

2 THESSALONIANS: Restrainers of Lawlessness

by Ray C. Stedman

Before Jesus Christ left this earth he said that he would return, but that before his return there would be a time of difficulty and widespread lawlessness. The seams of society would come apart, and disorders, violence, and riot would be so widespread that men's hearts would literally fail them for fear of the things that were coming on the face of the earth. And Jesus predicted the character of the age that would follow his ascension into heaven, and said that it would culminate in a time of great tribulation "such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be," {Matt 24:21b RSV}.

Now when Christians of Thessalonica were going through their time of trouble, many of them thought they were in that time of tribulation. It was to respond to this question that Paul wrote this second letter. In the first letter, he wrote to comfort them in their distress over their loved ones who had died, but this letter is written to correct certain misunderstandings they had about the "Day of the Lord," and this time of trouble.

There are three chapters in this little letter, and each one is a correction of a very common attitude that many people still have about disturbing times. The first chapter is devoted to a correction of the attitude of discouragement in the face of difficulty. These Christians were undergoing persecutions and afflictions and although they were bearing up with good grace, nevertheless, many of them were getting discouraged. "Why try any more?" they were saying; "There's no justice. Everything is always against us."

And to counteract that attitude, the apostle reminds them that the day when God would repay them for the difficulties they were going through was coming. Paul says (1:5-10):

This [your steadfastness] is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be made worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering – since indeed God deems it just to repay [or to recompense] with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant rest with us to you who are afflicted, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at in all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed. {2 Th 1:5-10 RSV}

Although we in this country have not gone through much in the way of persecution, there are other parts of the world where intense persecution breaks out from time to time. If we lived in one of these places or times, we would appreciate the meaning of these words. Paul is reminding these people that God has not forgotten them – that he is going to straighten things out at last. When people go through a time of great persecution, they say, "Isn't there going to be a time when this injustice is corrected? How can a man like Hitler get by with putting six million Jews to death? Won't things ever get straightened out?"

And Paul says, "Yes, a day is coming when a three-fold repayment will be made."

1. First, to these believers who are undergoing such difficulty, the very trials that they're undergoing, Paul says, are making them worthy

of the coming kingdom of God. That aspect of suffering is what makes us able to take it. It puts strength in our muscles and sharpens our moral equipment so that we're able to endure.

2. And then, he says, there will be a day of recompense to the "unbelieving." There will come a time when God will set them straight, when those who have misused their opportunity of service in life will face a righteous judge who knows their hearts. His vengeance will have two aspects – destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord.

Hell is often pictured as a fiery furnace where people are dragging around in chains, being continually burned and never being able to do anything about it. The Bible does use some symbols of hell that reflect that idea, but hell is really exclusion from the presence of the Lord. God is the source of everything that is good – beauty and truth, life and love, joy, peace, grace, strength, forgiveness. All those things come only from God, and if a man won't have them, then God finally says to him, "I've been trying my best to get you to take these, but if you won't have them, then you must have your own way." And they are shut out from the presence of the Lord. And if they're shut away from the source of all goodness, then what's left? The opposite – darkness and death. That is what they had been dishing out, and that is what they will finally obtain. God will let them have their own way, and when they get it, it will be the last thing they want.

3. And then the Lord himself will be repaid on that day. He will come, Paul says (1:10):

... to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at in all who have believed, {2 Th 1:10b RSV}

Notice that he doesn't say he is going to be glorified *by* his saints. But as the world sees the wisdom and the might of the God who can take a self-centered human being, full of anxieties and fears, and teach him how to walk in quietness and joy, rid of his guilt and his fears – a man as God intended a man to be – that is the greatest display the universe will ever see. And that glorifies God!

In Chapter 2 you have another reaction to disturbing times – fear. We read in these opening words (Verses 1-2):

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our assembling to meet him, we beg you, brethren, not to be quickly shaken in mind or excited, [really, the word is *troubled*] either by spirit or by word, or by letter purporting to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. {2 Th 2:1-2 RSV}

These people had evidently received a letter from somebody signing Paul's name, telling them that in this terrible time of trouble all they had to look forward to was worse times. But Paul says, "don't be shaken in your mind." Literally, don't be shaken out of your wits by what's happening.

I think many of our young people today are fearful, and striking out against society because they don't know that God is in control of events.

"Well," Paul says, "in my last letter, I wrote to you about our gathering together unto Jesus. The Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout and the voice of the archangel and the trumpet of God. The dead in Christ will be raised, and we who remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. That's our gathering together unto him," {cf, 1 Th 4:16-17}.

But now he says that the day of the Lord, this terrible time of judgment, is not the same as our gathering together unto him. But having introduced the subject of the day of the Lord, he goes on to tell them what it will be like and how they can tell it's coming. (2:3):

Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, {2 Th 2:3a RSV}

I don't like that word, *rebellion*. Literally translated, the word means "the departure" which of course could mean a departure from the faith, and thus, a rebellion. But I think it means the departure he just talked about – the departure of the church behind the scenes to be with the Lord in his second presence on earth.

And then he says (2:3-4):

and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of perdition, 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. {2 Th 2:3b-4 RSV}

Now this is an amazing passage. When Jesus was here, he offered himself to the Jewish people as the promised Messiah, and most of them rejected him, so that John begins his gospel by saying, “He came to his own home, and his own people received him not,” {John. 1:11 RSV}. Jesus also had said to them, “I have come in my Father’s name, and you do not receive me; if another comes in his own name, him you will receive.” {John 5:43 RSV}. Thus he painted the picture of one who would appear to be a deliverer to the world, whom Paul calls the “man of lawlessness” and “the son of perdition.” This character would be an utterly godless individual, and yet so remarkable that people would actually accept him as a divinely empowered being who could deliver them from their difficulties. (It is very interesting that statesmen, historians, politicians, and others are saying repeatedly today that we need a single worldwide leader who can unite all the various world forces, and bring us out into harmony and peace.) And he will be manifest, says Paul, in the temple of God.

When Paul wrote this letter, in about 52 A.D., the temple in Jerusalem was still standing, but in 70 A.D. it was destroyed, and there has never been a temple in Jerusalem since. In some way, however, the Jews will find a way to reconstruct another temple on the site in Jerusalem where the Dome of the Rock is now. And it is in that temple that Paul says “the man of lawlessness” will take his seat.

Paul has a further comment on the subject (2:5-8):

Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you this? And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. 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. And then the lawless one will be revealed. {2 Th 5-8a RSV}

There was something at work which he called the mystery of lawlessness. One thing that has

puzzled statesmen all through history is that they can never solve the basic difficulties of the human race. Why is it that we can come to a certain point in building good government, with widespread blessing and help for all, and then it all seems to crumble and fall apart? This has been the pattern of history. General Carlos Romulo, who was the Philippine Ambassador to the United States, said, “We have harnessed the power of the atom, but how can we bridle the passions of men?” That is the problem – this lawlessness, this spirit of rebellion against authority which is always the greatest danger to any nation.

But Paul says that something is restraining it. Something through the course of the centuries has been restraining lawlessness, preventing total anarchy. And Jesus told us what that is; he said to his disciples, “You are the salt of the earth; ...” {Matt 5:13a RSV}. “You are the light of the world,” {Matt 5:14a RSV}. Salt prevents corruption from spreading: light dispels darkness, and it is the presence of the people of God on earth that restrains the forces of evil. This is a remarkable thing, yet it is the truth. Wherever godliness diminishes – sometimes because of forces within the church as well as without – a spirit of lawlessness takes over.

But Paul says here that the restraint is going to be taken out of the way, and then the whole flood of human evil will be let loose upon the earth. And when that happens there will come the greatest time of trouble the world has ever seen. Yet, Paul says, it will come to an end (2:8-12):

The Lord Jesus will slay him with the breath of his mouth and destroy him by his appearing and his coming. The coming of the lawless one by the activity of Satan will be with all power and with pretended signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are to perish, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends upon them a strong delusion, to make them believe what is false, so that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness. {2 Th 2:8b-12 RSV}

This is the characteristic of the spirit of lawlessness – deception – and it must, and will, be destroyed by the coming of Jesus, the Son of Man who destroys the destroyer of earth.

Chapter 3 deals, finally, with the conduct of these believers in the face of difficulty and pressure. Paul was correcting here a third very widespread attitude that many have in times of difficulty – what we might call “fanaticism.” There were certain people in Thessalonica who were saying, “Why not just wait until he comes? Why should we concern ourselves about making a living? Let’s just live and enjoy ourselves, and wait for his coming.” So Paul says to them (3:6):

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is living in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. {2 Th 3:3 RSV}

Because, he says (11-13):

For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work in quietness and to earn their own living. Brethren, do not be weary in well-doing. {2 Th 3:11-13 RSV}

As we get nearer to the time of his coming, Paul says, remember that your responsibility is to keep on living normally and working with your hands, taking care of your responsibilities. The Christian life is a normal, natural life, fulfilling all the responsibilities that God places upon us. So Paul rejects the attitude of fanaticism and says that we are to give ourselves to the task that God has set before us.

In this little letter, discouragement is answered by looking to the day when God sets everything straight. Fear is answered by remembering that God is in perfect control of human events, and things will take place just as he has predicted they will take place. And fanaticism is rejected with a specific command – to be busy at the Lord’s work.

And then Paul closes with a very tender gesture. He says,

I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the mark in every letter of mine; it is the way I write. {2 Th 3:17 RSV}

What is? The words with which he closes the letter:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. {2 Th 3:18 RSV}

And if you look at the letters of Paul, you’ll find that they all close this way. He always took the pen from his secretary and wrote in his own hand, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.”

The application of this letter to each individual heart is simply this: God’s people are called to be restrainers of lawlessness.

How often are you operating as a restraint to lawlessness?

The measure in which you oppose lawlessness will be the measure in which there is no lawlessness in your own heart, and your own life.

Prayer:

We thank you, our Father, for this letter that reminds us that the hope of the church has not grown dim, and that the very events which Jesus Christ predicted are finding some degree of fulfillment even in our own time, and are moving toward the predicted end. We reaffirm our fidelity and loyalty to the One who has loved us and has given himself for us, and who will come again to be acknowledged by every individual. In the hope of that, we thank you in Jesus’ name, Amen.

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