

## II Thessalonians 2

### Don't Be Alarmed - EVER!

#### **Introduction**

Well, I know now why Reverend David asked me to come THIS week and preach on THIS passage. II Thessalonians 2 has been described as the most difficult and obscure passage in all of Paul's letters.

It is important to acknowledge at the start that, with a passage such as this, I will be leaving a good number of questions unanswered and I will be passing over certain issues of debate with barely a comment. If someone is interested in the hour long lecture required to hear every perspective I'm sure Rev. Jones would be happy to oblige during the week.

With my warning flagged we turn to II Thessalonians 2.

As I was looking at this passage I was reminded of the commercials which encouraged people to keep a watch out and be prepared to call the anti-terrorism hotline. The tag-line for these commercials was that Australians were to be "Alert - Not Alarmed". I think Paul may be saying the same thing to the Thessalonians Christians as they wonder about the coming of the Lord.

Today I want to look at three causes for concern for believers which Paul calls for his readers not to be alarmed by. We will also reflect on one great reason why they're not to be alarmed - a great reason for peace and security for every believer.

#### **Don't Be Alarmed That You Have Been Left Behind (2:1-3)**

First, Paul responds to the concern that the Thessalonians had to missing the day of the Lord. In the first couple of verses of chapter 2 it is apparent that Paul is responding to a false teaching. Paul may not be sure where this view has come from - it may have been a teaching, a supposed prophecy, a forged letter, or something else - but it is clear that he does not want the Thessalonian Christians to be dismayed or to be moved away from what he had previously taught them.

Why was there alarm here? Sometimes I'm not sure if we feel the weight of such a concern as this. We probably don't take this concern as seriously as we should because we are so comfortable here. For many in the western world, where we have worked so hard to create heaven on earth, there is a reluctance to believe that there could be anything better than what we have at our finger tips.

If we were to take a step outside of the western world and look at the two-thirds world, where life is much more of a constant struggle, then we would see a much greater

desire to be free from the burden of trying to survive and receive the peace and rest which is promised in eternity with God.

There is another reason however, why I believe we don't feel the weight of this fear and this is far more serious. The other reason we don't feel the weight of this concern is because so many of us lack any real passion or desire to meet with Jesus. Christianity has become a structure of believes and rituals rather than an encounter with the risen Lord and a joyful following of his kingly rule.

How many of us would prefer it if Jesus didn't return until after our next holiday, or after we finish reading the latest novel, or after we finish doing any number of activities that fill up our lives?

I once saw a beautiful picture of someone joyfully looking forward to the day of the Lord.... it was my wife Alison. We were going for a drive with her parents and Alison and I were in the back seat with her sister Fiona. Alison was in the middle and as we were driving along Fiona looked out the window and saw a skywriter writing the word "Jesus" in the sky. Fiona called out and said, "Look! It's Jesus!" I still remember Alison clambering to have a look and the disappointment she felt when she saw that it was just his name in the sky.

Perhaps we can recognize how devastating this fear of missing the day of the Lord would be, if we considered how a child feels when they are lost. A child, longing for the safety and security of the presence of their parents is the image which starts to give us an idea. If you or I were to miss the coming of the Lord then we would be absolutely devastated. We would indeed be lost!

In answer to the concerns that the Thessalonians had missed the day of the Lord, Paul reminds them that certain things would have to happen first before the Lord returns. Paul will also go on to point out that there will be no missing the day of the Lord. No one will fail to see the effect of Jesus' return!

### **Don't Be Alarmed At Rising Evil (2:3-7)**

It is to the events that lead up to Jesus' return that Paul turns. In verse three we read, "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."

And while Paul looks to a specific heightening of trouble before the Lord's return he also recognizes aspects of this at work already. In verse seven we read, "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."

While Paul is using the information he presents here to assure the Thessalonian Christians that the day of the Lord has not yet come, he is also wanting to bring them comfort as they confront rising evil. Paul assures the Thessalonians that rising Evil will not have the final say.

Now, I do need to pause here momentarily and just consider the issue of who is the man of lawlessness?

In determining who is the man of lawlessness, numerous figures have been nominated through the years. Such possibilities have included Roman Emperors, popes, Stalin, Hitler, Saddam Husein, Ossama Bin Ladan. The most significant problem that such suggestions have is that the person invariably dies!

Our ability to recognise elements of lawlessness in certain major leaders rings true with what Paul says about “the mystery of lawlessness already being at work.” We do see rising evil and yet the coming of the lawless one will be clearly different from what occurred earlier and will be unmistakable.

What then will mark off this “man of lawlessness”?

First, his name is his character, he is a person without law, presumably he is opposed to the law of God not necessarily or not only the law of people.

Second, he is the “son of destruction”. While destruction is his end it is also a characteristic of what he brings with him - destruction.

Third, he opposes all forms of worship except that which is to be directed to him. The man of lawlessness will oppose the One True and Living God and be determined to stop his worship?

Fourth, the man of lawlessness is ultimately not in control but is restrained until the appointed time. It is God who sets the times. While God is ultimately in control of the times, we are not given enough information here to determine who or what it is that restrains the man of lawlessness (that which restrains the man of lawlessness is described as both a thing and a person). For my own two bits, considering how the man of lawlessness is described, I think it is the collapse of ordered society and law - order and structure perhaps embodied in a strong ruler at whose death the man of lawlessness is able to arise.

The fifth characteristic of the man of lawlessness is that he is an agent of Satan but not Satan himself.

Sixth and finally, it is the coming of the man of lawlessness that signals the coming of the Lord and the man of lawlessness quick and final destruction. In verse eight we read, “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.” You get the feel from reading that there may be quite a build up, but as soon as Christ returns the battle is over so quickly it’s as if nothing had gone on.

So Paul addresses a genuine concern for the Thessalonian Christians but also for all of us. Will evil win? Will evil ever come to an end?

Paul’s hope is not based on some vague idea of “it’ll be alright in the end”, nor is he hoping in human achievement or development. Paul’s great hope is in Christ and the absolute victory he has over Satan and evil. Paul is waiting in hope for the final consummation of Christ’s victory to be finalized at his return.

Today, Armistice Day, we remember the end of World War One almost 90 years ago and It has been over sixty years since the end of World War Two, but who would think that we are getting closer to really living in a peaceful world? At an international level there are nations still fighting against nations, at a national level we know of civil war in countries like the Sudan, we can see conflict at a local level and we see it even in families. Wherever there are people in this world there is conflict and evil. Paul reminds us that we are not to be alarmed by the presence of evil, even if evil increases, but rather we are to place our hope in Christ’s victory over evil - a victory which will be consummated at his return.

### **Don’t Be Alarmed When People Turn Away Or Mock (2:9-10)**

The final cause for concern which Paul identifies is the alarm that can be raised when we see people turn away from or mock the Truth. Christians do not exist in a vacuum removed from the attitudes and beliefs of others. When people mock Christian belief as unacceptable to educated people (as Richard Dawkins does), not spiritual enough (as those in the New Age movement do), or out of touch with reality (as so many in Australia do), it hurts us.

What are we to do in the face of this mockery or when we are confronted with people turning away? Paul helps us by identifying the heart of the problem. In verse nine and following we read, “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.”

While I am firmly convinced that there is strong evidence for Christianity and that following Jesus makes good sense, I also recognise that you can rarely argue someone into being a Christian. The problem with arguing someone about Christianity is that while there are facts and evidence which needs to be evaluated and weighed, the biggest issue

is whether they love the truth. Do people desire to align themselves with the way God has created the world with him as the ruler?

When the man of lawlessness comes and uses signs and wonders to deceive people the reason why he will have success is because these people do not desire to align themselves with God's rule over the earth as epitomized in Christ. Ultimately Christianity is not about entering a building called a church, nor is about saying certain prayers, or giving an amount of money, or any other activities that Christians often take part in. Christianity is about loving God and giving Christ our heart-felt allegiance.

Paul's agenda in addressing the concern that the Thessalonian Christians appear to have had over people who mock or walk away from the faith is to direct people to the root problem. Paul wants people to clearly see who it is that they're rejecting - Christ - and what are the consequences of this. They reject the truth and pleasure in unrighteousness.

### **BECAUSE - God Is At Work In All This And He Is Our Hope (2:8, 13-17)**

So we have looked at three issues of concern for the Thessalonian Christians. These issues impacted not only the first readers of Paul's letter but they also impact us today.

There was alarm that the day of the Lord had already come. Paul pointed out that certain things must come to pass before Jesus would return and that the coming of the Lord could not be missed.

There is always alarm at evil, especially as it increases. Paul prepares the Thessalonians by teaching them that evil will get worse but it is not unexpected and when evil rises to new heights with the coming of the man of lawlessness so the return of the Lord is imminent.

And Christians can be alarmed and dismayed when people mock or walk away from the faith. To comfort the Thessalonian Christians Paul points out that these people are ultimately rejecting God's rule and Christ - the Truth.

While Paul has provided answers to each of these concerns, there is one great overarching answer with which Paul concludes this section.

Paul declares powerfully and clearly God's sovereignty in all circumstances. First, Paul describes how God is all powerful over all who oppose him. God is the One who appoints the time of Jesus' return. It is Christ who will kill the man of lawlessness. And it is God who sends the delusion to show up those who don't love him.

Second, Paul declares God's sovereignty over the Thessalonian Christians themselves. It is God who loves them, it is God who chose them from the beginning to be sanctified by the Spirit and believe in the truth. God called them to respond to the gospel!

Yes, there are concerns all around us, and yes, we may be tempted to be alarmed by them. What is the solution to these concerns? We trust and love the God who is sovereign over them all!

It is to God's great majesty and authority that we cling, knowing that God is for us. God's sovereignty is not some theoretical idea that's useful for theologians to discuss. God's sovereignty brings comfort and hope to all Christians today.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, allow me to pray this prayer that Paul prays for his readers at the end of chapter two:

“Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us an eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.”