

2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

Introduction

When I open my mobile banking app, very often, the first thing I see is a warning from my bank. It's always to do with scammers. It's a warning that fraudsters are at work. It tells me to be wary of communications that might appear to come from the bank, but don't. Then it goes on to describe how the scammers work so that I can spot their tricks and not be taken in. I have no doubt that you've received the same warnings.

And although mobile phones and banking apps are not the kind of things that Paul would have been familiar with, it's the same kind of warning that he's giving here. We saw last week that Paul is full of thankfulness to God for the church in Thessalonica. Their faith is growing. Their love for one another is increasing. And they're persevering in faith despite suffering persecution. But now we discover that something is threatening to trip them up. There are fraudsters at work. And Paul writes to warn them, so they won't be taken in. This passage contains lots of details that are difficult to understand. But if we keep *that* big idea in our minds, then we'll be able to hear Paul's warning.

So then, firstly, Paul says to the Christians in Thessalonica, don't be deceived. That's our first heading: Don't be deceived.

Don't be deceived

Please look don't again at verses 1 to 2. Paul writes this: **Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers and sisters, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by the teaching allegedly from us – whether by a prophecy or by word of mouth or by letter – asserting that the day of the Lord has already come.**

Just as we might receive letters and emails that seem to come from the bank, the church in Thessalonica had received messages that had seemed to come from Paul. They seem to have taken various forms: prophecy, word of mouth, letters. But they all had the same theme. They asserted that the day of the Lord had already come.

If we think back to what Paul had written in the preceding chapter, we can see why that would be devastating for the church in Thessalonica. Paul had taught them that when Jesus returned, he would bring their persecutions to an end and their persecutors to justice. They would finally enjoy relief from all the troubles they were enduring. And they would be gathered to Jesus to enjoy his glory forever. But if the day of the Lord had already come, as others were claiming, then somehow, they'd missed out. Their persecutions were still very real. There *was* no relief. Their persecutors *hadn't* been brought to justice. And they hadn't been gathered to him in glory. If anything could undermine their faith, then this is surely it.

Imagine the survivors of a shipwreck, huddled together in a life raft, afloat in the middle of the Ocean. Despite all they're going through, they're in good spirits because they trust that a Search and Rescue helicopter is coming to pick them up. Even now, it's on its way. Then they hear it approaching. They can hear its rotor blades. But to their dismay, it doesn't stop. For some reason, it flies straight past. They listen as the sound of the whirring blades fades into the distance. They're left abandoned and alone. All hope gone. It would be devastating.

And that's what Paul fears for the church in Thessalonica. They had heard false reports that the day of the Lord had already come. They were afraid they'd missed it. That they'd been abandoned. And if that were true, then their faith was futile, and all hope was gone. But it's not true, Paul says. The day of the Lord had not already come. He doesn't want them to be unsettled or alarmed. What they've heard is false. Someone's been trying to deceive them. And so, in the verses that follow, he reminds them of what they already know. He gives them a bird's eye view of the shape of history leading up to the return of Jesus. We might describe it as Satan's final rebellion, which is our second heading: Satan's final rebellion.

Satan's final rebellion

Let's read verses 3 to 8. Paul goes on: **Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshipped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God.**

Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things? And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendour of his coming.

Well, this passage raises lots of questions. And I don't have all the answers. But we can get the message if we remember Paul's purpose in writing. He doesn't want the Christians in Thessalonica to be deceived. He doesn't want them to be taken in by fraudsters. They'd heard reports that the day of the Lord had already come. But they can know that isn't true, he says, because the rebellion hasn't happened yet.

He wants them to remember what he'd told them. Christ's return will certainly be unexpected. In his previous letter, Paul had reminded them that the day of the Lord would come like a thief in the night. But nonetheless, while it will be unexpected, certain things

will precede it. And one of those things is what Paul calls 'the rebellion' during which a figure called 'the man of lawlessness' will be revealed.

Numerous attempts have been made to identify this man of lawlessness. In the first centuries of the church, the prime candidate was the Roman Emperor. But when Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, at the beginning of the fourth century, the emperor was no longer such a good candidate. Attention turned to other figures. The rulers of the Vandals, who plundered Rome in the fifth century. A corrupt Pope. And so on. But what Paul's describing here isn't one of the many evil men who appear throughout history but rather the most evil of them all, who will appear at the end of history: the figure that the apostle John calls 'the Antichrist'. He's a figure whose sole purpose is to overthrow God and take his place. He will oppose God and try to exalt himself over God. It's as though Satan will throw all he's got against God in one final act of rebellion.

But notice that Paul can't tell us about this man of lawlessness without immediately telling us of his defeat. He's **the man doomed to destruction**, he says, at the end of verse 3. He may be powerful, but he will not win. He has already been appointed for destruction. It's the first of many assurances Paul gives us that God is in control.

The man of lawlessness is coming, but God is sovereign. For the time being, this man of lawlessness is being held back. He's like a fierce dog on a leash. Paul says that they know what's holding him back. We don't. We can only guess. But whoever or whatever it is, the restrainer is merely an instrument in God's hands, serving God's purpose. For the time being, this man of lawlessness is being held back, **so that he may be revealed at the proper time**. In other words, at the time God has appointed. At a point in history, which God has determined, the one who is holding the man of lawlessness back will be taken out of the way, and he will be revealed. And in his very next words, Paul tells us that this will be followed by his destruction.

Verse 8. **And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendour of his coming.**

We don't need to be anxious about the end times because God is in control. History is in his hands. He's in charge. He has determined how and when the end will come. And everything will happen according to his plan and purpose. And Paul's point is that the Lord will not return until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed

It's like going to an international rugby match. You know you haven't missed the kick off, if they haven't played the national anthems yet. Or like going to the cinema. You know you haven't missed the start of the film, if they haven't shown the trailers.

If the Christians in Thessalonica receive the equivalent of a scam email, claiming that the day of the Lord has already come, they should ignore it. Don't give it the time of day, Paul says.

They don't need to be anxious about missing the Lord's return, because it hasn't happened yet. And they can be sure of that because the *rebellion* hasn't happened yet.

Many questions remain. But Paul has a further purpose in reminding them of these things. He wants them to understand why they're being troubled as they are, by fraudsters. And the reason is there at the beginning of verse 7. Do you see?

For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work...

Satan's opposition to God that will come to a climax at the end of history is already at work in the world today. It's being restrained. It won't reach its full force until the restraining power is removed. But nonetheless, the power of lawlessness is already at work today. And that's where these verses become particularly relevant for you and me. We need to be in no doubt about how Satan works so that, like the Thessalonians, we can stand firm against his schemes. And that's our final heading: How Satan works.

How Satan works

Please look down again at verses 9 and 10. Paul writes: **The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with how Satan works. He will use all sorts of displays of power through signs and wonders that serve the lie, and all the ways that wickedness deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.**

Notice how this lawless one, as Paul now calls him, will mimic Christ. Like Christ, he will come in splendour. He will come with signs and wonders. He will be impressive. But whereas Christ comes in the power of God, the lawless one will come in the power of Satan. At his first coming, the truthfulness of Christ's ministry was attested by the signs and wonders he performed. But *his* signs and wonders will be riddled with falsehood. Like a scammer, pretending to be the bank, he will have the appearance of Christ. But he's a counterfeit Christ who works by deceit. Because that's how Satan always works. It's how he's worked ever since the Garden of Eden. He lies and deceives.

And Paul's telling them this so they can make sense of their own experience of being deceived. It's part of the spiritual battle that's been going on since the Garden of Eden and will continue until Jesus returns. So, this isn't only to do with the end of history. This is relevant now.

For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work...

We experience it every day. It's all around us in the air we breathe. "Rules are there to be broken." People take what they want by force and exploitation. We're told that our problems will fade away if only we had more money, a better car, a bigger house. We must do whatever it takes to get them. We can only be happy if we're free to sleep with who we please and marry who we please. We need to let off steam by going out and getting drunk

with our friends. Ever so subtly, Satan moves our hearts away from God to idolise beauty and success, wealth and prosperity, entertainment and pleasure. The secret power of lawlessness is at work every day, tempting us to cast aside God's law and to worship things that are not God in the place of God. And we all need to be aware of that temptation.

But notice *who* is deceived. It's those, verse 10... **who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.**

The truth is the truth about Jesus and the cross. It's the truth of the gospel. Accepting this truth leads to salvation. The gospel is a message of sin and repentance, of forgiveness and life, that God holds out to everyone. But those whom Satan deceives are those who don't want to know. They refuse to welcome Jesus as their Saviour. They refuse to love the truth. Instead, of their own accord, they chose to love what's false. They believe that the secret of happiness lies in the pursuit of money and pleasure, because that's what they want to believe. And that's why they're perishing. They perish because of the choices they've made. The responsibility for their ultimate demise lies firmly with them.

Yet at the same time, this is from God! He confirms them in the choices they have made. Look at the final two verses: **For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.**

Once again, Paul is affirming the sovereignty of God. God is sovereign over everything. Even Satan and his schemes. And he uses Satan to punish those who reject the truth of the gospel. He sends them a powerful delusion, so they believe what they want to believe. They want to believe what is false instead of what is true. Therefore, God gives them over to the lie they have chosen. They have delighted in wickedness, so God gives them over to what they desire, and their condemnation is secured. It's a solemn message.

Conclusion

Paul's telling us this so that we can be ready for the devil's deception and not fall for it. It's like the message from the bank warning us to be on the lookout for scammers. Paul wants us to be alert to the danger. He wants us to avoid being deceived and losing everything.

The only way to be safe is to love the goodness and truth of the gospel, and to stand firm on God's word. That's what Paul's going to tell us next week, when we come back to finish this section of the letter. But for now, we need to hear the warning. We need to be ready for Satan's tactics, so that we won't be drawn away from the gospel message passed on by the apostles. It's a wonderful message. A message of grace and life. We need to be on the lookout for anyone who would cause us to doubt the goodness or truthfulness of their teaching. If anyone should make claims that conflict with the apostles' testimony, whether inside or outside the church, we need to recognise them for what they are: scammers and fraudsters. And we need to stand firm in our faith in the Lord Jesus. He will be victorious.

And if we stand firm in him, we will be ready for that glorious moment when he returns, and we will be gathered *to* him along with all his people.

Don't let anyone deceive you, Paul says.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, please guard our hearts from the schemes of the devil. Please help us to spot his lies so that we will not fall for them. And please help us to stand firm on the truth of the gospel until that day when he returns, and we are gathered to him in glory. We ask it in his name. Amen.