

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 29 January 2006

No. T0403

Speaker: Mr. Jonathan Hughes

The Christian Life in Difficult Times: 2 Thessalonians 1:1 to 2:12

I was asked to speak to a large group of Christians last summer. Fortunately, I was given plenty of notice so I had more than enough time to prepare. It was nice having the luxury of not having to discipline myself to preparing immediately. Then to my horror the evening I was to give the talk had arrived and I still had not prepared. Worse, I had forgotten to bring my PowerPoint presentation and everyone was in the room waiting to start. What was I to do? Fortunately, at that point, I woke up, badly shaken, but at least with some time to get ready!

Frighteningly, what was just a bad dream for me will prove to be an all too grim reality for billions of people in this world. To wake up to radio reports of millions of people missing. To experience the chaos of the breakdown of civil order, and probably to have to queue for hours to get petrol, and food. It will be the only news story on all the channels with conspiracy theories abounding. But for those who recognise the truth, it will be a time of utter loss. This will be no horrible dream but a terrible nightmare.

It was just this scenario that was so troubling the young believers in Thessalonica. They thought that the Lord had already come for the church and that they had been left behind. They believed they were then experiencing the troubles of the day of the Lord. No wonder they were "shaken in mind or troubled". These were not some unusually timid believers, spooked at the softest fright. They fully understood the implications of not being "caught up together" to be with the Lord, and it really scared them.

Biblical teaching to the Thessalonians was not something of curious theology. It was vitally important, and immensely practical. Sadly today, Satan has all but discredited God's timetable of future events, but as we shall see, these things mattered in the first century. They should still matter in the twenty-first! That is one of the reasons why in this series of talks we are considering the subject "The Christian life in difficult times."

Thessalonica was a busy cosmopolitan port in the first century. Its affluence owed much to the fact that the Thessalonians had been freed from taxes as reward for their loyalty to Rome. It lay on the major road route out of Greece to Rome and on the road to the east of the empire. It was to Thessalonica that Paul came on his second missionary journey, approximately 20 years after the crucifixion of Jesus. He was there for only two to four weeks, teaching for just three Sabbaths, before persecution forced him, along with Silas and Timothy, to flee the city for Berea. Even there though, the unconverted Thessalonians pursued him, and so Paul headed south, to Athens and then Corinth. Paul sent Timothy and Silas back to Thessalonica to find out how the young believers were getting on, and their report back was a source of great joy to the apostle. Their faith, their love, their behaviour made the young church an example to the whole region (1 Thessalonians 1:7).

In 1 Thessalonians Paul wanted to finish the teaching he had for the believers in Thessalonica. So he teaches them that Jesus will return from heaven for all believers. They will be raptured, literally snatched up from the earth to join Him forever. None would be left behind, even those who had died before His return would be raised from their graves, changed in an instant, gloriously like Him. After this had happened, the day of the Lord would occur. God will judge the nations for their rejection of Christ and their sinfulness. For a period of seven years, this world will come to learn the awesome power of a righteous and holy God, and Israel will come to repent of their idolatry that led to their captivity in the times of Daniel. In fact it is Daniel, and Zechariah, who prophesy so much about the day of the Lord, a time also known as the Tribulation. This the Thessalonians now knew. It stands as a great challenge to us today, that these believers who had been saved for just a few months, who had enjoyed Paul's teaching for just a few weeks, knew so much - were so spiritually mature. How many of us have been saved for much longer, and yet know far less!

Shortly after writing 1 Thessalonians, Paul heard from the Thessalonians that they had been unsettled in their faith. Some were teaching that the acute persecutions they were experiencing were the trials of the Tribulation that Paul had spoken about. They had missed out on the Rapture and were now in the Tribulation. There was even supposed to be a letter from Paul himself, teaching this falsehood. So Paul wrote to them a second letter to stop this false teaching before it really took hold. The year is around AD 51. How sad that so early in the history of the church, there were those who would deliberately teach falsehood, to dishonour the name of the Lord, and unsettle His people. What was a trickle then has now become a flood, which we must be on our guard against. The source of this false teaching is all too clear. From the very beginning, the Devil had said "Has God said?" Well yes! God had said. In 1 Thessalonians

5:4: "But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this day should overtake you as a thief." And yet, if these false teachers were to be believed, this is exactly what had happened. This most unwelcome of days had overtaken them, and so God's word would be false. So very often false teaching, about things that, to us do not seem to be so important, has very big consequences. Nothing less than the reliability of the word of God was at stake here. No wonder Paul wrote back to them so soon!

So it is that in verses 1 and 2 we get Paul greeting the church at Thessalonica. "Paul, Silas and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

As with the 1 Thessalonians the authorship is shared with Silas and Timothy. Paul has no need to lay down his apostleship, as the Thessalonians fully acknowledged it, so he can greet them as a brother. The only change from the introduction to 1 Thessalonians is that "God the Father" of the first has become "God our Father" now. To my mind this suggests a deepening realisation of the nature of God. What a privilege it is to be able to approach God as our Father, knowing His love for us as His children.

In the next two verses Paul gives thanks for these believers. "We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all abounds towards each other, so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure (verses 3-4)".

If there was ever a model church, it was here at Thessalonica. Their faith was really growing and this led to true Christian love amongst them. Paul was able to hold them up as an example to others. It is instructive for us that, before Paul wants to teach them something, he commends them. How often our teaching is hard and lacks the warmth of a simple thank you, or well done! It is so much easier to accept teaching from someone when we know they appreciate us and love us. I wonder, if Paul was writing to us today, would he be able to hold my local church up as a model for others to follow? Is there a growing faith and a vibrant love for one another? My teenage daughter challenged me recently.

One evening she came to me and said "Dad, do you think we are doing enough for the Lord?" I wondered what was coming next, whilst hastily thinking of some defensive answer. "It's just", she continued, "that in a book I was recently reading, the Christians in another part of the world are really being persecuted and are suffering, and yet when one of them came to the West, he found things so lukewarm." We have generally speaking settled down to a peaceful coexistence with the world, quite at home in either the church or the world, wanting the friendship of both. However, things were completely different for those at Thessalonica. To be a part of the church was to invite open hostility from the world around. So for the rest of the chapter Paul prays for their preservation.

"Which is manifest evidence of the righteous judgement of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer; since it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed. Therefore we also pray always for you that our God would count you worthy of this calling, and fulfil all the good pleasure of His goodness and the work of faith with power, that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ" (verses 5-12).

Paul states here the primary purpose of the return of the Lord Jesus will be to display His righteousness. At the time of writing, the Thessalonian believers were being persecuted and the world was causing them trouble. In that day, the believers will be rewarded whilst the world is troubled. So God ensures that all is put right. It is important for us to understand this principle in God's work. Asaph, the writer of Psalm 73, struggled with just this theme. He saw those who were righteous struggling, whilst those who ignored God apparently prospered. "Why bother?" was the unspoken question of his heart. It was not until he came into God's presence, in verse 17 of that psalm that he is enlightened as to the way God works. Jeremiah asks the same question, in Jeremiah 12:1: "Why do the wicked prosper?" Well, here we have the answer. In the fullness of time each one will receive the proper recompense for their own actions.

Let us be quite clear. It is an affront to the righteousness of God that those who disobey Him can prosper. In His own time He will deal with this. This ought to give us cause to pause and examine our own actions. But for those who live in obedience to God now, what a wonderful promise is given. Rest. The persecutions the believers in Thessalonica were suffering were producing patience and endurance, qualities that God will reward. So in a coming day God will bless those who suffer for Him now, and they shall receive a reward. For sure, it will be far more than we deserve, as God is a God who loves to give, but it will be on a righteous basis, not some sort of favouritism. Dear listener, there

are times now when we too may ask the question, "Is it worth it?" Others around may not seem to be as committed. Faithfulness only seems to cause difficulty and loss, the siren call of an easy life is hard to resist. Faint not, all done for Him now will be cause for Him to display His righteousness in a day to come. And God will have His vengeance! There is a proper price to pay for those who do not obey the Gospel, for those who cause trouble for His children. Evil doers will receive justice, a full price paid for their disobedience. Perhaps today we have lost this thought in our preaching the Gospel. We offer an invitation to the lost to be saved, whereas God issues a command to obedience. He has done all that is necessary for our salvation. All that is left for us to do is obey. And yet how terrible the price for those who reject the forgiveness of God! Everlasting destruction, an eternal separation from God, is for those who reject Him now. Not everyone will go to heaven in the end, and we certainly do not cease to exist once we die. Just as God's love for us has provided a way of salvation, so His love for His Son will demand the highest penalty for rejection of Jesus as Saviour. These are weighty issues that require a sober consideration in our lives. It really is the most serious thing to live, and continue to live, in disobedience to God.

In the light of this, then, the Thessalonians were to live lives that were worthy of the highest calling. In the day to come, Jesus was to be admired in them. Yes that's right, "in them"! We can well understand if Paul had said that Jesus would be admired by them. Surely even now, He should be so precious to our hearts that we admire Him. But when He returns to reign, Paul says, this world will look at us and admire Him! The charge was made against ancient Israel that "the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you" (Romans 2:24). In all our unfaithfulness and disunity, surely a similar charge must be levelled against us. The challenge for today must be that we live now in such a way that we hardly need to change much in a coming day, when others will admire Him when they see us. Of a truth, the church will be a truly glorious body, when He has dealt with it, removing all that is like wood, hay, stubble.

In chapter 2, Paul meets head on the problem that was worrying the Thessalonians. "Now, we ask you brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come. Let no one deceive you by any means; for that day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshipped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God" (verses 1-4).

In the scheme of events on God's calendar we come first to the Rapture, when all true Christians will be called up out of this world, to share His house. After this has happened, the day of Christ will come. Often referred to as the day of the Lord, or the Tribulation, it is preceded by two things. There will be a general apostasy, that is, an abandonment of the faith. To some extent we can see this happening even now. The authority of the Bible is constantly undermined. Its teaching is reinterpreted because it conflicts with modern practice in the world. God is reduced to something we can understand, and the miraculous is scoffed at. However, in the lives of individuals the true Christian faith is still held. Once these individuals are removed, the abandonment of true Christianity, which now is a steady flow, will become a torrent. Secondly, the lawless one will reveal himself, in direct opposition to God. Revelation refers to him as the Beast. He will offer peace and security, answers to all the problems that afflict our world. But he will demand to take the place of God in this world. Obviously he must have achieved a position of power before he is revealed. This begs the intriguing question "Is he alive today?"

The final section of today's study, from verses 5-12, gives further details regarding this time of tribulation. Verses 6 and 7 speak about "what is restraining" and "He who restrains" this lawless individual, and the ethos he represents. The church and the indwelling Holy Spirit have had a vital purifying role throughout the centuries. Whether we look at what believers have achieved in terms of lawful reform, or whether we look at the personal level, where a rude joke may be curtailed when a Christian enters the room, believers have a vital role in maintaining the morality of the society in which they live. However, after the rapture, the church will no longer be present on earth, and the Holy Spirit will no longer permanently indwell people, returning to the transient presence He occupied during Old Testament times. Unrestrained, the iniquity of man's heart will be revealed in all its awfulness.

There can be no doubt who is behind the man of lawlessness. Satan himself will put his man forward, confirming his validity with power, signs and lying wonders. It ought not to surprise us that Satan is able to use the miraculous to deceive. He did it in the court of Pharaoh, to undermine Moses. He does it today, to fool the gullible, and distort the Christian faith. He will do it to devastating effect in a day to come.

But this lawless one will be limited in his power. So it will be that he will be destroyed after seven years "by the breath of His mouth and ... with the brightness of His coming" (verse 8). One word from Jesus will expose the Beast's tissue of lies and Jesus' brightness will reveal all to be but counterfeit illusion.

Before we close we must note the solemn warning of verses 11 and 12: "And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness."

There may be some who think that they can reject Jesus now, believing they have an insurance policy. If they see these things happening they can choose to believe then. This is foolish disobedience. God demands obedience now - it is for our own good. Today is the time to be saved. Those who deliberately reject His call now will not necessarily have another chance. There came a time when God hardened Pharaoh's heart. He no longer had the opportunity to repent. Those who do not accept Jesus as Saviour now, awaiting a more convenient time, may be waiting for a chance that will never come.

As I learnt at camp, "Now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2).

Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1. Large Print copies of this document are also available upon request.