full and wholesome life.

You need to set yourself up as the ruler and determiner of your life. So how do we disempower that deception?

The first step is to see that the principle of lawlessness is at work now. That's the first step.

We cannot avoid what we do not see and acknowledge. everyone operates on the default principle of lawlessness.

Our default position is it's your life for mine. You exist to serve me. You exist to affirm me. You exist to build me.

[29 : 41] All of us want to rule our own life, be masters of our own destiny and determiners of what is right and wrong. That's the nature of the very first sin of lawlessness in the garden of Eden. And all destruction in our life flows from it and yet we justify it consistently.

The second step to disempowering deception is to do the same thing that overcomes the man of lawlessness here in verse 8.

What is it that destroys the man of lawlessness? The splendour of his coming. I talked about this last week. It is the splendour. Not just his coming.

It is the splendour of his coming. In other words, look to the splendour of Jesus Christ. He is better than any offer of righteousness. What he offers us in life, in life in him right now is fundamentally better than anything that we think that we could build for this world can offer.

Look at the splendour of the mystery of God's grace to me, a sinner in Jesus Christ. Marvel at the gospel of Jesus Christ and all its implications.

[30 : 58] His life for mine. He died that I might live. Marvel at the gospel that declares that the Christian is because of Jesus Christ.

They are loved by God. We are not lovable because of any of the lovability but because it was his initiative to choose to set his love for us in the person of Jesus Christ by Jesus giving his life for ours.

And it's in that gospel of Jesus Christ the sprinkling the shedding of his blood that fulfills all the law of God.

It's because of that and his act that we are declared to be his much-loved children. That in despite this is in fact that you are his much-loved children despite the ongoing presence that we have inside of us of lawlessness.

Holy Spirit is sanctifying us through belief in that truth. To disempower the deceiver, to stand firm in the truth, to grow in confidence in the gospel and stable in life, verse 5 calls us to hold fast to the teaching of God's word.

[32 : 21] 15 holds us to hold fast to the teaching of God's word. That is the only way to disempower deception and the key instrument to disempower deception is to marvel at the splendour of the gospel in God's word.

God's word is the key instrument and it's unfortunate that this South African pastor chose to believe a dream and set his hopes on a dream rather than the authority of God's word.

Because if he did, he would know, as we've already seen, 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 verses 16 and 17 are the only verses in the entire Bible that refers in any vague form to this idea of a rapture as it's understood in its modern idea by a very small group of Christians.

A very small group of Christians. It's a recent doctrine out of dispensationalism that didn't exist before the 1800s. And those verses in 1 Thessalonians 4 are about a meeting of Jesus and his faithful ones to encourage them because their friends had died.

And had they missed out, they are about the dead in Christ not missing out, so keep living, trusting God now in the gospel.

[34 : 03] and in 1 Thessalonians 4 there is no further information on any direction of travel once that meeting has happened. there is no evidence in the scriptures at all if you're a rapture talk person that you then go with him.

Nothing. It's all about the meeting and you're not lost, you're not forgotten. Crucially though, even more crucially, a few verses later Paul writes to the Thessalonians and emphasises something that Jesus has already said.

He will come back like a thief in the night and we do not know the time or the dates and that even Jesus does not know the time or the dates.

And so if you have a dream, even a vivid dream of Jesus telling you the date of his return, you are being deceived.

Because Jesus already said in his word, I don't know the time and the dates. How can he tell you what he does not know himself? It will just happen when the father tells him to do it now.

[35 : 34] So to live with confident hope, hope, and I feel for those who have been brought into this latest lie of deception, to live with confident hope so that we grow in trust of God and love for all people, we need to know our Bible.

And with the gospel of the Lord Jesus is the central interpreting principle of it. Paul's desire, his whole plan, is for you to grow confidently in the gospel.

And that is our desire here. In 1987, a pilot was flying an empty plane in the US when he heard a noise at the back of the plane.

So he left a co-pilot to fly the plane while he went and investigated he discovered a door that would have been sort of left ajar. While trying to close the door, he fell out.

And so the co-pilot saw what happened, radioed Coast Guard, said, hey, search area, pilot's fallen out over the Atlantic Ocean. And when the plane, which made an emergency landing, when it landed, the emergency service discovered that the pilot was hanging on to the railing of the stairs.

[36 : 59] emergency service said he was hanging on so tight they literally, he did not let go when he landed.

They literally had to peel his hands off those steps by extreme force because he would not let go.

do not be deceived now or in the future. Hold tight, so tight to God's word with the gospel of the Lord Jesus as its centre and its focus.
That is how we stand firm with hope and grow in faith and love in the face of lawlessness. each.
Stop Thank you.