

Holding on to the Hope of the Church

2 Thessalonians 2:1-4

Getting the wrong information can have a dramatic impact on the course of someone's life.

That was certainly the case for a man named Walter Dixon according to an article written about him back in 2019.

Walter was a veteran of three wars serving at the tail end of WWII, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War.

Just five days before shipping out to Korea he was married.

It is hard for me to wrap my mind around what that must have been like to have to say goodbye to someone you have just committed your life to.

I can only guess as to the grief Walter's wife must have felt when the military informed her that her husband had been killed in action.

In the middle of a battle Walter witnessed a group of five fellow soldiers get hit with an artillery round and he went to try and help.

One of the men had sustained serious injuries to his legs so Walter took off his field jacket which had letters from his wife in a pocket and wrapped it around the legs of the injured man.

As he was returning to his fighting position he was captured by a unit of Chinese soldiers and brought to a POW camp in North Korea.

Unfortunately, the position of those five wounded men was struck again and they were all lost beyond recognition.

Since Walter's field jacket was discovered among those lost it was assumed that he was among the casualties

For thirty months he endured harsh conditions with little food.

He tried five times to escape but was recaptured each time.

Things were fairly bleak but he managed to stay alive until the end of the war and made his way home.

When he got there he learned that his wife had remarried and had moved on with her life.

While that must have been hard news he says in the article that he understood on account of her being told that he had been killed.

Interestingly Walter ended up remarrying a woman named Aldine May Fenton the lady who wrote his

obituary in the local newspaper when he had been reported killed in action.

Talk about a roller coaster of emotions and events that happened because the army gave out the wrong information.

[Having and acting on the wrong information can have an enormous impact on our lives. That is why God has given us the gift of His Word. Time and again when the devil has worked to get people to believe untrue things, the Holy Spirit has empowered and inspired God's servants to point people back to what is true. That is what we find in our text this morning **2 Thessalonians 2:1-4**. As these believers are enduring a period of persecution some people had made their way into the church and were telling them untrue things about the return of Jesus. Since Christ's coming again is the ultimate hope of the church it is no surprise that Satan would want to cast doubt upon that hope. This week and next we are going to look together at how the apostle Paul under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit points the Thessalonians and us back to the truth and encourages us to keep holding on to the hope of the church. This morning we are looking at verses 1-4 which have two very important lessons for us in that regard. Lesson number one is this...]

Point #1 – Believers are called to think rightly about the coming of Christ. (Verses 1-2)

It is crucial to the perseverance of the saints, especially in times of trial and persecution, to have an unwavering conviction concerning the return of our LORD.

Now, I know that the subject of end times can be a challenging one. I know there is a variety of positions, I know some people are super passionate about it and others haven't thought much about it at all.

I want to say at the outset here that I believe each one of the three major theological positions regarding the last days affirms the hope of the church.

When we are talking about the differences between premillennialism, amillennialism, and post-millennialism we are talking about legitimate positions that all agree on the importance of the coming of Jesus.

If you are sitting here this morning asking 'millennial what now?' I get that the subject can be rather overwhelming.

Our goal for this morning is simply to do our best in understanding the text that is before us.

To do that we need to come to this passage as careful listeners applying good bible interpretation skills.

If we can do that then we will have the big picture right and that I believe is the intention of the apostle as he writes to these believers on this incredibly important subject.

The first three quarters of verse one makes the subject quite clear. (Verse 1a stop at 'him')

The word that is translated 'the coming' of the LORD Jesus is the exact same as the word used in 1Thessalonians 4:15.

In that passage it is extremely clear that the coming of Jesus and 'our being gathered to Him are the same event.

If you have been around the church awhile you have probably heard the word 'rapture' in describing this event.

That comes from the Latin translation of 1 Thessalonians 4:17 which reads in our English bibles as being 'caught up in the air' with all the saints and Jesus during His royal procession to the earth.

That is what is in view here which means that Paul is talking here about one event not two.

Now let's read **verses 1-2** and hear why Paul is raising this subject.

The phrase 'we ask you, brothers' at the end of verse 1 has a sense of urgency to it.

This could be translated as 'we beg you, brothers'. This is a matter of great concern to the apostle.

As they are enduring hardship he does not want them to be 'shaken in mind'.

The word for 'shaken' is used to describe earthquakes and also ships being torn away from their anchor point by heavy wind and waves.

What happens to buildings in earthquakes? They fall down.

What happens to boats that get separated from their anchor points and are tossed about in the wind and waves? They often get wrecked.

That is his concern for the faith of these believers.

Look at what is causing the threat of shaking the minds of these believers!

It is a teaching that has been introduced to the church 'seeming to have come from Paul and his gospel co-workers.

That was a huge problem in the early church. False teachers trying to pass things off as coming from the apostles when in reality it did not.

Listen, things that lead people away from the true gospel of Christ often imitate the real deal in order to try and gain credibility.

That is why the early church took such care in authenticating the writings that are included in the New Testament.

That is why Paul takes the time to write to these believers, to combat the lie concerning Jesus' coming.

The lie according to the end of verse 2 was that 'the day of the LORD' that is Jesus' coming and gathering his people had already come.

[Are there any kids with us this morning who take the bus to school? It's been pretty cold the last few weeks waiting for the bus hasn't it? If you are waiting outside for the bus and someone tells you that you have missed the bus or that the buses are canceled for the day are you going to keep waiting?]

That is the idea of what is being told to these believers. They are enduring in the faith despite suffering for Jesus and someone comes along saying, "You missed His coming!"

Talk about 'shaking' or 'alarming' the mind.

If Jesus came and saints suffering for His sake got left behind why in the world should they bother to carry on.

That is Satan's goal in false teaching. It is to get people to give up or turn their backs on truth that is essential to salvation like Jesus' return.

That is why Paul is so concerned here, that is why it is so important to think rightly about the hope of the church because if we don't we lose all reason to press on.

There are bedrock issues of the Christian faith that need to be held onto like an immovable anchor.

Thinking rightly about the coming of Christ is one of those anchor points.

[We may differ in minor ways about the how and when of Jesus' return and our being gathered to Him, but we must not waiver from the future hope of that event. If people tell you it has already happened don't believe it. If they say His coming is just a spiritual thing know that the bible teaches a real physical event in which Jesus sounds the trumpet and graves are opened and those that remain are transformed and we really will live with Jesus body and soul forever. Because that is true we always have a reason to continue on in the hope of our faith. That is true no matter what happens, and we can see that in verses 3-4 which show us that...]

Point #2 – Despite the full opposition of evil Jesus will come. (Verses 3-4)

No matter how bad thing may appear upon the earth Christ is going to keep His promise to return and take His people to Himself.

Knowing what is at stake Paul writes this at the beginning of verse 3. (Verse 3a stop at 'way')

That is pretty emphatic.

No matter who tries to convince you of something different, no matter who tries to get you to lose hope in the coming of Jesus, no matter how they try to do it, don't fall for it.

Why is that? I mean how can we be sure that we haven't missed out?

He tells us in **verses 3-4.**

How should we understand the words 'that day'?

That has to be the same day he is talking about at the end of verse two which is what he is talking about in verse 1.

That day is the coming of Jesus and the gathering of His people to Himself.

Paul says, you can rest easy knowing that you haven't missed out because some things are going to happen before Jesus comes for His people.

One thing that will happen is 'the rebellion'.

The word translated 'rebellion' here is where we get the word apostasy from.

Apostasy means to abandon or reject one's belief system.

Commentators are a bit divided on exactly what this entails, it could mean a significant number of people who carry the name Christian will turn away from the faith, or it could mean a significant increase in rebellion against the LORD in the world generally speaking.

In the time and place in which we live either one of those possibilities or a combination of the two is fairly easy to imagine.

I want to issue a word of caution here.

It would be easy to presume we are living in the time described here and look at the world as say, "It's hopeless, the world is toast so why bother preaching the gospel to a world that won't listen anyway."

Brothers and sisters we are called to be salt and light until Jesus comes.

We don't know what the Spirit has in mind in terms of revival. These truths never stopped Paul from preaching rather the opposite.

If we really believe Jesus will come and gather us, then we should do all we can to be serving His kingdom in the present come what may.

Paul's whole point is to encourage them to keep on keeping on because Jesus' coming is still in the future. Not only will this 'rebellion' take place we also see here that 'the man of lawlessness' will be 'revealed'.

That is a man who is completely opposed to God's law.

This is the man many theologians call the antichrist.

Paul describes him here as a particular individual.

We'll look further at him next week, but what is already clear from this passage is that his identity will be unmistakable.

For as long as I have been a Christian I have heard people label different religious and political figures as the antichrist.

As a pastor people will ask me, "Do you think so and so is the antichrist?"

Here is what I always say, "We don't have to guess. It will be plainly obvious who he is."

Look at what it says here!

He will 'exalt himself against every so-called god or object of worship'.

That means he will say the only acceptable religion will be the one he creates.

That is something that will be impossible to miss.

'He will take his seat in the temple of God proclaiming himself to be God.'

If we look at how the phrase 'temple of God' is used in the bible Paul either means the temple in Jerusalem or he is referring to the church.

Personally I lean towards a temple in Jerusalem but that is not nearly as important as what 'the man of lawlessness' does here.

He proclaims himself to be god, the implication being that he expects everyone upon the earth to worship only him.

That is pretty hard to miss.

All of this strikes me as a strange kind of comfort to these believers.

Far from trials and persecution being evidence of missing out on Jesus' coming and gathering his people, the apostle is essentially saying things will get worse before Jesus comes.

The full force of evil will be completely opposed to the church and that will be the sure sign that Jesus' coming is right around the corner.

If we hear that as discouraging then we are missing the point and that will be made much clearer in our text next week.

What he is saying is that despite all of this opposition Jesus will keep and build His church until He comes to gather His people from every part of the globe and make all things new.

The point is no matter how powerful the antichrist may appear he cannot stop the real King of kings from reigning over all the earth.

[Quick show of hands, how many people here have every wished you could stop time. Either the current day you are enjoying is just so great you want it to last longer or what is coming the next day is something you would rather avoid. Have you ever stayed up late because going to bed means tomorrow will come faster? How many people have ever been successful at stopping time?]

It is true the antichrist will have a great deal of power and influence.

It is true life will be hard for those who love Jesus.

But just as surely as no man has the power to stop the sun from rising tomorrow, no man—including the antichrist—has the power to keep King Jesus from coming for His people.

That brothers and sisters is the hope of the church.

Let us think rightly about it.

God will keep his people through every trial and tribulation and Jesus will gather us to Himself and even though the forces of hell will muster every bit of power they have, Jesus will come.

I love what Matthew Henry writes concerning these verses, he says, "Jesus' coming in all the pomp and power of the upper world in the last day to execute judgment upon all has been the faith and hope of all Christians in all ages of the church."

That is our hope too.

Know it, hold on to it, and let no one deceive you into thinking otherwise because it is a glorious and true hope that will keep us in all things.