

Before He Comes
2 Thessalonians 2:1-12
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FBC Waynesboro

No Biblical issue as brought out more fanatical fascination than the issue of the Second Coming. Every age has produced its prophets who would carefully calculate and then predict the precise date of His coming. Some who saw those days pass were so determined or deluded that they would simply recalculate and come up with another date. This kind of thing has been going on from the time that Paul in A.D. 50 wrote his first letter to the church in Thessalonica. These early believers really believed that they would live to see the return of Jesus and when some among them began to die they stood at the grave to ask questions both about life after death for the people of God and the return of Jesus. Paul responded to those questions in his first letter but it seems that there was still some confusion so he comes back to it in these verses.

The confusion in Thessalonica concerned the Day of the Lord and its arrival. Remember that this phrase was well understood by people in the ancient world. It was as familiar to them as is the phrase "fourth of July" is to us. It meant for them that Day when God would come to execute His righteous judgment upon the earth and set things right. Now it is important to note that from the time of the ancient prophets there had been those who had sought to change the meaning of this day. They did not like a God who judges and executes justice so they painted the Day of the Lord in pictures with all light and no darkness, all grace and no judgment. We see this for example in Amos 5:18-24. They saw the Day of the Lord as the day of deliverance for all people, but it is not that. It is the Day of Judgment that includes Jesus taking His church out of the world.

The problem in Thessalonica was that some were saying that this Day had already happened. Jesus had already come. The judgment at already begun. The Day of the Lord had dawned. Where did that come from? It came from the same kind of source that always brings confusion to the church. It came from people who had had a dream or a vision or who had received some revelation that they had articulated even in writing saying that it had come to them from God but it had no affiliation with the Truth of God as written. And people believed it. Why wouldn't

they? Those who were proclaiming it were prefacing their words and writings with, “The Lord spoke to me and” How do you argue with that? They had believed it to the extent that they were externally shaken and internally distressed and Paul writes these verses to set the record straight.

He begins by pointing us to the “coming” of our Lord Jesus and our being gathered to Him. The word for “coming” is the Greek word “parousia” and it means literally, “being down” or “being alongside” and it is used in the New Testament for the coming of Jesus in the end that includes both the rapture of the church and His return with the church to judge the world. The phrase “gathered together” translates one word in the Greek that is used only here and in Hebrews 10:25. There it refers to the gathering of believers as the body of Christ for the worship of God which some have forsaken while still saying that they are faithful. Paul makes it plain there that such cannot be true. And he anticipates John who says that those who went out from us was designed of God to show that they never belonged to us. Those who are gathered to Jesus on the last day are only those who have been gathering in His Name on the Lord’s Days which prepares us for our being gathered to Him on that day. Now it is true that people gather in worship every Lord’s Day that will not be gathered with Jesus on the day of His coming but it is even more true that would be profoundly rare for anybody to be gathered to Jesus on the last day who has not been gathering with other believers all along the way. Do you know people like that who do not gather regularly with God’s people but still profess to be people of God? Would you pray for them and their salvation? Would you proclaim the Gospel to them? Would you plead with them to see how Satan has both seduced them and blinded them? Jesus is coming to gather those who have gathering before Him and that coming initiates in a very real way the first day of the dreadfully and desperately dark Day of the Lord.

But Paul wants these people to know that there are three things that will happen all of which signal the arrival of the dawning of the Day of the Lord. The first one happens by God’s grace as a signal to God’s people that the Day is drawing near. The other two develop dramatically and suddenly in the first moments of the first day of the Day of the Lord. I want to give you all three and then develop them over the course of this Sunday and next Sunday. The first thing that will happen that will be in place before the Day of the Lord dawns is what this text calls “the rebellion.” This word describes the dominating cultural condition and societal

status of the last days. The essence of it is an understanding of the Gospel that is actually foreign to the Gospel but is so prevalent and popular that it become THE GOSPEL that is believed in as the basis of life for many who profess to be children of God who in fact are captured and controlled by the devil. So dull are their minds and dominated by darkness are their hearts that they neither see nor sense their dreadful condition. We are going to develop all of what this means but listen to how Paul speaks about these people, 2:10-11. This prevalence of a perverted Gospel will pave the way for the revealing of the lawless one or Son of Destruction or as we know him best from Scripture, the AntiChrist. His power will be so great and His presence so pervasive that many will fall at his feet and worship him. He will be the primary purveyor of the false Gospel at least for awhile and will lead the way in persecuting and putting to death those people who refuse to compromise their commitment to the Gospel. Then the third thing happens and this is when all hell will break lose upon the earth because the one who restrains is removed. Now you will see that nobody really knows what that means. There have been a multitude of attempts to understand who or what this is and we will look at it. You will not hear me say, "well, I know what this means . . ." What you will hear me say is that, "I am satisfied for now that it most likely means" But the revelation of the Antichrist and the removal of the restraint happens in the context of a great rebellion or to use the Greek word, "apostasia" from which we get the word apostasy.

There will be in the last days a great apostasy in the church. It is so important that we get what this means biblically. So, let's begin with what we know for certain about the relationship of true believers to the Lordship of Jesus. Look at John 6:35-44. We come to Jesus because we are brought to Jesus by the Spirit of Jesus; compelled by the conviction of sin and the call of God in repentance and faith we choose to commit our lives to Jesus as Lord. And when that happens we are held forever in the hands of the One who saves us. Paul puts it this way in Ephesians 1:11-14. In both these texts and so many others there is a critical component without which and apart from which we will not understand the biblical concept of apostasy. Jesus is the One who by His Spirit calls people to Himself. He is the One who saves them. He is the One who by His very Spirit secures them so that He is the One because we belong to Him begins to work in us to make us like Himself. He never fails to do that in those who belong to Him. When Paul speaks in Ephesians One of those who belong to God, he says that we are those who heard

the word of truth, the gospel of our salvation. Now, why does he emphasize that? Because even in his day there were other gospels, the two most popular in his day was on the one side the gospel of easy believism and on the other the gospel of energetic doism. The one called people just to trust Jesus and live as they pleased while the other called people just to do good and be moral for this is what makes one right with God. But Paul wants us to know that as we approach the Day of the Lord, there will be a great rebellion against the truth of God and it will come as a result of the pervasive presence of a gospel that is not the gospel at all but will be so very popular among so very many who will believe it right up until the dawn of the Day of the Lord. Don't you think we need to know that this false gospel looks like and sounds like?

This text teaches us what it is in its essentials through three very critical words: apostasia, anomia, and adikia. It consists of rebellion against the Truth of God, refusal to submit to the Law of God, and a righteousness that is determined by us and not declared by God. It is so critical that we see clearly that these three terms speak of right standing before God, right surrender to God, and right service to God except for one little letter. But this one little letter that begins each word negates the truth of the word. It guts it of its right content. And this is the essence of the rebellion in the last days. It will look like a right standing before God but it isn't at all. It will look like a right surrender to God but it isn't at all. It will look like a right service to God but it isn't at all. Its outward appearance and verbal pronouncements look and sound good, but it is corrupt at the core. And we need to see and hear what it looks like so we can get to the core. So, let's look at each of these three words.

Apostasia or apostasy or rebellion. The most famous text in the Bible for understanding this word is Hebrews 6. Paul sounds a warning in Hebrews 5:11-14. These people are not growing at all. Ask them about their faith and they can tell you when and how they got saved; ask them what God is teaching them through His Word right now and they have nothing to say. Paul is concerned. He ought to be. So should we. Not only are they not growing but they are still stuck on issues of little or no importance, 6:1-3. Lost people in churches show their hand when they get disturbed about issues of no consequence: how we baptize, how we observe the supper, whether we are pre-trib or post-trib or KJV only. And then Paul presses the point in verses 4-6. These are people who have heard the Gospel, they have

responded to the Gospel, they have been under conviction by the Holy Spirit, they may have been baptized but there has been no life change at all, but they still say they are believers. Their way of life brings contempt to the Lord Jesus Christ and it is impossible for them to be brought to repentance. Why? Because God is mean and angry? Because God is limited in His ability to save? No. Because they have believed and bought into a Gospel that is not the Gospel at all and they really, truly believe that real and radical life change and Lordship are not related.

Let me take you to one other text and we will end here for today. Go with me to 1 John 2:18-27. John is describing here exactly what Paul is teaching in 2 Thessalonians. Before the Antichrist is revealed there will be hundreds of thousands of antichrists in the world who do not know and would not believe that they are that. So, who are these people? The last line of verse 27 is the key. In fact, this phrase is the most often repeated phrase in 1 John. He picks up this theme from John 15 and the image of the vine and branches. And those who are the antichrists are those who do not live their lives under the Lordship of Jesus among the people of God in the body of Christ but still profess to be believers. And nobody can convince them that they are not. They are confident that they are. Yet, John says to the saints in Ephesus that they left you so that you would know who they are. They have a version of the Gospel that does not include the church nor does it include the commitment of their lives to the Lordship of Jesus. You need to know that swirling around Asia Minor in these days and particularly present in Ephesus was a new and better gospel. It taught that the goal of the gospel is to save our souls for heaven while leaving us on earth to enjoy life as we determined and defined the enjoyment of life. That gospel did not stay in Ephesus did it? And in the last days it will be the most popular and most prevalent Gospel. If we are not there already, we are very, very close. God help us.