

# Instruction for the Distressed

## 2 Thessalonians 2:1-17

Illustrate the danger of being misinformed and the importance of truth. Maybe the story of the *Titanic*?

Illustrate how an activity may have multiple layers of purpose. In soccer, we had the boys take a ball with them everywhere. They did everything they did with a ball, including laps and sprints.

Concerning the Lord's return, the church at Thessalonica had been:

**Uninformed** - 1 Thessalonians 4 Led to unchristian grief

**Misinformed** - 2 Thessalonians 2 Led to unchristian fear.

The mesmerizing imagery of this passage can have the very effect on us today that Paul was trying to counter in their day. A surface reading and handling of this passage can actually lead us to the same sort of misdirected emphasis that disturbs the church. So we must take up this instruction and in doing so, we will discover that Paul is interested in informing the church about the Lord's return; but he is more concerned to awaken them to the importance of truth.

With this emphasis upon truth large in our minds, let's study these paragraphs together, asking for God's help.

### The Problem that Disturbs

(v.1-2)

In the midst of their terrible suffering in affliction and persecution, the church had been disturbed by misinformation. Their life's context of persecution made them vulnerable to this deception.

<sup>1</sup> Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, <sup>2</sup> 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.

### Its Important Subject

(v.1)

They have become disturbed over and he is concerned with what we call Eschatology. Paul introduces this subject under the twin rubric of *the coming* and *the gathering*. It is Jesus the Lord who is coming and it is we, His people, who will be gathered to Him. He is talking about the *Parousia* and the *Assembling* – we use the terms Revelation and Rapture to refer to Jesus' Second Coming.

### Its Disturbing Effect

(v.2)

The problem is that the church is misinformed. They have been told things that were not true that left them shaken and disturbed. The error, linked with the truth they did know and held to, unsettled and alarmed them. This is both the design and the effect that being misinformed has.

### Its Fraudulent Authority

(v.2)

The church had a prophetic declaration, a preaching message and finally a forged letter. All of these were counterfeit. The prophecy, the word and the letter were all purported to have had Paul as their source or authority. Imagine. In the first century church, a massive

letter writing campaign had been mounted against Paul. A letter to Corinth had attacked Paul's apostolic authority; to Galatia, Paul's gospel; to Thessalonica, Paul's eschatology to the extent that Paul took to signing his letters with his very distinctive and laborious signature to authenticate them.

### **Its Subtle Error**

**(v.2)**

Now we have to do a bit of thinking here. The phrase *the day of the Lord* is used in two ways in the New Testament. It is used in these ways consistently by Jesus and the Apostles.

The Day of the Lord is used to refer to the whole period of time beginning with the resurrection of Christ and the commencing of the age of the Spirit which culminates in the Return of the Lord. It is the age in which the promised Kingdom of Christ commences and reaches its final and full realization with the *Parousia*.

The Day of the Lord is also used of the short period of time in which the very wrath of God is poured out on the unbelieving nations at the end of Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> week or as it is sometimes (erroneously) called, the Tribulation.

Now why would this be a particularly disturbing message? What would be disturbing about an authoritative and prophetic declaration that their persecutions and afflictions come because the Day of the Lord had come? Because it would have meant that they were beginning to experience the wrath of God *as unbelievers*. In effect, they had missed the gathering unto the Lord. This deeply distressed them just as it would you.

But the lesson is great for us here: *we must be on the guard for subtle errors on important topics that come backed by fraudulent authorities whose effect is to undermine our faith and hope in difficult times.*

### **The Truth that Informs**

**(v.3-12)**

In response to the misinformation that distressed and disturbed them, Paul gives truth that is to inform and to encourage them. Receiving that truth gives them the responsibility to not be deceived. There were sufficient resources in the truth they had learned and the grace they were receiving not to be led astray. So he is calming their affections by informing their minds. We need this model today when people are upset, alarmed and disturbed due to being misinformed about Biblical truth.

Some of you may struggle with what I am about to say. You have a particular schema or timeline that you are committed to as a framework. The plain language of this text is going to force you to do one of two things: re-evaluate your framework or force it onto the Scripture. As a matter of fact, I am seriously concerned that the general misinformation in churches today about eschatology is going to expose us to severe difficulty in the time of apostasy and tribulation that may shortly be before us.

### **Understand the Prerequisites**

**(v.3-4)**

Before the Day of the Lord, there are two events that must happen. This is the very plain meaning of the words here. These two events must come to pass before the Coming and the Gathering at the Day of the Lord.

<sup>3</sup> 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, <sup>4</sup> 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.

## The Departure of an Apostasy

The word here refers to a falling away from, a departure from. In the context, it is a departure from truth. Immediately preceding the *Parousia*, the professing church will largely abandon the faith leaving only a relative small number of the elect. Paul is alluding to Jesus' teaching in Matthew 24:8-14 where in verse 10 Jesus said that many would *depart from* the truth.

## The Disclosure of the Antichrist

That the man of sin or lawlessness here refers to the Antichrist is little disputed. The language Paul uses alludes to Daniel 7:23-28; 8:9-14,23-26 and especially Daniel 9:24-27 and Matthew 24:4-51. In these texts the Antichrist is portrayed in all his wickedness. How will he be revealed for who he is? (1) He will oppose and exalt himself over every religion. (2) He will enthrone himself in the temple of God (3) He will proclaim or display himself to be god.

This man of sin may be revealed or uncovered, but he is doomed to destruction.

## Remember the Clear instruction

(v.5-8)

Paul was reminding them that he had been continually teaching them these things. This was not new information to them. In fact, what he was saying to them was rooted in Jesus' own teaching on eschatology that expounded on the Old Testament prophecies.

<sup>5</sup> Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? <sup>6</sup> And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> 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.

Who is this person? We can easily identify him *Biblically*. There have been attempts all through history to identify him *personally*. We must be very careful – we will know who he is when he does what the Bible predicts.

There is coming a time in the future when this man of sin, the anti-christ will come to power. We do not know when, but we know that 3 1/2 years after he has established a treaty with Israel and rebuilds a Jewish Temple, he will erect an image of himself in it and command that all the world should bow down and worship him as god. This is what has traditionally been called *the abomination of desolation*. Then begins great tribulation as he persecutes those who worship the true God. That period of time is shortened for the sake of the elect when Jesus appears, gathers His elect to Himself and begins the awful outpouring of His wrath on the Day of the Lord.

From this sequence of events, we can see why:

The church was disturbed. If the Day of the Lord had come, then they were subject to the wrath of God as unbelievers and had not been gathered at Jesus' appearing.

The church could know that these events had not yet transpired *because what must precede them had not yet taken place*. It is quite evident that Paul is informing them that the rise and revelation of the Antichrist and his desolating abomination in the middle of the Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> week must occur before the Day of the Lord. So the persecution

they were suffering was terrible, but not yet that of the great tribulation from which they would be rescued.

So they must remember (and so must we) Paul's clear instruction:

### **His Present Restraining**

**(v.5-7)**

The reason that the antichrist had not been revealed is that he was being restrained. Frankly, in all my studies I cannot come to honestly say to you what or who this restrainer may be. They well knew; we do not. But, we do know that, in spite of all of Satan's efforts to bring forth this man, God will continue to restrain until it is in God's timetable. Then God will remove the restrainer so that this Satan inspired person may carry His evil to its full measure. Until then, the secret force, or hidden principle of lawlessness is at work. There is an evil principle of sin working in the public arena even in our society and culture today. There will come a day when out of the *mystery* of sin will come forth the *man* of sin.

### **His Future Destruction**

**(v.8)**

The one who is revealed will be utterly destroyed. Here is the great comfort of this text. That man of sin who emerges out of the chaos of the mystery of lawlessness who exalts himself to be worshipped as God is utterly overthrown and destroyed.

Destroyed by the breath of the Lord. The Spirit of God going forth in the Word of God is a sword at the throat of Satan's false christ to bring an end to his life.

Brought to an end by the appearing of Jesus. Here is an amazing statement. All of the deceiving effects of the antichrist will be nullified by the brightness of the majesty and glory of Christ's appearing.

I leave to your sanctified imaginations the wonder and amazement with which we will marvel and the fear that will grip the unbeliever on that day. This is the day when our glorious king will shine forth in majesty from the heavens. The sword of His Word and Spirit will plunge deep into the wicked heart of the lord of darkness and the blinding, choking smog of his deception will vanish in the hot glow of Jesus' glory and holiness.

### **Be Warned About Deception**

**(v.9-12)**

<sup>9</sup> The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, <sup>10</sup> and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. <sup>11</sup> Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, <sup>12</sup> in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

### **The Character of that Deception**

**(v.9-10a)**

The coming of the man of sin will be a natural progression from the religious and cultural environment in which he arises. His coming will not be sudden and strange, but will seem to arise naturally out of the apostasy and its characteristic religious activity. In some measure, what Paul goes on to describe has always been with us. But we cannot help but wonder as we see the astounding rise of these characteristics across all religious, not just denominational grounds.

The antichrist will arise out of the apostasy characterized by counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders energized and activated by Satan. It will also be accompanied by blinding and binding effects of ever growing wickedness for those who are doomed

to perish. They will perish, having loved their sin while following after the signs and wonders, because they did not receive the love of the truth.

### **The Consequence of that Deception**

**(v.10)**

Here is the horrible outworking of power and pleasure—they do not love the truth. And loving the truth is the antidote to the fascinating allurements of supernatural power and seductive pleasure. Because they would not receive the love of the truth, they are not saved.

Listen loved ones, here is a sobering message to the Christianity of our day. To be saved, you must love the truth. And it is a *love for the truth*. Many who are in the middle of the signs, wonders and miracles will nod to the truth while embracing deception. They are seeking after the power of signs, wonders and miracles, not the power of God in the Word. The end result is that they are being snared by Satan and denying the sufficiency of the Word. This is why Paul is so concerned for truth. And it is why we must have a passion for truth in the Word.

### **The Condemnation by that Deception**

**(v.11-12)**

The terrible purpose of God is revealed. He will accomplish his judgment and condemnation of those who are perishing. Those who were not elect and are not gathered at the appearing of Christ, those who were perishing and were not saved:

God will send them a deluding influence  
So that they will believe the lie (what is false)  
So that they may be condemned (judged)

Because they  
Did not believe the truth  
But delighted in wickedness.

After the gathering of the church at the appearing of Christ, no one will be saved who heard the truth and delighted in their sin because God will send a deluding influence which will cause them to believe the lie of Satan. Sobering words these. There is no second chance. You are hearing the truth now, if you do not receive the love of the truth, if you do not believe the truth now, your heart will be so turned by your sin and the powerful delusion that you cannot and will not believe to be saved. Even in the face of the horrible judgments that will fall in the wrath of God on the Day of the Lord, you will continue to pant after your pleasure and will shake your fist in rebellion against God. O, my friend, believe in Christ today. Turn your heart to believe and love the truth so as to receive and submit to the Lord.

*So the church is not to be distressed because the coming of Christ and the gathering of the church to Him has not happened yet.*

### **The Contrast that Challenges**

**(v.13-17)**

Thank God for the “buts” of Scripture. In contrast to the sad doom awaiting those who would not believe, Paul is so thankful for this church. The great contrast is between those who are perishing and those who have been chosen for salvation. This is a great doctrine about which a great deal of the church is misinformed.

<sup>13</sup> But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. <sup>14</sup> To this he called you through our gospel, so that you

may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>15</sup> So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.

### The Explanation of the Truth

(v.13-14)

Let's develop these truths by asking the questions this paragraph answers.

**What is the root and ground of election?** The love of God. We are those who are *loved by the Lord*.

**What is election?** God chose (single aorist, middle, indicative) you. It is the marking out of some men and women whom God loves with a saving love. The object *you* means that it is personal. God chose people. Ah, the wonder of it: Loved by God, so we are chosen by God.

**When did election take place?** From the beginning. As Ephesians 1 puts it, before the foundations of the world; that is, before anything was created. Election took place in eternity past.

**What are we chosen for?** To be saved. Election is of people to be saved. We are "chosen for salvation" (NASB).

**How is election carried out in salvation? How is that salvation brought about?** Through the sanctification of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. Here again is Word and Spirit. The consistent witness of all the Bible is that the new birth and the whole effecting of salvation is partnership of the working of the Spirit and Word in the one chosen.

**What then is my responsibility in it?** To respond to the call of God. The word here means an imperial summons. This is not like standing on the back porch calling the kids, cows or pigs home. It is the summons that is vested with sovereign authority.

**How or by what am I summoned?** In or by the gospel. The gospel is not merely an invitation based on a series of truths. It is an imperial summons based on the saving work and sovereign authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are saved by faith in the truth because we are hearing the gospel. Only those who hear the truth in the gospel are being saved.

**For what purpose have we been chosen to be saved?** That we might share in the glory Christ receives. We all know what it means to share in the warmth of the fire. We know that we are not the ones burning, rather we are basking in the warmth of its flames. So this is not our being glorified, but in Christ being glorified and us sharing in that glory with Him. O, that will be glory for me only because all the glory is for Him.

So, God loved us and before creation, chose us to be saved by the work of the Spirit and the belief in the Word. He then summoned us through the gospel. All of this is that we will share in Christ being glorified.

### The Exhortation because of the Truth

(v.15)

So if the truth is so important, what is our responsibility?

We must stand firm and hold fast. These two words communicate tenacity. If we love the truth, believe the truth, obey the truth and teach the truth, we had better be standing firm

and holding fast. The pressures to conform our doctrine to everything else except the Scriptures are immense.

We must value both doctrine and duty. *Tradition* here is not those things that we have added to the Word and hold dear. It is the idea of doctrine and duty *that is handed down to be received and passed on.*

These doctrines and duties *come from the deposit of apostolic teaching in the Word.* All the words and the letters that give us our doctrine and duty have been preserved without error in the Scripture. Therefore, it does not matter what our traditions are – and it matters terribly if we elevate them to be equal with or higher than the Scriptures.

*So the church is not to be distressed because we have been chosen by God to be saved.*

## The Prayer that Encourages

(v.16-17)

In the light of the distress of the church and these two great truths, Paul turns to prayer. Both our distresses and our doctrines need to be turned into doxology.

<sup>16</sup> Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, <sup>17</sup> comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.

## The Roots of Encouraging Prayer

(v.16)

Prayer that encourages should not just come out of thin air. It must stand on a firm foundation.

### The Person of our God.

*The Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father.* This petition pleads and expects the personal involvement of God. Jesus Himself and our Father are being asked to be involved in what he will ask. God does not distance Himself from our affliction and distresses, but bends to intimately involved with us.

### The Perfections in our God.

*Who has loved us and graced us.* Do not miss that this petition is borne up on the wings of God' love and grace to us. We know that God is graciously disposed toward us.

### The Provisions by our God.

*Gave us an eternal comfort and a good hope by grace.* What God has done in the past causes us to look forward in faith and hope to what His grace will do for us in the future. We do not live the Christian life by gratitude for the past. Rather, encouraged by the past, we live by faith in the grace that will come in the next moment of need.

## The Requests of Encouraging Prayer

(v.17)

So what is it that we should be praying for in our distress and our need to love and believe the Word?

### The Actions

God, by grace, is being asked to *comfort* and *strengthen* our hearts. Now stop just a moment. Can you think of a time that you prayed for someone else that God would become so intimately involved in someone else's distress that they would be comforted and strengthened inwardly? When was the last time this was your experience?

## The Arena

Our petition is for comfort and strength in every good thing we are doing and saying. Don't miss this. Comfort and strength are given in the midst of ministry. Note that this distressed church is to be comforted and strengthened in the very midst of its good work and word. This grace was not then to make them feel better, but to cause them to serve greater.

*So the church is not to be distressed because we are praying for enabling grace for each other.*

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## Reflect and Respond

What emerges from this text is Paul's passion for truth. It is a theme that underscores the importance truth has for all people, believer and unbeliever alike.

These words and phrases are like the chime which keeps tolling for truth: prophecy, message or letter (v.2), deceive or deception (v.3, 10), counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders (v.9), believing what is false and not believing what is true (v.11-12) in contrast to phrases like remember what was told (v.5), you know (v.6), the truth (v.10,12,14), our gospel (v.14), traditions (v.15) and word (v.17).

The contrast between the man of sin whose coming is characterized by deception, deceit and counterfeit wonders and the messengers of Christ whose coming is characterized by truth, teaching and holiness.

The truth is to be received and loved (v.10), believed (v.12) by those who have chosen for faith in the truth (v.13) and called by the gospel (v.14).

Condemnation is upon those who do not love the truth (v.10) and under a deluding influence, believe what is false (v.11) instead of believing what is true while taking pleasure in sin (v.12).

If we learn nothing else from these paragraphs, we must learn to value the truth. The truth is to be heard, taught, told, loved and believed. The truth will save us, mature us, encourage us and inform us so that we will not be easily distressed.

This text leads me to conclude that the great apostasy out which the antichrist arises will involve the counterfeit signs, wonders and miracles activated by Satan. We can only witness to and pray for those who are ensnared in this movement today.

I know that many do not believe the grand truths about the electing love of God. How sad. Why would you let Satan rob you of such nourishing and God exalting truth? Particularly, when a passage like this is so clear and so encouraging.

May I summarize again this wonderful truth for you? God loved us and before creation, chose us to be saved by the work of the Spirit and the belief in the Word. He then summoned us through the gospel. All of this is that we will share in Christ being glorified.

Truth must be transformed into living. It is of little value that you hold the truth in your head when you do not do the truth. In fact, the whole of the Scripture condemns that kind of knowledge as a dead faith.



So the church is not to be distressed because the coming of Christ and the gathering of the church to Him has not happened yet.

So the church is not to be distressed because we have been chosen by God to be saved.

So the church is not to be distressed because we are praying for enabling grace for each other.

No matter what affliction or apostasy or spirit of antichrist surround us, may God give us grace that we will be comforted and strengthened in every good work and word.

