

“Countdown to the Second Coming”
2 Thessalonians 2:1-3
(Preached at Trinity, July 12, 2020)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. In Chapter 1 Paul wrote to encourage the Thessalonian Christians. They were suffering at the hands of the lost who despise Christ and hate the Gospel. They were enduring and their steadfast faith was remaining strong. Paul encouraged them that this was a sign of God's righteous judgment—that they were being considered worthy of God's kingdom. It was a sign of their acceptance of the Gospel of Christ.
2 Thessalonians 1:5 NAU - "*This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering.*"
2. The actions of the wicked, on the other hand, were evidence of God's judgment upon them. They would be repaid with eternal destruction, forsaken by God.
2 Thessalonians 1:7-9 NAU - "when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, ⁸ dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power"
3. Knowing God's righteous judgment Paul never ceased praying that Christ would be glorified in them. This is consistent with his first letter to the Thessalonians.
1 Thessalonians 5:23 NAU - "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."
4. Now as we enter **Chapter 2** Paul's attention again turns to Christ's return. Besides the Book of Revelation and the Olivet Discourse in the Gospels, Paul's two letters to the Thessalonian church provides some of the Bible's most detailed instruction on the Second Coming of Christ. At the same time, Paul's words here in the second chapter are some of the most difficult to interpret.
 - A. In his first letter Paul had stressed that the return of Christ would arrive suddenly and unexpectedly.
1 Thessalonians 5:2-3 NAU - "For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. ³ While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape."
 - B. The unexpected nature of Christ's return demands sober watchfulness.
1 Thessalonians 5:4-6 NAU - "But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; ⁵ for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; ⁶ so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober."

- C. Apparently the church had misunderstood Paul's teaching -- that sudden and unexpected meant immediate. There are two schools of thought on interpreting **Verse 2**.
1. Is Paul saying that the Thessalonian church was shaken because some were teaching that the return of Christ had already come. In other words, is the text saying "the day of the Lord has come" . . . and gone?
 2. Or, is Paul saying that the Thessalonian church was shaken because some were teaching that the day was upon them, that it had arrived? "The day of the Lord has come." KJV – "that the day of Christ is at hand"
 3. There are good arguments on both sides. There were indeed some in Paul's day who were teaching that the resurrection had already occurred and there was nothing else to expect.
2 Timothy 2:16-18 NAU - "But avoid worldly *and* empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness, ¹⁷ and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, ¹⁸ *men* who have gone astray from the truth saying that the resurrection has already taken place, and they upset the faith of some."
 4. In the context of this letter the second argument seems to fit best. Paul is writing to correct the thinking that the day was at hand, that there were only days or at most weeks remaining.
 This teaching on the immediate nature of Christ's return had left the Thessalonians anxious and nervous.
2 Thessalonians 2:2 NAU - "that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed"
 The word for "shaken" is from a word referring to the tossing of the seas –
5. Some had taken Paul's words about the unexpected nature of Christ's return and had applied their own interpretation that was disturbing the church.
- A. It was interfering with their duties of life. There is always an important balance to maintain.
 - We must be vigilant and watchful while living with a sense of expectation of the second coming. We must maintain an eternal perspective, setting our minds on things above. Scripture always maintains a sense of urgency.
Revelation 3:11 NAU - "I am coming quickly; hold fast what you have, so that no one will take your crown."
 - But we must not neglect our earthly responsibilities.
 - B. Some had been so impacted by talk of the imminent return of Christ that they had given up on their duties all together. They quit working and simply sat idle while they waited. They were also getting involved in the business of others that did not concern them. Paul describes the situation in **Chapter 3**.
2 Thessalonians 3:10-14 NAU - "For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. ¹¹ For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. ¹² Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread. ¹³ But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary of doing good. ¹⁴ If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame."

6. Their problem was faulty thinking. It was an issue of doctrinal error. They were being deceived. **2 Thessalonians 2:3 NAU** - "Let no one in any way deceive you"
7. Paul reminds them that there were certain conditions that had to take place before Christ returns. Paul had previously instructed them on this – **Verse 5**. It reminds us that sound doctrine must be continually be taught.
9. There have always been those who have tried to set the date for the return of Christ. They have diligently searched for signs that would usher in His return. Our own generation has not been immune to this.
10. The context of the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24 is the declaration of Jesus regarding the destruction of the Temple.

Matt 24:2 - "And He said to them, "Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down."

 - A. The disciples presumed Jesus was speaking about the end of the age. They could not imagine a world without the Temple. They wanted to know when this would take place and what signs would indicate that the time had come.

Matthew 24:3 NAU - "Tell us, when will these things happen, and what *will be* the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?"
 - B. Jesus answered with a focus on both the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD as well as His return at the end of the age—two separate events.
 1. He told them that when they looked and saw Jerusalem surrounded by armies the time for the destruction was near. They were told to flee to the mountains. Those who heeded the warning were spared.

Luke 21:20-21 NAU - "But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then recognize that her desolation is near. ²¹ "Then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains, and those who are in the midst of the city must leave, and those who are in the country must not enter the city;"
 2. Then Jesus told them events that would take place between the first and second coming of Christ – wars and rumors of wars. It is interesting that many see this as a sign of the end but that is not what Jesus said.

Matthew 24:6-8 NAU - "You will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not frightened, for *those things* must take place, but *that* is not yet the end. ⁷ "For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes. ⁸ "But all these things are *merely* the beginning of birth pangs."
 3. He also predicted a terrible time of persecution as well as a time of apostasy, a terrible falling away.

Matthew 24:11-13 NAU - "Many false prophets will arise and will mislead many. ¹² "Because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold. ¹³ "But the one who endures to the end, he will be saved."
 - C. But there was one certain sign that would mark the Second Coming of Christ.

Matthew 24:30 records that the ultimate and greatest “sign” will be when men look up and see Christ coming.

Matthew 24:30 NAU - "And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory."

1. The ultimate sign preceding the destruction of Jerusalem was when they looked up and saw the approach of the Roman army
Luke 21:20 – “And when ye shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that the desolation thereof is nigh.”
 2. Just as Jerusalem would not ultimately know the time of the end until they saw the Roman army approaching, we will not know the ultimate time of the coming of Christ until we look up and see Him
Matthew 24:31 NAU - "And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other."
11. In other words, the ultimate sign is no sign at all. The sign will be the event itself. One of the clear teachings of Christ is it would come at a time when life is going on as usual.
Matthew 24:36-39 NAU - "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone. ³⁷ "For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah. ³⁸ "For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, ³⁹ and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away; so will the coming of the Son of Man be."
 12. One thing is sure. The day you think Jesus *WILL* return is the day He will not return. This is because His Second Coming will be a time we do not know.
Matthew 24:42-44 NAU - "Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ "But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. ⁴⁴ "For this reason you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think *He will*."
 13. This we do know. Jesus will come at an unexpected time but also an expected time. In other words, we cannot know whether or not it will be tomorrow, or perhaps today, but we must live with expectation and we must be ready. The Biblical position is it could occur at any time but not a specific time. We must maintain vigilance.
1 Thessalonians 5:4-6 NAU - "But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; ⁵ for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; ⁶ so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober."
Matthew 24:42-44 NAU - "Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming."
Matthew 24:50 NAU - "the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect *him* and at an hour which he does not know,"
 14. After all of this instruction about the unexpected nature of Christ's return and the absence of a sure sign that His return is upon us, Paul gives two conditions that must occur before Christ returns.
 - A. First, there will be a great apostasy from the faith. We'll look at this more next time. It is hard to quantify. What will be the scope of this great falling away? We know that not one of the elect will be lost but will persevere to the end. But what does this great falling away mean for the visible church? When the false are removed from the genuine will the remaining remnant be quite small?
 - B. Second, Paul speaks of the arrival of the Antichrist, an individual arriving whom Paul describes as the ultimate expression of lawlessness.

15. There is a third sign that will precede the Second Coming of Christ that our Lord revealed. The Gospel must be preached throughout the world so that all of the elect will be brought in.
- Matthew 24:14 NAU** - "This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come."
- Acts 1:7-8 NAU** - "He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; ⁸ but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth."
- A. The excitement today should not be in wars and rumors of wars or other signs but in the great spread of the Gospel
1. The great Gospel endeavor is continuing.
 2. 100 years ago the Bible had been translated into only 300 languages
Today it has been translated into over 1400 languages.
- B. Instead of so much emphasis today being directed towards looking for signs of the end and reading books on the end times, we should be spending these energies spreading the Gospel. Jesus is not going to return until each and every one of the elect are brought to salvation.

Conclusion:

1. It is easy to fall into the trap of setting dates or looking for signs. Even our Reformed forefathers fell into this.
Richard Phillips notes: "Martin Luther was certain that the pope was the Antichrist and that the return of Christ was therefore imminent. It was a settled conviction among virtually all the Puritans that Christ was on the brink of returning, with most agreeing on the year 1650 as the most likely date. Jonathan Edwards was persuaded that the Antichrist would arrive in 1866, followed by the church's age of glory with Christ."¹
2. Our best posture regarding the Second Coming of Christ is to maintain vigilance and expectation, while maintaining a keen sense of our duty before Christ to live a life of holiness and service to Him.

¹ Richard D. Phillips, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, eds. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, Reformed Expository Commentary, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015), 322.