

Today is the second of three Sundays in 2 Thessalonians. In the first chapter, Paul had some encouraging words for the Thessalonian Christians. But there was also some teaching about God’s judgment, and the two sides of this judgment: a judgment of righteousness for those who have repented and put their trust in Jesus, and a judgment of condemnation for those who do not. Paul says in 1:7 that this judgment “will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels.”

And in this second chapter, Paul returns to this theme of Christ’s second coming. Now, Jesus teaches on this topic a fair amount, but the Book of Revelation is the lengthiest section of Scripture that deals with Jesus’ return, end times, the rapture of believers, and so forth. Well, one of our own Rose Hill church family members has co-authored a commentary on the book of Revelation, that is available to be read online. In fact, we have a link to it on our [church website](https://www.rosehill.church/bible-study.html) (<https://www.rosehill.church/bible-study.html>). Let me share parts of a couple paragraphs from the commentary that will help set the stage for today’s passage:

“Christ’s physical return to earth is believed in by the vast majority of Christians, but nearly every event connected with it is the subject of dispute” (*Tapestry: The Book of Revelation*). ... Evangelical Christians who would not think of questioning each other’s intellectual honesty or literal interpretation of scripture...will lose all civility when debating Christ’s return. Some of the most vicious personal attacks have come from experienced ministers and educators who should know better [like the Reverend Brian North 😂]...

“The problem is not that Christians believe the Bible to be unclear on the subject. Rather, each group believes the Bible is perfectly clear, supports their position, and that therefore those who support another view must not take the Bible seriously. From this comes the rancor. **Christians must understand that while the issue is important, our salvation does not depend on properly understanding the timing of the Rapture (*Tapestry*:**

The Book of Revelation). Not one soul will be saved or lost because of that person's beliefs concerning the details of Christ's return."¹ Those paragraphs really resonate with me and my approach to this topic. So, with that introduction, let's dive into 2 Thessalonians 2, **beginning with verses 1-5...**

One of the keys to understanding this section is realizing we don't have everything Paul has taught them on this topic. Paul writes in verse 5, **"Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things?" (2 Thessalonians 2:5)**. So, verses 1-4 (along with other verses here on the same topic) are the "these things" he's referring to, and we see that they are, in part, a synopsis of what he had told them previously. But we don't get all the details. Paul didn't expect this letter to be read by anyone other than the people to whom he was writing in Thessalonica, so repeating everything he'd previously told them was unneeded, unnecessary, pointless, gratuitous, superfluous...*and* redundant.

But we can see from these verses that the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ has become a point of controversy within the church. And, as my introduction to the sermon and the paragraphs from that commentary make clear: It's *still* a point of controversy. This is really unfortunate. We see in the passage that: **Some have become alarmed and unsettled from teaching that is "allegedly" from Paul and his companions that Jesus' return had already happened.** But Paul is letting them know here that he already covered this stuff when he was with them, and he wouldn't instruct someone to teach them something on his behalf that is any different. So, any prophetic word, or other kind of teaching, or a letter that supposedly comes from him, that teaches something different, is not to be believed. Don't be deceived.

Then he gives some "signs" that will happen before Jesus' return. What Paul writes is sort of a synopsis of what Jesus teaches in Matthew 24, where a lot of terrible and difficult things happen with false teachers, a lot of deception, persecution of Christians including being put to death for their faith, and so forth. During that, however, the gospel will be preached to the whole world, Jesus says. That will happen through believers like you and me during this time that precedes the return of Jesus (I'm not saying we're in the last few years before Jesus' return). **So, although the day and hour of**

Jesus' return is not known, like a thief coming in the night (Matthew 24:43), Jesus says all these events that will take place prior to his return. Is there some mystery in them? For sure. That's where a lot of the debate is. But the result is clear: Jesus will return. And Jesus' expectation is that his followers really will not be caught by surprise because we expect and look for his return. Non-believers will be caught by surprise. And then once he does return he will at some point gather up his believers – both those who have previously died and those who are alive at his return.

That teaching from Jesus (Matthew 24, and similar sections in Luke and Mark) is what Paul is summarizing here in verses 3 and 4, and then in some of the next verses as well. He writes about the rebellion that will occur, and that the “man of lawlessness” (which is another title for the antichrist) will be revealed. Paul had shared with them more about all this when he was with them. He's just reminding them of what he'd taught. Let's continue reading, **verses 6-10...**

There is a certain degree of mystery in these verses as well, though there is also some concrete, clear as day teaching that again is rooted in Jesus' teaching. First, the lawless one is being held back, even as lawlessness is already at work in the world. Who this lawless one is specifically, is not spelled out. Second, something or someone is restraining this lawless one, though we don't know who or what it is. Paul says that the Thessalonians do know, so that's kind of interesting – Paul must have told them previously. From what he writes, however, we don't know if it's a “who” or a “what”: Verse six talks about “what” holds him back as if it is an inanimate object; then in verse seven, he talks about the one “who” holds him back. Exactly who or what is doing this restraining has been a subject of debate for centuries, and there is no definitive conclusion. Some have said he was referencing the Roman Empire, or the Holy Spirit, the archangel Michael, or the witness and preaching of the church. St. Augustine, one of the greatest theologians ever, writes, “I admit that the meaning of this completely escapes me.” I find that very comforting, because it means I'm not a theological idiot.

Then in verses 9 and 10 we see that this lawless one works in the power of Satan. There will be signs and wonders that deceive and draw people

away from God. He is deceptive: He won't come announcing that he is full of lies, death, and dead ends. He comes with promises of happy feelings and worldly accomplishments, power, success, and more. He's seductive and attractive. He is no idiot and will present himself in an alluring way. And he's already at work, too, and we would do well to guard against deception in our own faith. What are we tempted to elevate above God in our lives? What are we allowing to be in a position of power and influence over and above Jesus?

Now, in the middle of these verses we get a word about Jesus' return. Verse 8 says, **"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" (2 Thessalonians 2:8).** The lawless one will be utterly destroyed. When Jesus returns, he's not coming as a baby. No manger. No wise guys from the east. No silent night, no Santa, no Rudolph. He's coming as a warrior king with a heavenly army, ready to do battle, and no one and no thing that stands opposed to him stands a chance at survival, including this lawless one who operates in the power of Satan. You don't want to be in opposition to Jesus. You want to be on Jesus' side. This brings us to **verses 11 and 12**, two of the more sobering verses in Scripture...

The key to understanding this is the first words, "For this reason." Some translations will read, "Therefore". What's being referred to is the fruit of the work of the lawless one, summarized in verse 10: *"They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved."* These are people who already, of their own accord, reject the truth and instead have believed the untruths of Satan. What is the truth being referenced? Well, Jesus – as many of you know – says, "I am the truth" (Joh 14:6) so certainly it includes believing in him. But it also includes the truth of our sin. People love to believe that they are without sin.

Have you ever tried, even gently and lovingly, pointing out to someone their sinful behavior? It's not always received well, even if you do it in a non-judgmental way, and even if they're a believer. I once had a couple of friends call me out on a sin in my life when I was in college, and I know I didn't respond well. It wasn't their fault. They were completely right, and handled

themselves well. My pride was in the way. They were pointing out an inconvenient truth that I didn't want to acknowledge. But if a person is going to be saved by Jesus, there has to be a recognition and confession of sin. It's a truth that has to be recognized. And when that's refused, it's hard to acknowledge the truth of Jesus as well. Who needs a savior when we don't think we need saving from anything, right? So, that's where these people are that are discussed here: they've rejected the truth – of their sin, and of Jesus.

And so in verses 11 and 12, with this delusion that God sends in these end time events...**It's like God is saying, "You insist on rejecting the truth? Then I will confirm you in that rejection."** In Romans 1:24, where Paul writes about non-believers and the sexual sin in their lives, "Therefore, God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts..." Not that they aren't welcome back like the prodigal son, but these people have made their choice, even though it grieves God. And so, it's similar here in 2 Thessalonians. It refers to a divinely allowed deception, not one God delights in, but one that fits into His righteous judgment because of the lack of faith and truth in their lives. Let's read the **last few verses (13-17)** now...

So, Paul gives some words of thanks like at the start of the letter, directing his thanks to God for the Thessalonians. And then he gives some words of encouragement. **His encouragement to them is to stand firm and hold fast to the teachings they've received from Paul and his ministry companions.** Remember, this section started with how they've apparently heard other things that were *allegedly* from Paul about Jesus' return, and are causing divisions in the church and probably causing a crisis of faith for some. It's why Paul goes into all this stuff about some of the things that will precede Jesus' coming, and what will happen when he does. None of those things have happened, so they can continue to be strong and confident in their faith because of Jesus. That's his aim?: to build their confidence in Jesus, and strengthen their faith.

And still today, this final word of "stand strong" rings true for us as well. And we're not like a boxer trapped in the corner of the boxing ring, taking the beating from his opponent while just trying to hold ground and stay upright. Paul says, **"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” (2 Thessalonians 2:16-17). They are to live out their faith in good deed and in good word.

What we see is: standing firm doesn’t mean standing pat, huddled up in a defensive position. “Standing firm” means staying strong in our belief in Jesus, even in the face of trials, deceptions, and the work of lawlessness that is still at work in the world, and living that faith out through good deeds and good words. And as we do that we will be strengthened and encouraged. So, stay strong in your faith in every good deed and word. Ours is an active faith. Ours is a faith that is lived. Ours is a faith with movement and action and momentum that is marked by goodness and love. That’s all we can really control in this grand drama: our own living out of our faith. Jesus’ return and all the signs that come before it are out of our control. We can’t control other people’s response to Jesus, either – though as we’ll see next week we pray that the good news of Jesus is received by people.

So, let this word encourage you today. Whatever you’re facing. Whatever temptation comes your way. Whatever attacks your faith. Whatever hate comes at you. Whatever deception comes. **Anything that seeks to dislodge you from the firm foundation of Jesus Christ – whatever message might seek to persuade you away from the truth of Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, ascension, and eventual return – stand firm on Jesus, your solid rock foundation.** God’s got you. He’s got the whole world in his hands...He’s the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the end-all, be-all, and he’s with you in the midst of whatever rocks the boat of life. Keep standing firm on Jesus; keep living out your faith with good deeds and good words, so that the good news of Jesus goes forth into your home, your community, your workplace. God’s got you, and you can stand firm on that truth until Jesus returns. Let’s pray...Amen.

¹ <https://www.tapestryofrevelation.com/appendices.html>