

True Comfort

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[0 : 00] If you would turn with me to 2 Thessalonians chapter 2. While you're making your way there, you'll be reminded that last week we began at chapter 1.

Chapter 1 was very much about the lesson of reassurance, but a biblical reassurance. And here in chapter 2 there is equal comfort, and so we'll begin chapter 2 verse 1.

We'll read the entire chapter, now hear God's word. 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 by 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.

[1 : 43] 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.

The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan, with all power and false signs and wonders, and with him 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 they may be condemned, who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

But we ought always to give thanks to God for our brothers, beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits 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.

[3 : 17] Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and the God and 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.

May God's blessing be upon that word this morning as we seek to hear it. Chapter 1 promised genuine believers genuine reassurance, but the way reassurance works is that it must be consistent with the truth.

And therefore, the truth is reassuring to those who want to hear the truth. It's also reassuring to those who do not want to hear the truth in a different kind of way.

So I'll give you an example, for instance. If a child is going out with me, one of my children, and we're about to go across a fierce stream, and they cannot tell how deep it is, and they ask the question, are we going to get across to the other side without being washed away?

And I happen to know, having crossed the stream a hundred or more times before, where to stand, where to position myself, and I tell the child, yes, I can make it across, and this will be, you know, a reassurance to you.

[4 : 56] That child then has to place his trust or her trust in me to make it across. That kind of reassurance in someone who can do for you what you cannot do for yourself is a very obvious biblical reassurance.

But there's also another type of reassurance, and it goes something like this. If you don't pick up your toys, and if you don't tidy away your books, and if you don't do that, you won't have this.

That's also reassuring. Because what it does is though it may not feel like it is reassurance to the person hearing it, it is reassuring them of the conditions laid down of what is true.

Unless you do this, you will not have that. If you remain like this, then this is what will follow. If you continue in that direction, then you cannot go in this direction.

That's also reassurance because it is true. And so what 2 Thessalonians chapter 1 did is it reassured us if indeed we are following the Lord faithfully.

[6 : 10] And it reassured those that if they are not following the Lord faithfully, then judgment will come upon those who do not believe and who do not obey the gospel.

That also is a reassurance. It's a reassurance because it is true. So the benefit of reassurance to the believer is indeed, of course, if you are faithful.

You receive the comfort of knowing you're going to be able to cross the river, knowing that you're going to be able to accept it into eternal glory because you're faithfully consistent with the Lord Christ.

Not because it is any work in and of yourself that accomplishes it, but rather because in light of your salvation, you are the first fruits, as we see here, by which you cannot be anything but obedient to the Lord.

Repentance, obedience to the faith is a product of salvation. It is the very evidence that we are saved. It is not a work that makes us saved, but it is the very fingerprints of salvation itself.

[7 : 18] Now, with that in mind, this chapter here is about true comfort. True comfort. And like anyone, when you don't want to hear the truth, as many children as they grow up being told by their parents, your biggest problem is that you don't like to hear what's true.

You just don't like to hear the truth. Because what the truth does is it draws lines in the sand. It shows you whether you're on one side or the other side.

It shows you exactly where you are in relation to a standard. And I've said this multiple times before. When I was young playing basketball out on the road, I thought I was amazing until I went to a court where there was an actual hoop.

And then I realized that I couldn't get the ball in the hoop probably nine times out of ten. But in the garden or in the front road where there was just a spot on the wall, I was pretty good.

But the moment you introduce a standard by which everyone has to play to, suddenly your ability is shown for what it is.

[8 : 28] In exactly the same way when God speaks and his word is heard, it is the standard by which everything is measured. Everything is measured.

And so I want you to feel the true comfort that 2 Thessalonians brings to you this morning. And I want you to recognize that the only reason why you can be comforted this morning is because, as we said last week, God the Holy Spirit is the one that communicates the blessings of God from him to you in Christ Jesus, of course.

And so as we look at these words together, I want you to notice there is a repetition. Firstly, both chapters, or in fact the whole letter, focuses on aspects of the Lord's return.

In chapter 1, we saw the final judgment. Here in chapter 2, we have Christ's second coming being addressed in relation to something that must happen first.

The other thing that you may notice in chapter 1, verse 11, and chapter 2, verse 17, is that there is a focus, or a repetition rather, on you being ready and established for every good work that God has got for you.

[9 : 51] In other words, the purpose of your Christian life is to do the work of God as long as you are here. Now, of course, there are things which disrupt that work, namely false teaching, which is what 2 Thessalonians deals with.

But as I said last week, the reason we can draw a conclusion about what this letter focuses on is because of some of the things that it mentions more than once. And so this letter has a wonderful way of refocusing your attention on the calling that God has given to you.

God has got a specific calling upon the life of a Christian. And that Christian has to fulfill that calling. They are everything that God works and wills in the life of a Christian is so that that Christian will do what God has called them to do.

And only when you know that does your heart and mind begin to settle. And this is why when you're addressing teenagers as they're growing up with all their aspirations and desires and will and everything they want to do in the future, you have to point out that if you belong to Christ, if you belong to Christ, this is the most important thing that you have to consider.

The calling that God has given you that comes before any other thing that you do or want to do. And it's the same for us. Too often, however, Christianity is reduced to the hour on a Sunday morning and it doesn't vary or have much impact on the rest of the week because we are concerned with so many other things.

[11 : 41] And this is right in many ways because God wants us to live in the world. But at the same time, the calling upon your life is not to receive less attention than anything else that you give attention to.

If anything, it is to receive more. What Paul is going to address here in 2 Thessalonians in chapter 2 in particular is that he wants to give true comfort to a congregation that has been thrown off balance in their Christian faith because someone, somewhere along the line, either by word of mouth or by letter, has gone around telling these young Christians that Christ has already returned.

Now, this may not be a problem for any of you. None of you may suffer with the doubt or belief that Christ has already returned. But here in the early church where the expectancy of Christ returning imminently was fresh in the minds and hearts of people, to be told that this has already happened is something that could have, at least theoretically speaking.

and Paul has to address the reality that Christ has not already returned. And so, the discomfort caused by the lie has to then be readdressed by the truth because only the truth can address true comfort in the heart of a believer.

This is essentially what Paul was doing here in 2 Thessalonians chapter 2. So, there's a few things we know and there's much we don't know. So, for instance, we don't know what verse 2 is addressing.

[13 : 23] We don't actually know where the letter come from or who spoke by word of mouth that Christ had already returned. We don't know who these people were.

We know that it happened and Paul is even addressing the fact that it comes under the sort of direction that Paul might have actually done it himself.

the letter seeming to come from us. And Paul's saying, no such letter came from me. So, someone is sowing bad seed in the congregation.

And then in verse 5, Paul also speaks by word of mouth to them and we have no record of what Paul actually said. And the reason I'm pointing this out is because 2 Thessalonians chapter 2 with the man of lawlessness is quite a tricky chapter if I might say so.

Made even more tricky by the fact that you have verse 2 and you don't know where this letter came from or what it actually said other than the fact that the conclusion is Christ has already returned.

[14 : 33] and you don't know what Paul said in verse 5. You don't actually know the private conversation that he had with this church. And so, the reason Paul is addressing what he's addressing about the man of lawlessness is not to address him so much as he is trying to address the discomfort that this church feels by believing that Christ has already returned.

So, I do want to say just as a point of passing that having taken the church through the book of Revelation on Sunday evenings where I address the man of lawlessness at length over and over again throughout those weeks I'm not going to be focusing on him so much as much as I will be focusing on why Paul is mentioning him here in 2 Thessalonians.

So, let's just look through this together. Right from the very beginning Paul is abundantly clear that 2 Thessalonians chapter 2 is addressing the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But he is also addressing the fact that some people in the church believe that this has already happened. False teaching has gone throughout the church and it has left many in the church to be alarmed to be put off balance in their faith stating that Jesus has returned.

Paul, verse 3, does not want the church to be deceived and so he has to address the order of events so as to show these people that Christ could not have already returned.

[16 : 10] And he does this by telling them that the man of lawlessness has not yet been revealed and he has not yet taken his position in the temple of God and therefore it is not possible for Christ to have already returned because this has to happen before that.

And so the reason why Paul is addressing the man of lawlessness is because he's putting the order of events or rather the events of the second coming in order so that people can receive comfort that Christ has not already returned.

In other words, if we can conclude that the man of lawlessness hasn't arrived already, then we can equally conclude that Jesus Christ has not come. And that's important for these believers to hear.

So the reason why Paul is mentioning the man of lawlessness is not so much to address who he is, what he will do and why he comes, as much as it is to address that this hasn't happened, therefore Christ's return has not yet happened.

That's really the focus of 2 Thessalonians chapter 2. Now the discomfort caused by a lie of this magnitude means that you would evidently give up on your faith.

[17 : 29] If Christ had returned and you're left wondering what now, why is there any reason to continue following Christ? So this is a very big lie with very big consequences.

And as I said last week, that if you don't believe that the gospel and Christ will triumph over the world and everything in the world, then your Christian life will be so compromised that it will be consistent with someone who says, if I can't beat them, I'll join them.

So if you believe that Christ has already come and gone and you're left with the position that you were in prior to this happening, why is there any reason to continue following Christ?

I can't think of one. So Paul knows the seriousness that he is facing in addressing a lie of this magnitude. Now notice where the lie comes from.

It comes from Satan. Behind the work of the man of lawlessness is really Satan. Satan is the deceiver. He is the one that gives the sort of power to the false signs and wonders.

[18 : 43] It is the work of Satan. It is an evil act of deception and this is where it becomes applicable for the church today. You, wherever you have gaps in your biblical literacy, you are open to deception.

Wherever you have gaps in your knowledge of God and what God has accomplished, you are open to deception. You are open to believing a lie and therefore you are open to practicing Christianity in a way that is not consistent with the way that it is meant to be practiced.

So these things matter to us though the context is somewhat different. Notice then that those who are deceived, verse 10, are perishing.

Why are they perishing? Because they are people who refused to love the truth and be saved. And then notice the condition that these people find themselves in.

they cannot help but believe what is false. That we must never think that the only judgment a person has to be concerned with is the final judgment.

[20 : 01] Because there are plenty of present time judgments, one of which that people, verse 10 here, if I can just read it, verse 11 and 12, sorry, therefore, God sends them a strong delusion so that they may believe what is false.

Already under the judgment of God for refusing to love the truth. Verse 12, in order that they may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

As I said last week, one of the things that the Christian church has to address is not believers is not just whether or not you believe but it's whether or not you are obeying the gospel.

Remember chapter 1. The judgment of God falls upon those who do not believe and who do not obey the gospel. Paul is not only dealing with people who misunderstand, who don't understand, but he is removing all misunderstanding.

Why? Because there is a standard by which the Christian life ought to be lived and when you live according to the standard of God it is then the reassurance comes.

[21 : 22] It is then you find the true comfort. In other words, every single blessing that you can actually enjoy can only be enjoyed in the person of Christ.

And without faith in Christ and walking in his ways, you rob yourself with the blessings that are freely available to you in him. And so whatever gets your mind as I've often said gets your whole way of life.

If it gets your mind it gets you. I've known people who've woken up and they've got one thought on them and it's ruined their whole day because they just cannot shift that one thought.

And then it ruins their week and their month and they become a certain type of person because they just cannot deal with the lie or the false or the thoughts or whatever it may be. So these things are really important because they destroy who you are as a person and who you are meant to be as a Christian.

It really does matter that you as a person of God receives true righteousness as true reassurance chapter 1 and true comfort here chapter 2.

[22 : 40] There's no messing around here. This is serious business because the gift that you have received in Christ came at the death of his son as atoning shed blood.

This is the value of which your life is worth. And so now we begin to see the point at which we can truly appreciate what God has given to us.

Paul then sort of closes in verses 16 by reminding us that only in the person of Jesus Christ have we received eternal comfort and good hope through grace.

That is the only place of comfort and that is the only hope. The only place of true comfort is in the person of Christ Jesus.

So what does this mean? Well, number one, focus. Number two, comfort. And we're going to deal with this as just one point. Focus and comfort. Paul has to deal with the deception because it is the deception that is causing the discomfort and the distress amongst the Christians in this church.

[23 : 50] And the only way to deal with this kind of discomfort is to address the biblical illiteracy. that is wherever there is a gap in your knowledge you are open to deception in that very area.

And therefore one of the reasons why we want young people and even us in the church to be biblically literate is not so that we can just know the truth but so that we can know the truth from error.

In fact, one of the qualifications of an elder is not that they are just to be able to teach the truth but they are also able to teach what the errors are as well.

They are to teach and defend what is true. And this is important because if we are to be salt and light which I have often said is probably one of the misunderstood verses in the New Testament because most people's definition of salt as a Christian comes from the Oxford Dictionary and normally goes down the line of a preservative.

that we are to preserve the culture or something. But if you look at salt from a biblical definition and from a biblical use salt was used to put on the land of God's enemies so that crops couldn't grow.

[25 : 09] It was an act of war. It was an act of bringing things to an end. And so when God is calling you to be salt and light teach and defend there are some things that we bring to an end in this world that's false.

That is wrong. It is not to continue. And then the light and the darkness is of course what people run to. And so this isn't about preserving anything.

This is about bringing things to an end that do not deserve to continue. And so what we have here in 2 Thessalonians is Paul bringing to the end the false teaching that Christ has already returned and restoring the comfort to the Christians in this church through giving them knowledge.

Giving them a biblical understanding of the end times or the end of the end times. however you might want to think of it.

And so the word of God here is not something which simply makes us more biblically intelligent. It is the very means by which you can be comforted as a Christian.

[26 : 27] So the whole point of learning the Bible is not to become clever. It is to become comforted. The whole point of knowing more is not so that you can become a biblical professor.

But it's rather so that you can be reassured and comforted in the truth. So that you can, if I can put it in the words of Jesus, to make it simple, set free. The truth is the only thing that can set you free.

And that applies in every area in which the truth speaks, which is every area, might I add. And so the word of God comforts us in our weaknesses.

It comforts us in our failings. It most definitely comforts us when we are doubting. And it most definitely deals with our double-mindedness. In other words, when God speaks, we don't have to be convinced before we obey, or do we?

And I've often struggled with this in teaching the Bible and hearing what people have to say in the church because it goes something along these lines. I've heard what you have said.

[27 : 44] I believe that you've taught it consistent with the Bible, but I'm not convinced. That's great. What about thou shall not steal? Does someone have to be convinced that stealing is wrong before you obey it?

I mean, if it is the word of God that is speaking. You see the problem. You see, if everything determines, it can be determined on whether or not I'm convinced, then you're basically promoting your authority above the authority of God's word.

Until I'm convinced, I don't have to do it. Until I'm convinced, I don't have to do this or believe that. But that's problematic because what you're doing is you are placing your authority over and above the revealed authority of God's word.

And so as Paul speaks, it is absolutely of great importance that these Christians understand that what they are hearing is the word of God through the apostle to the church so that they would indeed be comforted.

As James Denny put it, and as you know, I like James Denny, although I want to qualify what I mean by I like James Denny. His book, *The Death of Christ*, is a beautiful and wonderful book.

[29 : 15] His book on the atonement and the modern mind, and then of course his book on reconciliation, he tends to move towards quite possibly a rectal theory of the atonement, which I won't, it wouldn't bore you, but I won't go into it today.

But this is what he said, and it's absolutely wonderful. He said that in Christ, or rather in God, the heart, because you are made in the image of God, the heart can only ever rest in truth.

It cannot rest in anything else. Now, there are some people in the world, having counseled a number of people in broken marriages, where they are quite content to hear a lie in order to be comforted.

So, for instance, a woman who is not sure whether or not her marriage is going to continue because they've had a rocky time of late, will say to her husband, perhaps over and over again, do you love me?

Do you love me? Do you love me? And she don't care whether or not it's true, because of the comfort she will receive by him saying, of course I do. Some people are so desperate to be comforted, that they're even wanting to be comforted under false pretenses, under that which is not true.

[30 : 39] such is the fallen condition of the heart, that we go after a source of comfort that may not actually be a biblical source of comfort.

As I said before, imagine you're on the Titanic with a young child, and you say to your child, lie down on the bed, close your eyes, it will all be all right in the morning.

You know it's not going to be all right in the morning. And so the comfort you give the child, because the child is trusting you and believing you, and the child goes to sleep in your arms on the bottom decks of the Titanic, goes to sleep in comfort, but the comfort is a lie, and the child is lost forever.

And yet how tempted we are to take that route of comfort, rather than the biblical one that says, if you don't turn to Christ, you are dead in your sins.

Do you understand the difference? Do you understand how important it is here to truly appreciate what Paul is addressing to this church?

[31 : 54] Well, let me finish with this. Notice then that the question we must ask is a simple one. What is it that causes our discomfort? And the answer is simple.

wherever there is a gap in our knowledge concerning the things of God, there is the opportunity for us to doubt, to be thrown off in our faith, to become double minded, even to lose our commitment to following Christ in this world.

Because if we do not believe that we, in Christ, will triumph over the world in light of the gospel, then the only conclusion we are left with is that if I can't beat the world, I will join the world.

And so notice the call that Paul gives to the church. Now may the 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 for every good work and word.

Amen. give you peace at all times, in every way.

[33 : 10] The Lord be with you all. Amen. Amen.