

Message #2

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2 Thessalonians

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OUR HOPE AND THE FACE OF EVIL

2 THESSALONIANS 2:1-5

I.

A couple of weeks ago I finished reading *East of Eden*, by John Steinbeck. (PROJECTOR ON--- EAST OF EDEN) Decades ago I read *Grapes of Wrath*, for which Steinbeck won a Pulitzer Prize and for which he is most famous. According to his third wife, Steinbeck considered *East of Eden* his greatest work. I heard it referenced a couple of times recently because it deals with Biblical themes of good and evil. So I decided to read it.

Perhaps the most interesting character in the novel is Cathy, later called Catherine, later called Kate. Steinbeck in the book calls her a "psychic monster" and a "malformed soul." As a girl, Cathy is responsible for the death of her parents. She later shoots her husband, who is a kind man. She abandons her twin boys. She ends up as the head of a brothel in California. Destruction follows in her path.

The book was published in 1952, the year in which I was born. The biggest concern for our country at the time was the Korean War. Kim Il-sung, the dictator of North Korea, who called himself "the Great Leader," had triggered the war because of his invasion of the south. He had a very bad reputation. Our GIs who were taken as POWs were treated very badly. When the *East of Eden* came out during this war, it was received with mixed reviews. Some of the reviewers were critical of Cathy, saying that she was not a realistic character. She was too evil. No one is that bad.

Sixty-five years later Korea and the danger of war are still in the news. North Korea is led by Kim Il-sung's grandson, Kim Jong-un (KIM JONG-UN), who is evil incarnate. Soon after coming to power, he had his uncle, a general killed. A few months ago he ordered the assassination of his brother in Malaysia. He demands ultimate loyalty from all of his subjects. Two weeks ago Ohio student Otto Warmbier died. He had committed the horrible offense of tearing down a propaganda poster while on his tour in North Korea. For that he was sentenced to 15 years in prison. He came home in a coma from which he never recovered. Now the "Dear Leader" threatens to unleash nuclear missiles on the United States. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Evil is a reality. Occasionally we encounter extreme examples of it in our world. In order to deal with it we need a Biblical perspective. Such is the subject of the passage before us this morning.

We have begun a study of 2 Thessalonians. We have seen that this brief letter from the Apostle Paul continues themes introduced in 1 Thessalonians. A healthy church, such as the one in Thessalonica, is marked by a display of the virtues of faith, love and hope. In Chapter 1 those virtues are reemphasized. Now in #2 we find that the understanding on the part of the Thessalonian Christians in regard to hope for the future was a little off. Paul begins to correct that in our passage. His explanation has relevance for us and our understanding about the future, especially in regard to confrontation with evil.

II.

Thus in vv. 1 & 2 of #2 in 2 Thessalonians we learn that OUR HOPE REQUIRES A PROPER UNDERSTANDING OF THE COMING OF OUR LORD AND THE DAY OF THE LORD. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. OUR HOPE REQUIRES A...) In vv. 1 & 2 we read, "**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.**"

Something has happened to cause the Christians at Thessalonica to become upset. They are "shaken." The original word was used of the tossing of a ship. Here it is the tossing of a mind that is involved. The mindset of the Christians has been thrown off. The result is that they have become "alarmed"--- a present tense verb describing their ongoing emotional state.

The cause of this mindset and resulting emotional condition is a belief that the day of the Lord has come. In order to understand what is going on here we need to be clear about the meaning of the terms that appear in these two verses. The key words have an overlapping meaning and are interpreted in different ways by Christian teachers and students.

The first term to be considered is "the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." In Greek the word for coming is *parousia*. We saw that term used first in the Thessalonian correspondence in the first letter in #2 v. 19. (PROJECTOR ON--- 1 THESSALONIANS 2:19) There Paul said, "**For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming--- *parousia*? Is it not you?**" This *parousia* involves Christ's second coming. It is an event which Paul implies that Christians should anticipate with eagerness.

In the fourth chapter of that first letter Paul addressed the fate of Christians who died without experiencing the return of Christ. He wrote in vv. 15 & 16 (1THESSALONIANS 4:15), "**For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming--- *parousia*--- of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.**" He is talking about the rapture of the church. (1 THESSALONIANS 4:16) "**For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with**

**the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first."** Thus we see Paul using *parousia* of Christ with reference to the rapture.

John, Peter and James also use *parousia* with reference to the rapture of the church. Jesus used the term in the gospels. In Matthew #24 he speaks of the tribulation that lies in the future. He speaks of His return and the judgment that awaits His enemies at the end of the tribulation. Thus we read in Matthew #24 v. 27 (MATTHEW 24:27), **"For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming--- *parousia*--- of the Son of Man."**

This *parousia* will be dramatic. It will involve the physical return to earth of Jesus at the end of the tribulation. It will be followed by the judgment of the enemies of God. So this *parousia* seems to involve, or include, two parts. Both the rapture of the church and the return of Christ to earth at the end of the tribulation are described by the term *parousia*. Context determines which aspect is in view. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Verse one in our text is referring to the first aspect of the *parousia*. This is reinforced by the second key term in v. 1--- **"our being gathered together to him."** This is the only time that this expression is used in the New Testament. But a very similar term appears in #4 of the first letter. In v. 17 of 1 Thessalonians #4 (PROJECTOR ON--- 1 THERSSALONIANS 4:17) the apostle writes, **"Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord."**

So the cause of upset for the Thessalonians has to do with the first aspect of the *parousia*, the rapture of the church. The source of the misleading information, according to v. 2, is a "spirit," which may involve a supposed prophecy from the Holy Spirt; a "spoken word," which could involve a sermon or teaching from a traveling Christian speaker; or a "letter," wrongly attributed to Paul and his fellow missionaries. (PROJECTOR OFF) We might call this stuff "fake news." Paul seems not to be exactly clear where the false information originated. Perhaps it involved multiple sources.

At the end of his first letter, in #5 v. 21, he warned his readers to test everything, especially messages that claim to be prophecies from God. Spiritual input needed to be compared to the doctrine taught by the apostles.

The problem that the fake news has caused for the Thessalonian Christians is that they fear that the day of the Lord has come. We encountered the term "the day of the Lord" in 1 Thessalonians. I pointed out then that it has an Old Testament origin. It was especially associated with the judgment of God upon His enemies. In the New Testament the term is associated with God's judgment in the end times.

In 1 Thessalonians #5 v. 2 (1 THESSALONIANS 5:2) we read a few messages ago, "**For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. (1 THESSALONIANS 5:3) While people are saying, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.**" This day of the Lord seems to involve bad things. It is associated with destruction.

The concern of the Thessalonian Christians is that the time of destruction associated with the day of the Lord and the tribulation has come, and they have missed the rapture. Either there is no rapture, or it is coming later. The Thessalonians were enduring a time of tribulation and persecution for their faith. Their hope was that the rapture of the church was coming and that it would provide relief and exoneration for their situation. But now they feared that they were in the day of the Lord and that even worse judgments were coming and that they would not escape them. Paul is writing them to relieve their fears and to further explain his original teaching to them.

(CHART) Don nicely put this chart together on this slide to help us to visualize the meaning of these key terms in the first part of our passage. The timeline shows key events at the end of human history. The *parousia* refers to the rapture of the church just before the tribulation and the physical return of Jesus to earth at the end of the tribulation. The day of the Lord refers to the time of judgment that begins with the start of the seven year tribulation and continues on through the end of the millennium and the judgment of the nations that follows. So you can see how *parousia* and the day of the Lord overlap.

A healthy church has hope, even, and especially, in times of trial. The focus of that hope involves a proper understanding of the day of the Lord. Our hope has as its object the return of Christ. For us Christians this means the rapture of the church which could come at any time. There are no other events on the Biblical calendar that precede it.

III.

In vv. 3-5 of our passage we find that OUR HOPE REQUIRES A PROPER UNDERSTANDING OF THE ANTICHRIST AND EVIL AT WORK IN OUR WORLD. (III. OUR HOPE REQUIRES A PROPER...) In v. 3 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...**"

The Christians at Thessalonica have been misled by fake news that the day of the Lord had come. They feared that their trials would only get worse and that they could not look for a rapture that would deliver them from the judgments of God. But Paul says that the day of the Lord will come only after the rebellion occurs.

The original word for "rebellion" is *apostasia*, from which we get our word "apostasy." The event at issue is not just any apostasy. It is not just some falling into apathy characterized by some people in the world. It is the apostasy. It is a major apostasy unlike any other. The term literally means "falling away." But it often is used in the New Testament and in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to refer to a rebellion against God.

Jesus Himself spoke of this rebellion against God that would occur during the seven year tribulation. He wrote in Matthew #24 v. 10 (MATTHEW 24:10), "**And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another.**" What is the cause of this? Part of the cause is that the church has left the earth. There are no true Christians around upon the earth after the rapture to serve as salt and light in a sinful world. There will be professing Christians who claim to be part of the church. But in the face of persecution it will be easier for them to turn against the true God. This turning against God is described in greater detail in the Book of Revelation. (PROJECTOR OFF)

According to v. 3 in our text not only must the apostasy come before the day of the Lord can begin but also the man of lawlessness must be revealed. This individual is more commonly known as the Antichrist. He is one who abides by no laws. He makes his own. He especially opposes the laws of the true God. So this individual is characterized by immorality and injustice.

Furthermore he is described as "the son of destruction." This can mean that he is headed for destruction. The Bible indeed says that this is his fate. Judas Iscariot is called the son of destruction in John 17:12. Some commentators think that this term describes his fate. But his deed of betrayal also caused destruction. I suspect the descriptive term for the Antichrist here more likely describes his behavior. He causes destruction in all of his behavior.

One of the most concise descriptions of this "man of lawlessness" appears in #13 of the Book of Revelation. Beginning in v. 3 (PROJECTOR ON--- REVELATION 13:3) we are told this about him: "**One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast.**" The Apostle John in his vision is describing a world empire. One of its leaders appears to be killed, but he miraculously survives. This is the Antichrist who is described here as the beast.

The passage (REVELATION 13:4) continues, "**And they worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, 'Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?'**" The dragon is Satan, who gives power and authority to the Antichrist.

The description continues in v. 5 (REVELATION 13:5), **"And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months."** This amounts to three and a half years, which is half of the time of the tribulation. It is in the latter half of the tribulation that he will seem to have complete authority over the earth.

Verse 6 (REVELATION 13:6): **"It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. (REVELATION 13:7) Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. And authority was given it over every tribe and people and language and nation..."** There will be people during the tribulation who come to recognize that Jesus is the true Messiah and the Savior of the world. Many of these saints will be Jews who come to recognize Him as their Messiah.

Then in v. 8 (REVELATION 13:8): **"...and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain."** The text goes on to describe a second beast who gives attention and glory to the first beast. This second beast is like a counterfeit Holy Spirit. Thus we have a counterfeit Trinity. There is Satan and the Antichrist and the second beast. (PROJECTOR OFF)

So this is part of the story about the Antichrist. But v. 3 in our passage speaks of the day of the Lord not coming until the Antichrist is revealed. To what is that referring? In Daniel #9 this Old Testament prophet and statesman had a vision of the future in which an angel told him that the Messiah would be cut off 69 weeks after a decree to rebuild Jerusalem went out. Generally among evangelicals this is understood to mean that Jesus would be killed 69 weeks of years, or 483 years, after this decree was issued. Initially the angel told Daniel that it would be 70 weeks of years before God's program with Israel would be completed. After the death of Christ it seems that there is a pause in the divine clock before the seventieth week begins.

So in v. 26 of Daniel #9 (PROJECTOR ON--- DANIEL 9:26) we read, **"And after the sixty-two weeks--- earlier the angel spoke of an initial unit of 7 weeks followed by 62 weeks--- an anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing--- this seems to be a reference to the crucifixion of Christ. And the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. Its end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war. Desolations are decreed."** The reference to destruction of the city appears to find fulfillment in the demolition of Jerusalem that occurred in 70 AD. It was the Romans who carried out that destruction. But the end is still in the future. So there is an indication that the prince who is to come--- the Antichrist--- will come from somewhere in the old Roman Empire.

Verse 27 (DANIEL 9:27): **"And he--- the Antichrist--- shall make a strong covenant with many for one week, and for half of the week he shall put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall come one who makes desolate, until the decreed end is poured out on the**

**desolator.**" Putting other Scriptures together, it seems that the Antichrist will make some kind of major world treaty that will guarantee the safety of Israel and Jerusalem. In the middle of that seven year period he will put an end to sacrifices occurring in a rebuilt temple. The revealing of this man of lawlessness, the issue in v. 3 of our passage, will occur at the beginning of the seven year tribulation. Whoever plays the leading role in making this treaty will be the Antichrist. That event will mark the beginning of the day of the Lord and the judgments of God that will follow. Because that has not happened Paul is assuring the Thessalonian Christians that the day of the Lord has not yet begun. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In v. 4 of our text we find a further description of this Antichrist. Paul says that he **"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."** This is the fulfillment of the various prophecies that are made in the Bible about a coming abomination of desolations.

There is another section in Daniel which describes this action and proclamation of the Antichrist. In Daniel #11 v. 30 (PROJECTOR ON--- DANIEL 11:30) an angel tells Daniel about a future ruler who will do bad things to Israel. We read, **"For ships of Kittim shall come against him, and he shall be afraid and withdraw, and shall turn back and be enraged and take action against the holy covenant. He shall turn back and pay attention to those who forsake the holy covenant."**

Kittim is a reference to Cyprus, which was part of the Roman Empire. History tells us that the Romans interfered with the plans of an ambitious Syrian king by the name of Antiochus Epiphanes IV to conquer Egypt. Antiochus was upset by this Roman interference. He recognized that he could not defeat the Romans. So he took out some of his anger on Israel and the Jews.

Daniel 11 v. 31 (DANIEL 11:31) predicts, **"Forces from him shall appear and profane the temple and fortress, and shall take away the regular burnt offering. And they shall set up the abomination that makes desolate."** There is that "abomination desolation" term again. History tells us that in 168 BC Antiochus attacked Jerusalem. He outlawed Jewish worship. He set up an image of the Greek god Zeus in the temple.

The angel goes on to provide more details about this coming evil king. But then he goes on to describe certain future events and characteristics of this king that do not appear to fit Antiochus Epiphanes. They seem to describe an evil king who is yet future.

In v. 36 of Daniel 11 (DANIEL 11:36) we read, **"And the king shall do as he wills. He shall exalt himself and magnify himself above every god, and shall speak astonishing things against the God of gods. He shall prosper till the indignation is accomplished for what is decreed shall be done."** Antiochus never

exalted himself above every god. He promoted the worship of the Greek god Zeus. This future king is making astonishing claims against the true God.

Verse 37 (DANIEL 11:37): "**He shall pay no attention to the gods of his fathers, or to the one beloved by women. He shall not pay attention to any other god, for he shall magnify himself above all.**" There is no one who has quite fulfilled this description of this future ruler. The Daniel prophecy seems to fit with the description of the son of lawlessness that we have in v. 4 of our passage. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Jesus also told His disciples about the end times. He, too, spoke about the Antichrist and a future abomination of desolations. Shortly before He was crucified Jesus answered a question from the disciples about the end of the age and the sign of His *parousia*. This is recorded in Matthew #24. His description includes an account of a coming tribulation. In v. 16 He says (MATTHEW 24:15), "**So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the readers understand)...**" Here it is, another reference to the abomination and to the coming Antichrist.

Verse 16 (MATTHEW 24:16): "...**then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.**" The worst part of the tribulation, the great tribulation, will occur when this abomination comes to pass. Verse 4 in our text says that this man of lawlessness at this point will proclaim himself to be God.

Verse 5 finishes off our section today (PROJECTOR OFF) with this comment: "**Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things?**" Paul had been in Thessalonica for only a couple of months. Yet he spent time teaching the Christians there about the *parousia*, the second coming and the day of the Lord. He did not regard this subject as advanced doctrine, as something unimportant to basic Christian faith. He saw it as fundamental to basic Christian teaching. For it was connected to the virtue of hope, which is essential to a healthy church.

Our culture often has difficulty in accepting the notion that people can be evil. There are the Stalins and the Hitlers and the Kim Jong-uns. But bad behavior around us is often written off as due to a lack of education or mental illness or bad parenting or poverty. The Bible tells us that evil is a reality in our world. We need to be prepared for it.

The Apostle John wrote in #2 of his first epistle (PROJECTOR ON--- 1 JOHN 2:18) in v. 18, "**Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour.**" There is the big Antichrist who awaits at the end of the age. There are other antichrists like Kim Jong-un who rule in various parts of the world. Then there are little antichrists that we may encounter in the course of our lives.



Sometimes we may even encounter them in churches. The Pope last week removed two top Vatican officials because of significant evidence that exists that they have been involved in child molesting. Martin Buber, a Jewish philosopher, once argued, **"Since the primary motive of the evil is disguise, one of the places evil people are most likely to be found is within the church. What better way to conceal one's evil from oneself, as well as from others, than to be a deacon or some other highly visible form of Christian within our culture? ... I do not mean to imply that the evil are anything other than a small minority among the religious or that the religious motives of most people are in any way spurious. I mean only that evil people tend to gravitate toward piety for the disguise and concealment it can offer them."** (*Good and Evil*)

Perhaps of even greater concern is that we find this evil within our own lives. Adolf Eichmann was a key leader in the Nazi effort to destroy the Jews in WW II. After the war he fled to Argentina. In 1960 Israeli agents found him, kidnapped him and smuggled him back to Israel. There he was put on trial.

Charles Colson reports, **"One witness against him was an Auschwitz survivor named Yehiel Dinur. Dinur entered the courtroom and stared at Eichmann. Their eyes met. After a few tension-filled moments, Dinur broke down and began to shout and sob. Why? Was it the memories of Auschwitz? Was Eichmann evil incarnate? No, as Dinur explained on 60 Minutes, it was the fact that Eichmann was an ordinary man. Dinur saw so clearly that sin and evil are part of the human condition, 'I was afraid about myself. I saw that I am capable to do this... Eichmann is in all of us.'"**

That is the reality that we must confront. We need a certain humility before God. We need a certain honesty with ourselves. For there is that evil within all of us that shows itself in greed and lust and pride and in desire for revenge and selfishness. It is why we must take up our cross daily. It is why we must regularly confess our sins. It is why we need a daily dependence upon God. It is why our hope must not be focused upon ourselves but upon the God who has provided our salvation by faith in Christ and who has promised us a great eternity.