

March 18/19, 2023

## **We Shall Not Be Shaken**

*A People of Hope Series*

**2 Thessalonians 2:1-12**

Pastor Bryan Clark

Well, it seems to me there are plenty of things to be concerned about these days. So, what should we talk about? Should we talk about Russia? Maybe we should talk about China, or North Korea. Maybe we should talk about the economy. Now we need to talk about the banks. Maybe we need to talk about violent crime. Maybe we need to talk about death and disease. Or maybe we need to talk about the environment. Or maybe we need to talk about the almost complete breakdown in trust in the institutions we need to be able to trust. There's no shortage of things to be concerned about. It has created what I would refer to as a culture of despair. I've been a pastor for 40 years, and I've never seen anything like this: the level of despair, the level of hopelessness, the level of anxiety, the level of fear, the level of anger. There are so many people that are almost completely incapacitated and unable to live life on a daily basis. So, what is it that we need to understand and believe, in order to not be shaken in a culture of despair?

Well, that's what we want to talk about. If you have a Bible, turn with us to 2 Thessalonians, Chapter two. Last week Josh opened 2 Thessalonians, chapter one. He told us this letter was probably written shortly after the first letter, but it's certainly evident that the persecution on these believers is increasing. So just to be clear, we're not just saying life was hard for them. We're saying they were being persecuted because they were followers of Jesus. Now in the midst of all of that, some false teachers have convinced them of something that's not true, and Paul has to address that. Verse 1:

**Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.** (\*NASB, 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2)

So he's talking about **the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering**. I would say, certainly, this is a reference to what we talked about in 1 Thessalonians, chapter four. It's helpful to know that, grammatically, the **coming** and the **gathering** have to refer to one event. When we studied that in 1 Thessalonians chapter four, that passage ended with the words: *Therefore comfort one another with these words.*

But some false teachers have convinced these Thessalonian believers, "I don't know how to tell you this, but Jesus has already come, and you missed Him!" Now, just imagine this. This is your comfort—the **coming** and the **gathering**. Now, this is an ancient culture without all of the communication we have. So they're fairly isolated in Thessalonica, and someone has convinced them, "By the way, I don't know if you know this or not, but Jesus already came, and apparently you missed Him," which then means they're subject to the day of the Lord, which probably, because of the level of persecution that they are enduring, seems to ring true to them.

The day of the Lord was introduced in chapter five of 1 Thessalonians. Ryan did an excellent job of explaining that. It has a rich Old Testament history, but at the end of the story, Jesus returns, and He will make things right. He will fix the broken. He will make straight what is crooked, and He will judge those who have taken pleasure in wickedness.

Now imagine if your comfort was in the coming and the gathering, and someone convinces you, for whatever reason, that this little fledgling group of believers in Thessalonica missed it, and now they are subject to the day of the Lord. This is the concern that Paul is addressing. It may have come to them, he says, through **a spirit**, just probably referring to a prophetic utterance. Somebody apparently was prophesying that they had missed it. Or he says **a message**, which was probably something like, “I talked to Paul, and Paul said...”, or a *letter*.” There was always a problem with counterfeit letters floating around in the first century. That is probably why, at the end of this letter, Paul actually says, “I’ve signed it with my own hand,” which is his way of validating, “This is a letter from me.”

As a result of believing the false teachers, Paul says they have been **quickly shaken from their composure**. The word **shaken** is a very graphic term. It was used, for example, to describe a ship in the sea that had broken loose from its mooring in the midst of a storm. So, imagine the ship is in the sea and it's anchored down. But now this huge storm comes, and the wind and the water from the waves, in the chaos, it's broken loose from its anchor. And now it is being tossed to and fro. It's either going to sink, or it's going to be blown out to sea, or it's going to crash on the rocks, and it is utter chaos! That's the word **shaken**. The NASB translated it **shaken from your composure**. I don't really care for that. The Greek word is *mind*. I don't think it's talking about their composure. I think it's talking about their anchor was their belief—their mind—of what he had told them is true. He had given them the truth, and that's what they were anchored down to. But now they have broken loose from that truth, and they've believed something that isn't true, so now it's utter chaos.

The other word is **disturbed**. The word **disturbed** means something like *to be agitated*. One of the commentators translated it *jumpiness*. I actually kind of like that. They've become so tense, so nervous—they're so jumpy—that they're jumping at every little thing that happens. And Paul is wanting to help them regain their sense of quiet and peace. Verse 3:

**Let no one in any way deceive you, for it *will not come* [meaning the day of the Lord] unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God.** (Vs. 3-4)

This is where this text gets difficult. Actually, it gets quite confusing. I am certain that there are certain people who have all of their end-times theology—what we call eschatology—all perfectly in place, all diagrammed, and they would say, “This isn't confusing at all. This plugs in here...this plugs in here...and this plugs in there.” But it might be helpful to know that most New Testament scholars acknowledge that this is an extremely confusing text. Many would say, “Of all of Paul's writings, this is the most difficult to understand.” I mentioned before that certainly *the coming and the gathering* is connected to what we talked about in 1 Thessalonians, chapter four. And when we

went through that text, I tried to be true to what we're told in the text, and not read a bunch of extra stuff into that text that isn't there.

After that weekend, I received a very respectful email from someone who had concerns over some of the things I said, which is fine. It was followed by, "I sent a copy of your sermon to someone who really knows his Bible." (*laughter*) Okay, actually I take no offense at that. There's a lot of people way smarter than me, a lot of people that know their Bible way better than I do. I'm happy to learn from these people. But what's implied in that is, "If you knew your Bible better, you could figure it all out." What's implied by that is, "If you knew your Bible better, you'd realize there's one eschatological camp that has it right." So, everyone else is obviously wrong.

Here's the problem. For 2000 years, people who really know their Bible—biblical scholars who love Jesus, who believe in the authority of Scripture, who apply proper hermeneutics—have completely disagreed on their conclusions related to end-times theology. If that's true, and it is, then we should approach a text like this with a great deal of humility. Is it really reasonable to think a preacher in Lincoln, Nebraska, in 2023, has finally unlocked the code and figured out what scholars for 2000 years have not been able to figure out?

So there are a couple of points to be made here. One is, to me, this goes to trust. As one of your pastors and as one of your Bible teachers, I want you to trust me. And part of that commitment means if it's clear, I'll tell you it's clear. If it's not clear, I'm not going to pretend it's clearer than it is. That's part of our relationship of trusting one another. But probably a bigger concern is so many Christians and churches get so distracted in trying to figure all this out, they lose sight of the mission, which is abundantly clear as to what we're supposed to be doing.

Several months ago, I had lunch with a couple of friends I hadn't seen for a long time, and I was looking forward to a nice lunch together. One of them happens to be an elder in another church. As soon as I sat down, the very first thing he said to me was, "Hey, you're not one of those Amillennialists are you?" If you don't know, Amillennialism is just one of many eschatological camps. So I said, "No, I don't think I'm one of those," to which he said, "Good, because they are really the problem."

"Why, I didn't know that. That is news to me." Here all these years, I've thought Satan is the problem. (*laughter*) I thought the devil is the problem. I thought sin is the problem. I thought evil is the problem. I thought wickedness was the problem. I thought people, living in despair, that don't yet know Jesus, was the problem. I had no idea that the problem was our fellow believers who simply have a different end-times theology. I didn't know that. You'd have to imagine the devil sits in the corner and laughs as we busy ourselves throwing stones at one another while the world goes to hell. That's the problem! We get distracted about things that really aren't clear, and lose sight of what is abundantly clear—our call to a mission. So, with humility, let's look at the text and see what we can figure out.

What Paul is saying is that the coming and the gathering has not taken place, so the day of the Lord has not yet come because there are two things that need to happen first. One he refers to as **the apostasy**—the great rebellion. This is a mass movement away from God. But we're still left with some questions. How much apostasy qualifies as *the great apostasy*? So, in the 20th century, we

had entire nations that kicked God to the curb and adopted an atheistic worldview. That was a massive apostasy. But, apparently, it's not *the* apostasy. So how much apostasy is necessary? I think it falls into the category of, "You'll know it when it happens." But honestly, that's not terribly clarifying.

The second thing is **the man of lawlessness will be revealed**. It could also be translated "*the man of sin*," probably the same as *the antichrist*. He's called **the son of destruction**, which is exactly what Judas is called in the Gospel of John. The man of lawlessness *will be revealed*. It's very interesting that in this text, Paul uses a number of words to describe the man of lawlessness that he also uses to describe the coming and revealing of Christ. So, in chapter one, verse seven, Jesus *will be revealed*. In chapter two, the man of lawlessness *will be revealed*—same word! It carries the idea that the man of lawlessness will be a fake Christ, a counterfeit Christ, an antichrist, a pseudo-Christ. So, you'll have the pseudo-Christ, and you have the true Christ. We are told that the pseudo-Christ will set himself up as God, as an object of worship above all other objects of worship.

As a matter of fact, Paul even tells us he will **take his seat in the temple**. The Greek word for **temple** here is not the word for the temple's structure, but rather a reference to the Holy of Holies. So it does raise lots of questions. Would the first readers—these Thessalonians—would they have thought of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem? Perhaps they would have. But that temple was destroyed in AD 70. So, if they thought that, it was destroyed before the man of lawlessness was revealed. Maybe it's a rebuilt temple someday. Maybe. But that's not really what it says. So, it seems to be somewhat of a mystery. These are Gentiles, and they were surrounded by pagan temples of the Greek gods. So maybe what they would have understood is more of an imagery: that the man of lawlessness will take his seat in the temple, declaring himself to be God. There are even those who think the temple may be a reference to the *church*, because the church is called a *temple* in the New Testament. So, it would be someone who would come from inside the church and lead people astray. That particular idea has led to quite a bit of conjecture and naming of names, and who people have thought that might be over the years. And to be honest, that hasn't been terribly productive. So we're not quite sure of the details there. Verse 5:

**Do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things?  
And you know what restrains him now, so that in his time he will be revealed.**

(Vs. 5-6)

So here is where a lot of the question arise. I would say verse 5 is a mild rebuke. They should not have been shaken, they should not have been disturbed, because when Paul was with them he explained all this to them. He explained about the apostasy, he explained about the man of lawlessness, and it should have been clear enough that they should have realized that hasn't happened. The frustrating part of this is why doesn't he share it with us? Why did he share these clarifying details with them in person, but he doesn't share it with us so we're left with all of these questions? In verse 6, he's talking about what is called the restrainer. The restrainer is a *what* in verse 6, a *who* in verse 7. So, "**what**" and a "**who**". Whatever, whoever it is, **restrains** this great apostasy, **restrains** the man of lawlessness until God is ready for the moment for that to happen. So there is a lot of speculation. Who or what is the restrainer? At one time it was thought it was one of the emperors. Then, it was thought maybe it was the Roman Empire that was able to hold back this great evil. Then it was thought maybe it was just the rule of law. Then it was thought,

well maybe it's the church; maybe it's the Holy Spirit; maybe it's one of the angels. There's even a view that maybe it's the preaching of the gospel. In other words, what restrains the end is until the gospel is preached around the world, and so the mission to preach the gospel is the restrainer. So, who knows? But what's interesting in verse 6 he says, and you know what restrains him now. Apparently in Paul's conversation with them he told them who it was. He told them what it was. So, again, we're left with this frustration, "Why didn't you tell us? Why did you tell them but you haven't told us and we're left to try and guess and figure all of this out?"

In addition it seems confusing if the man of lawlessness is an actual human, why was it necessary to restrain him in the first century when apparently, 2000 years later, he's still not on the scene. If it's actually a person—he didn't even exist in the 1<sup>st</sup> century—what are you restraining? So we're left with all of these confusing details. It's almost as if Paul is saying, "You don't need to know this." Why didn't Paul tell us? You'd have to conclude it was intentional. Perhaps he didn't want us to get caught up in all these details and miss the real point, which we're going to discover in a moment. Verse 7:

**For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; (so there's a degree of this that was already happening...that was the persecution) only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way.**

So at one point—yet future—on God's time table, the restrainer is removed. Then what happens?

**Then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming; (Vs. 8)**

So on God's time table, the restrainer is removed. The man of lawlessness is revealed and now it seems like it's going to be this cosmic battle, but it actually is no battle at all because simply with the breath out of the mouth of Jesus, the dragon is slain. And that is the end of his great appearance. Verse 9:

**...that is, the one [the counterfeit Christ] whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved. (Vs. 9-10)**

So, ultimately, the man of lawlessness is a puppet of Satan. It's Satan's power; it's Satan's work. So you have this cosmic battle between God and His Christ with Satan and his counterfeit Christ. Jesus will defeat the counterfeit Christ **with the breath of his mouth**, but those who have rejected the truth, will be easily deceived and led astray. They will follow the apostasy. They will follow the miracles. They will follow the counterfeit Christ because they are deceived. Verse 11:

**For this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness. (Vs. 11-12)**

So what he's saying is the counterfeit Christ, who is some sort of a puppet for Satan, with all of his claims, with all of his power, with all of his miracles, will easily lead the masses astray because they have rejected truth. They will be deluded. I assume that deluding influence is the man of lawlessness, which then creates this mass apostasy which, in the end, leads to judgment for those who have taken **pleasure in wickedness**. And I would take **wickedness** to mean those who have been part of the apostasy.

All right. So, let's put the whole thing together, and here's what we *can* know: The coming and the gathering has not yet taken place. It will then usher in the day of the Lord, which is yet future. But it can't happen until the apostasy—the great rebellion away from God—and the revealing of the man of lawlessness—who will come forth as a counterfeit Christ—and who will demand to be the object of worship, and with great miracles will convince the masses. But when the true Christ comes, **with the breath of his mouth He will slay this dragon**. End of story! And Jesus wins fully, and completely!

So if you put all that together, here's what I think the text is saying. In the midst of all the stuff, in the midst of all the confusion, all the trauma, all the storms, all this junk that's going on, God's got this...God's got this! He's in control. He's sovereign. He's got the restrainer in place. He's not going to be removed until God removes him. And at the end of the day, God's man—the true Christ—defeats Satan and his guy, and God wins fully and completely. No matter what happens, no matter how crazy, no matter how chaotic, no matter how much the storms rage, God's got this! Everything is under control. Jesus wins, and for the believer, the future is glorious. So that's what we believe, and we anchor down to this truth.

So, in the midst of the most difficult storms, everything's going to be okay. If we don't understand and believe this, we become no different than the rest of the culture. We're full of anxiety. We're full of despair. We're full of hopelessness. We're full of fear. We're full of anger. We get caught up in the same emotions that define the rest of the culture. And when that happens, we have no witness. If it seems like our ship has broken loose from the moorings and is being tossed to and fro in the sea, in the midst of the storm, why would anyone on another ship that's in chaos, jump off and board our ship, if our ship seems to be just as chaotic as their ship? There's nothing about that that seems appealing. But what if, in the midst of the storm, and all these ships are blowing and crashing into the rocks, and the storm is raging and the waves are high and mighty, what if in the midst of all of that chaos, there's one ship that seems to be anchored down. What if that ship seems to be a refuge in the time of the storm, and everybody on that ship seems to be quiet, peaceful, courageous, and at rest, and people say, "I don't know quite what's going on, on that ship. All I know is I want on that ship. Perhaps in times like these, our greatest testimony is that, in the midst of the chaos, in the midst of the storm, in the midst of the turmoil, we come together as a church. We understand and believe the truth, and we declare to the culture around us we will not be shaken. We will not! Not only for our sake, but for the sake of the people around us that do not yet know Jesus. That's what it means to be a people of hope. That's what it means to be the people of God. May that be true of us!

*Our Father, we celebrate truth: that You sit on Your throne, that You are sovereign, that You've got this, and that everything is going to be okay. At the end of the story, Jesus wins. and those of us that believe, win with Him. Our future is glorious! Lord, may we as*

*a church be the ship that is anchored down. May we be a light in the darkness, that others might come to know Jesus. This we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.*

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## WINTER 2023 // WEEK 10

### Life Group Questions

A People of Hope // March 18-19, 2023

We Shall Not Be Shaken // 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

## Introduction

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We live in a time when relative truth seems to have the strongest influence. But just as Paul encouraged the Thessalonian church, we are responsible to measure what we hear only by the Truth of the Gospel and the character of God. As you wrap up this session of Life Group together, make it a point to encourage each other to love and pursue the Truth.

To think through the main ideas in the sermon and prepare for your discussion together, we invite you to look over all the questions on the following pages and write your thoughts down before you meet with your group. Due to preferences over a wide range of groups, we do not expect you will cover every question each week.

## Warm Up *(Suggested time: 30 min)*

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We've heard and learned much about what it means to be *a people of hope* throughout this session. Give each person a chance to share something they are more hopeful about after going through this study in 1 & 2 Thessalonians.

## Getting Started

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Transition into group discussion.

- 1) Open group discussion with prayer. Here are a few potential prayer items:
    - a. For the Spirit of God to lead you in truth
    - b. For the fruit of the Spirit to be cultivated in your lives
    - c. For grace to hear and apply what the Spirit says to you
  
  - 2) Choose someone to read the passage aloud for the group.
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## Study Questions *(Suggested time: 40 min)*

- 1) What example or encouragement from the sermon this week has stirred your thinking since you heard it?
- 2) In writing 2 Thessalonians, Paul is clearly concerned that these young believers are being deceived and led away from the truth of the gospel and the mission they were given to share it. **If Paul were to write a letter to us today, what are some deceptions and lies he might pinpoint as distracting us from the truth?**

What are the biblical truths to counteract those lies?

How can you support each other to walk in the truth and stay on mission to share the gospel with those around you?

- 3) Given that Paul spent only a few weeks teaching and grounding this church in the gospel, **why do you suppose he devoted so much time reminding them that Jesus is returning and He wins?**

What did Pastor Bryan remind us of concerning the importance of Jesus's return for living today?

- 4) Consider how you responded recently to a news report or theory about our uncertain future (culturally, politically, financially). **Share your response, if you're willing.**

As you consider your response, what does it say about your belief that God is still in control?

In general, when you face times of crisis, what value system rises to the surface in the way you respond?

How can the members of your Life Group help you to stay steadily committed to the Truth when times of crisis arise?

## Personal Spiritual Exercises

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Just like physical exercises help strengthen and stretch our bodies for healthy living, these spiritual exercises are meant to move us spiritually in ways that may be new so we might experience inner growth. Since God longs for us to experience Him with our whole selves—mind, body, spirit—we invite you along each week to strengthen your souls with suggestions and prompts. **Next week in Life Group, take a few moments to share how the Lord may have used this exercise in your life.**

**Prayer Focus:** 2 Thessalonians 2:2-3 reminded us that we are not to be shaken in our faith or deceived by lies. You are responsible for the way you handle truth so make that a matter of prayer this week.

1. Pray a simple prayer of openness like, “teach me Your ways, O God”.
2. Ask God to reveal the times you resist the truth of His Word.
3. Confess your resistance and need for God to train your heart to do His will.

**Scripture Focus:** Read and reflect on Paul’s prayer for the church in Corinth in 1 Corinthians 1:4-9 each day this week. You may like to change it up each time by reading in a different version or listening on audio. Notice the words and phrases that teach you about the sovereignty of God and the truth of the gospel.

## Prayer *(Suggested time: 20 min)*

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A significant part of “coming together” is being open and honest with our lives. Sitting in a group of people for prayer may be new or it may be familiar to you. If you would rather not pray aloud when it is your turn, feel free to pray silently and then say “Amen” aloud signaling the next person in the group to pray. Whether or not you choose to verbalize your prayer, everyone is a participant in sharing this time before God together.

Take a few moments to prepare a prayer request. What did the message, working through the above questions or the discussion cause you to notice about your own relationship with Jesus? Would you be willing to share your prayer request with the group?