

The Thessalonians not only struggled with persecution. They also struggled with false doctrine. And false doctrine has a way of robbing us of our peace and our joy in the Lord, of taking away our confidence so that we have no hope. And so what Paul wants to do in our reading for this evening is to set the Thessalonians straight, so that they will no longer be concerned, so they will no longer shaken. And I want you to keep that in mind as we go through this passage, because there's a lot of things in it that might seem confusing to us or even frightening to us. But Paul intends this to be a comfort. He is telling us all of these things so that we know beforehand what's going to happen, so that nothing takes us by surprise. All of this is a comfort and not meant to frighten.

So Paul dives right in then. Verse 1, he says: "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 a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come." So the problem that the Thessalonians had, then, was they thought Jesus had already come. They thought the day of the Lord was already past. And they had missed it! And since they thought they missed it when they were in the middle of their persecutions, they thought, "Well, what do we have to look forward to? What's the point of all of this? If there's nothing ahead of us, then it's all pointless. We have no hope."

Paul doesn't say where exactly they got this idea into their heads, but I think there's a couple of suggestions here in the letter. Because he says, first of all, to beware of a "letter seeming to come from him," which suggests that there was a false letter written in his name. And in fact, at the very end of this book, chapter 3, verse 17, he says this: "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine. It is the way I write." So I think what happened, then, was that someone had written a letter using Paul's name and sent it to the Thessalonians. The Thessalonians thought it was real, and that letter told them that the day of the Lord had already come. And so because they thought it was from Paul, they fell into this false teaching. That should give us a warning, Christians. We should always pay attention to where something comes from. Just because we hear it doesn't mean that it's true. We should always ask a question like: "Is this in the Bible? Is this something that God says?" Because if we don't, we might end up like the Thessalonians, caught up in false teaching and losing all of our hope. So prove everything, Christians, by God's word!

Paul continues, verse 3: "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." So he's telling the Thessalonians: "You didn't miss anything. And the reason why you know that is because these things have to happen first. You haven't seen these things happen, so therefore, Christ has not yet come." And the first thing he points to is what he calls "the rebellion." Notice he says "the." He doesn't say "a rebellion." He says "the rebellion," referring to the great and final rebellion against God just before the end of the world. For example, in 1 Timothy 4, Paul says: "Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons." So in other words, just before the end of the world, wickedness will be at its height. People will fall away from God, even people who claim to be Christians. And they will follow after sin in a way that we have not seen in all the history of the world. This must happen before the end comes.

But that rebellion will also reveal one that Paul calls "the man of lawlessness, the son of destruction." If you wanted to put that rebellion into one person, it will be that man. He will be the embodiment of sin against God, the one who exalts himself against God in a way that no one else has in all the history of the world. The Bible calls him the man of lawlessness, the son of destruction, because that describes who he is. It describes his character. Because that's the way the Bible speaks. If you go back to the Old Testament, for example, and go to Noah, when we read that Noah was "five hundred years old," what it actually says in Hebrew is that Noah was "the son of five hundred years." Now, that doesn't make a lot of sense to us in English, which is why we say Noah was five hundred years old. But Noah was the "son of five hundred years" because that described who he was. He was a five-hundred-year-old man. So the man of lawlessness will be lawless. He will be a rebel. The son of destruction is one who is going to destruction, one who deserves the full judgment of God. And Jesus also in John 17 verse 12 calls Judas a "son of destruction," so this man of lawlessness when he comes is going to be like Judas who betrayed the Lord, only far worse.

But what else do we know about this man? Paul goes on in verse 4: "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." So not only is he going to be lawless, he will claim that he is God! This language that we hear goes back to Daniel chapter 11, where Daniel speaks of a king who will rise up against God and speak astonishing things. Daniel was referring to a king named Antiochus who persecuted Israel. He set up a pagan altar inside the temple and tried to make Israel pagan. He was the worst persecutor the church had before the days of Jesus. This man of lawlessness will be like him, only worse, because this man will claim to be God himself. Now, he may not say it outright and say that "I am God," but he will say things and claim things for himself that belong to God. He will claim for himself the power to do whatever he pleases. He will claim for himself control over all things, so that he will be able to do whatever he wants. And he will also say that he decides what is right and what is wrong and against what God has to say. So this man, then, is going to be and claim to be like God. And all of these things must happen before the end comes.

So Paul reminds the Thessalonians that they've learned all of this, verse 5: "Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things?" And the reason why they were so upset, the reason why they were so shaken up was because they'd forgotten what Paul had told them. They'd forgotten God's Word. And that gives us a warning too, Christians. When we are not in the Word, when we are not listening to what God has to say, we're going to be caught off guard. God wants us to hold onto his Word, to think about it, to have it before us, to meditate on it, to chew on it, as it were, so that we are ingesting it and making it a part of our lives. When we do that, we will never be caught by surprise. But if we don't do that, we shouldn't be surprised when we are surprised. God wants us to listen to his Word.

But I think this verse also shows us why a passage like this can be very difficult for us. Because Paul assumes the Thessalonians know what he's talking about. All he's really doing is reminding them of what he said before. He's basically jogging their memory and saying, "You know this all already. You've just forgotten it." And the Thessalonians would say, "Okay, yeah, that's right. Now I remember what you said." But we don't know what that is. We don't know what Paul said to the Thessalonians. And we see that especially in the following verse, verse 6: "And you know

what is restraining him now, so that he may be revealed in his time." They knew what he was talking about, but we don't. And so there's a question. What exactly is Paul referring to here?

But I think the best way to figure this out, as with anything, is to listen to what the Bible has to say. Look at the next verse, verse 7: "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." We see a couple things here that I think help us understand what Paul is getting at. First he refers to what he calls the "mystery of lawlessness." It is a mystery because it is hidden. It is something that we cannot fully see. God has hidden it from our eyes. Just like the Gentiles becoming part of the church, just like all of us being here today in the church, was a mystery before the coming of Jesus. Before that point, it wasn't clear that this is what was going to happen. But after the coming of Jesus, then it is clear. The mystery is made plain. Paul says lawlessness is a mystery too. It's not obvious to us why it happens this way. We can see it happen. The Jews attacking the Christians in Thessalonica: that's lawlessness. The world attacking the church throughout all the history of the world: that's lawlessness. People who claim to be Christians attacking other Christians: that's lawlessness. We can see it at work. We know that it is happening all throughout history. What we don't understand is why it happens. Why do they hate the gospel? Why do they not want to be saved? Why do they constantly fight against the church? That's something that has not been made clear.

But Paul also tells us that it is a mystery because it was being restrained. There is something that is holding back this lawlessness, something holding back iniquity that's keeping it hidden. And as long as it's holding it back, it's going to stay a mystery. But as soon as it lets go, then everything will be made clear. And then the man of lawlessness will appear. So who is this restrainer? Who is holding back lawlessness until the end? I think the best answer for that is an angel. Because we hear in a passage like Revelation 20: "And he [that being an angel] seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while." So this passage shows us, then, that angels restrain. They hold back evil, just like Satan is said to be bound. But they can also release that at God's command, just as Satan is said to be set free for a short time. So the angel restraining lawlessness, then, is holding it back until the time when God tells him to stop. And then he will release it, and everything will be made clear.

But that revelation is going to be pretty short, as we hear in verse 8: "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." When the lawless one appears, shortly after that, swiftly after that Jesus will come back and destroy wickedness and destroy the man of lawlessness and defeat Satan forever. The coming of the lawless one will end with the victory of Christ.

But that leaves us with one last question, Christians. Why does the lawless one come? Paul answers that, verse 9: "The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved." So Satan, being set free, goes out to deceive the nations with all of his power. And part of that power is raising up the lawless one, raising up the man of lawlessness to carry out his evil designs. And he will confirm that with false wonders and signs and miracles, so that those who hate God will come to follow after him. All of these things

happen because they love unrighteousness. They love wickedness. They love evil. And they hate God. That's why they want nothing to do with him. And God is handing them over to their destruction.

We should not understand this as Satan's victory, as if Satan was finally going to win the battle. No, Satan is only able to do this because God lets him. That's what Paul goes on to say in verse 11: "Therefore, God sends them a strong delusion so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness." God's handing them over to their sins. He's basically saying: "You love this so much and you hate me so much. Fine! I'm going to give you exactly what you want." He gives them the delusion to believe what Satan is doing, and in so doing sends them to their judgment. We should not think of this as God deceiving them, like he's tricking them into being destroyed. Absolutely not. They want this, because they hate the Lord. So God brings judgment upon them by releasing Satan for this short time. All of these things must happen, Paul says, before the end comes.

But, in conclusion, Christians, I want you to remember this. Paul intends this to be a comfort. He does not intend this to be frightening. He doesn't want this to be confusing. He doesn't want us to come away from this thinking that all is hopeless. The whole point is to give us hope. Because the Thessalonians could find hope knowing that they had not missed the end. They had not missed the coming of Jesus. They still had something to look forward to. And we have hope in this too, because we can look forward to the victory of Jesus. Even though things are going to get worse, even though things are going to get to be the very worst that they've ever been, even though it seems like evil is going to win, just at that moment Jesus wins forever. And that is the hope that we can hold on to and the hope that Paul wants to give us today.

So stand firm, Christians! And hold on to what you have been taught, because Jesus is coming, and the victory belongs to him forever.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you are the one who holds all things in your mighty hand. We pray that you would teach us always to trust in you, knowing that you have given us the victory through your Son, Jesus Christ. In his name we pray. Amen.