2 Thessalonians 2

Verses 1-4: The Rapture, the Day of the Lord, and the Man of Sin

Ministry Reading

Opening Reading -- 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

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Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him, that ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of the Lord is at hand. Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God... Now ye know what withholdeth that he might be revealed in his time. For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way. And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming: even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, and with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: that they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

By the Coming -- and Our Gathering Together: A Translation Matter

The opening of this chapter has been subjected to a troublesome change in some translations that empties it of its true force. Verse 1 is rendered in some versions as 'concerning the coming' of the Lord Jesus, leaving the whole thing vague. But that is not the force. The apostle is beseeching them by the coming -- by that coming as the ground of his appeal. If the verse were referring to the appearing of the Lord in glory, then he would be beseeching them by the very thing they feared. That makes no sense. He is beseeching them by the truth of the prior rapture -- his coming for us -- and by our gathering together unto him. That is the thing he had explained to them in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18: the dead in Christ rising first, then the living caught up together to meet the Lord in the air.

The word for 'gathering together' here is the same as that used in Hebrews 10:25 for the assembling of the saints together. In Matthew 18:20 we have the same principle: where two or three are gathered together in Christ's name, there He is in the midst. It is the Holy Spirit who gathers souls to Christ now, and He will act in that same way when the Lord comes for His own and we are gathered together unto Him. So the appeal of verse 1 is an appeal to the heart: let your affection for the Lord and your hope of being gathered to Him be the thing that steadies you.

The Supposed Fraudulent Letter: The Day of the Lord Already Present

The real problem the Thessalonians faced was not simply anxiety about the future but a specific deception. Someone -- possibly with a forged letter purporting to come from Paul -- was claiming that the day of the Lord had already arrived, was already present. Not merely that it was imminent, but that it had begun. And the intense persecutions they were enduring were being presented as evidence of this -- as if they were experiencing the judgments of the

day of the Lord rather than the tribulations common to saints in a hostile world.

There is a difference between 'the day of Christ' and 'the day of the Lord' that is important here. The day of Christ, the day of the Lord Jesus Christ -- these refer to the heavenly and glorious side of that great epoch: Christ manifested in His glory, the saints with Him, the things of heaven. The day of the Lord refers to the earthly and governmental side: judgment poured out on a rebellious world. The Thessalonians were being told the day of the Lord -- with all its awful judgments -- had already started. That explains exactly why they were troubled. Kelly argued and established that the correct reading of verse 2 is 'the day of the Lord is present,' not 'at hand.' Someone was asserting it had already arrived.

Paul also warns in 2 Thessalonians 3:17 that his mark is in every letter he writes -- suggesting that forgeries were already a known problem in the early church. The three channels of deception named in verse 2 -- spirit, word, and letter -- correspond neatly to Satan going about as an angel of light with his ministers as ministers of righteousness: false prophetic utterance, false teaching, and false correspondence.

A Steady and Soberly Judging Mind

The appeal is that they not be shaken in mind. Darby's marginal note explains the expression as being shaken from 'a steady and soberly judging mind.' There are all kinds of minds: flighty, distracted, inconstant. The mind Paul desires for them is the opposite -- steady, sober, not carried about by every wind of doctrine (Ephesians 4:14). The same kind of steadiness that was endangered at Thessalonica is endangered whenever a plausible voice claims that prophetic events are already unfolding and invites believers to get caught up in the excitement of living in a special moment. There is always a seductive appeal to being part of something that is happening now. Harold Camping's claim that the rapture would occur in 1994 -- proved false then, and repeated for 2011 -- was

exactly this: a word, in this case a false word, that shook many from their settled minds.

What Must Come First: The Apostasy and the Man of Sin

The apostle's answer to the deception is straightforward: the day of the Lord cannot be present because certain things that must precede it have not yet occurred. Two are named: the apostasy, and the revelation of the man of sin.

Some have labored to make the apostasy here refer to a departure of the saints -- the rapture itself. The argument is that the Greek word apostasia can mean departure. But apostasy has been understood throughout the history of the church for what it actually means: the abandonment of the truth. It is a departure from the faith, not a flight upward. It refers to the great apostasy of Christendom -- the casting off of the truth that has been proclaimed throughout the Christian era. To take a falling away and understand it as a falling upward is exegesis in reverse. The word is pressed into service to support a conclusion already desired. The apostasy is the great defection of Christendom, and the man of sin is revealed in the atmosphere it creates.

The Man of Sin: Counterfeit and Contrast

The man of sin, the son of perdition -- both titles invite comparison with what has come before. Son of perdition was applied to Judas (John 17:12). This is not the same person, but it is the same character brought to its ultimate expression. Judas occupied the closest possible place of privilege beside the Lord Jesus and betrayed Him. The man of sin occupies the most exalted religious position on earth and usurps the place of God. Kelly described him as the final Judas -- the full consummation of everything that Judas represented.

In Philippians 2:5-11 the Lord Jesus is shown humbling Himself -- taking the form of a servant, becoming obedient unto death -- and waiting for God to exalt Him. His exaltation has a due time, and that time has not yet come. The man of sin cannot wait. He exalts himself. He sets himself up above all that is called God or is worshipped. He sits in the temple of God showing himself that he is God. Where the Lord Jesus came in His Father's name and was rejected, this one comes in his own name and will be received.

The Temple in Jerusalem: Three Apostasies

When verse 4 says the man of sin sits in the temple of God, this is not to be spiritualized as referring to the church. The church -- the true body of Christ -- will not be here when this occurs. There cannot be two temples of God simultaneously occupying that position. The temple here is a literal rebuilt temple in Jerusalem, just as Daniel 9 speaks of the coming prince causing the sacrifice and oblation to cease in the middle of the week. That requires a temple, a priesthood, and reinstituted sacrificial worship to cease from. All of that will have been re-established in the first half of the seventieth week.

This moment -- the middle of the week, when the man of sin is revealed in the temple -- is the convergence point of three apostasies. The apostasy of Christendom, which produces the religious vacuum into which he steps. The apostasy of the beast's government, which receives its throne directly from Satan (Revelation 13). And the apostasy of Israel, which receives this false messiah who has set himself up as God in the holy place -- the abomination of desolation standing where it ought not. These three apostasies converge at the middle of the week, just as God prepares to bring everything to judgment at the appearing of the Lord in glory.

A Dark Chapter with One Great Light

This chapter is not a happy one. The supposed forgery of verse 2 is disconcerting. The apostasy and the man of sin in verse 3 are solemn subjects. The picture of an apostate world delivered over to strong delusion is awful. And yet, right in the middle of all this darkness, there is a radiant expression in verse 8: 'the brightness of his coming' -- or in Darby's rendering, 'the appearing of his coming.' That brightness stands out against every dark word surrounding it. It is the epiphany -- the outshining of the Lord Jesus in glory -- that will consume the wicked one and annul every lie. The chapter is dark, but it has this great light at its center. The saints were to think of the coming of the Lord not with dread but with joy and delight -- because He is going to appear, and His appearing will make all the works of darkness worth nothing.

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Lord willing.