

About Christ's Return

DAVE BAST

I was recently doing a crossword puzzle and came across a clue that consisted of a square-root symbol with the number 666 in it. The correct answer was: The root of all evil. Maybe you have puzzled yourself over that strange number in the book of Revelation—the mark of the beast; or you have wondered about the anti-Christ, who is mentioned in 3 John, and who or what that might be. Well, today on *Groundwork*, we are going to think about this mysterious personification of evil, but from the letter of 2 Thessalonians. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. Scott, we have come now to the second of a brief, three-part series covering a brief letter—the letter of Paul to the Thessalonians—the second letter that he wrote to that church. We talked a little bit in our opening program about 1 Thessalonians, which we also did a series on; and now we are kind of following that up with part two, sort of a PS that Paul sent sometime later to the same church, dealing in some ways with some of the same issues.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; you know, one of the things that came out of particularly the Protestant Reformation in the 16th Century, Dave, was a practice that became known as *lectio continua*, and this was particularly for preachers, where the idea was, we are just going to read through scripture, and we are going to teach scripture, whatever comes. We are going to preach our way through scripture; and one of the advantages of *lectio continua* is that you don't get to skip the hard parts.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And there are some parts of the Bible that are more difficult than others, some that are a little easier to understand; some that are almost scandalous. We did a series not long ago on the book of Judges...there is an entire book of the Bible that seems like kind of a tough one to accept. We don't want to skip the difficult passages, and it is a good thing because there are parts of 2 Thessalonians, too, that if it were up to us, we might try to skip because there are some very interesting things in this chapter, as we are going to see in this program.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely; so, we often take this approach in *Groundwork*. If you are someone who is just new to the program, you might be wondering why we are always talking about series, but we are usually working our way through a book...sometimes a part of a book. Once in a while, we will dig some themes out of scripture that we want to focus on; but as you say, Scott, it has some advantages. You don't have to wonder about what you are going to do next, you know. Well, you just keep going. If you address something controversial,

it is not like you are trying to ride a hobby horse; but, you also pointed out the big disadvantage: You cannot cherry-pick, and just sort of skip the obscure...the difficult...the offensive parts of the Bible, and there are plenty of those, including the one we are coming to today in 2 Thessalonians Chapter 2, which contains one of the murkiest passages in the whole New Testament. So, let's dive right in, and let's start out with something that is a little bit easier, just the first couple of verses.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Paul writes: Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers and sisters, ²not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by the teaching, allegedly from us, whether by prophecy or by word of mouth or by letter, asserting that the day of the Lord has already come. So, Paul is saying: Don't let anybody fool you into thinking that I said, or any of...Timothy or any of my colleagues have said by word or by letter that Jesus already came and you missed it somehow. Don't be unsettled by that. We didn't say that, is what Paul is saying.

DAVE BAST

Right; you know, there is some interesting things to think about here, or point out. Apparently, there must have been some people who were trying to copy Paul, or sort of lie about what he had said to them; that they claimed to have secret, inside info. We know that there were people who followed Paul around...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And sort of taught a contrary gospel, but the fact that there were some who might even have counterfeited one of his letters, which is very interesting, as we will see in the next program, the way Paul closes this little book of 2 Thessalonians.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, yes.

DAVE BAST

So, he is coming back to the big theme of 1 Thessalonians, which is the second coming, and he is trying to straighten them out. Apparently, there were people in the church who were a little bit too hyped up over the idea of Jesus' return. You might ask: Why would they think that it had already happened if life was just going on? That is kind of a puzzling issue.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Although, it has happened again in history. In fact, not too long ago in the history of the Church, back in the 19th Century, so less than 200 years ago now, there were a number of movements, including a group known as the Millerites, and some others who were very sure Christ was going to come back right around like 1848 or something. I think they even fixed a date in October, or something of that year; and so people were all expecting that that was going to happen. Well, of course, as has happened with other predictions of Christ's return, the date came and it went and nothing happened; and so, what they said was: Well, he did come back. It was just kind of secret, and it was spiritual. So, it happened. So, we are now living in the Millennium already, but you just couldn't see it. So, this has happened before, where people have said Christ came back secretly...quietly; and well, that has unsettled the Thessalonians apparently. Some, we are going to see in the final program, that Paul warns them not to be lazy or idle, that could have been partly a result of this. I mean, if you think Jesus has already come, well, then why do I have to stay busy...I mean...or try to live my life for God? I will just sort of chill out and take it easy. Others may have just been alarmed that they missed it...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And maybe we missed the kingdom. Paul says no; that is not the truth at all; and in fact, he is going to now go on...and now things do start to get murky...he is going to go on in 2 Thessalonians verse 3 to lay out some things that he said have to happen first, and they haven't happened yet.

DAVE BAST

Right; yes, it is a pretty simple argument, Paul says. Don't get all bent out of shape because you think it has happened already, or maybe there were people also who said: Well, it's going to happen tonight, or: We are right on the verge of it; so, just drop everything and look up in the sky. No, Paul said. There are certain things that will happen before Christ's return, and they haven't happened yet. So, that is pretty straight forward, but what is puzzling are the things that he says haven't happened yet.

So, here is how Paul explains it:

³Do not let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day (meaning the day of Christ's return) will not come until the rebellion occurs, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. ⁴He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshipped, so that he sets himself up in God's Temple, proclaiming himself to be God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁵Do you not remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things? ⁶And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. ⁷For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work, but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so until he is taken out of the way. So, two things, Paul says, are going to happen. There is going to be some sort of a rebellion or an apostasy, which might be even in the Church, where people just kind of refuse to live God-glorifying lives; and then there is going to be some figure who is going to come and set himself up as God, opposed to the true God...maybe saying: There is no God, but I am God; and is going to try to make people worship him instead of the one true God. So, those things have to happen first, Paul says, and they haven't happened yet, so don't worry. Jesus did not come back yet because this has to happen first. That much is clear, but what is this all about? That much is not so clear.

DAVE BAST

Right; so, this man of lawlessness that Paul calls him...some other readings in other manuscripts describe him as "the man of sin", or the lawless one, we might say...it is a human figure who is absolutely kind of the incarnation of evil, as Jesus was the incarnation of good. That is what anti-Christ actually means, by the way. It doesn't mean somebody who is just against Christ, it means a counterfeit Christ...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; somebody who denies that Jesus was the Christ, but I am...

DAVE BAST

Right, yes...a pretended messiah; and the mark of the beast in the book of Revelation, that is where that 666 comes in, that is probably a symbolic number; it might refer to somebody's name, some people have said Nero, the terrible emperor. It could just be that it is a perversion of 777, which would be the full number of perfection. So again, this idea that this is a substitute—this is a fake—this is a counterfeit. It is a human leader. It is not a demon, but a human leader who just is so evil, and he is in the world now, Paul says, but something is holding him back...something is restraining him; and we wonder what *that* might be, too.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and of course, there have been lots of evil figures in history: Nero and Caligula and Stalin and Hitler and Pol Pot. There have been lots of evil people in history; none of them have probably been *the* evil one, because Paul says that the fullness of this is being restrained, by God, we assume; but one day, God is going to let the cork, really, out of the bottle for a little while before the end comes. It is best not to speculate about this; but one thing we do know...actually, what is interesting, in 2 John and 3 John, which is the only place in the Bible where the word *anti-Christ* occurs, it is in the plural. There are going to be quite a few would-be

evil figures before the final end comes. So, best not to speculate on this, but also best to know the main point, Paul is saying here, is that if you know that hasn't happened yet, then Christ has not returned yet. So, don't be taken in by those who say he has already come back, because some stuff is going to happen that nobody is going to miss when it does, and only then will Christ return.

DAVE BAST

So, that is what is going on right now, but Paul also wants to talk a little bit about what is going to happen when Christ does return, and that is where we will look next.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and this second program on Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians; and we are in 2 Thessalonians Chapter 2. We are doing one program per chapter of the three chapters of 2 Thessalonians in this series, and we have just been seeing that Paul is addressing a problem, as he often does. We always say we are reading somebody else's mail when we read the epistles; and Paul very often is responding to a letter he got from the church to whom he is writing, or a report he got from the church, which we don't possess anymore, but you can kind of figure out somebody told Paul: Hey, some of our brothers and sisters in Thessalonica are in a tizzy. They are panicking because somebody told them that you said Jesus already came back in secret. So, Paul writes them and says: I did not say that. I have never said that. Anybody who says I said that is faking you out. It is a lie. Jesus won't come until some very dire things will happen, and we were just looking at that in the first segment.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and they haven't happened yet, is Paul's point, which is interesting for us to reflect on. Things are not as bad as they could be in the world. God is still here. God restrains the worst excesses of evil. God is protecting everybody to some extent; and he does that through human means. We could be thinking of government; where government is good, that restrains evil. We could be thinking of the Church. Jesus said you are salt and light in the world. You are to serve as a force that stops corruption and that spreads the truth. So, yes, that hasn't happened yet, but someday it will happen, and wow; that is going to be a terrible time.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And this is kind of scary...almost...that we shouldn't get wrapped up in it...we shouldn't be scared, because we know that God's got this thing, but some of this is a little scary, but it is also full of hope. So, let's pick it up, 2 Thessalonians 2:8:

And then (Paul says) the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth, and destroy by the splendor of his coming; ⁹but the coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with how Satan works. He will use all sorts of displays of power through signs and wonders that serve the lie, ¹⁰and all the ways that wickedness deceives those who are perishing. They will perish because they refuse to love the truth, and so be saved. ¹¹And for this reason, God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie; ¹²and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth, but have delighted in wickedness.

DAVE BAST

Clearly, Paul wants us to be encouraged by this. One thing we might note is, when this lawlessness breaks out or when the anti-Christ kind of comes in a supreme form, it is not going to last all that long because, Paul says, almost instantly Jesus is just going to overthrow him, and he is not going to do it in some big battle in the Middle East with tanks and helicopters. He is going to do it, Paul says, with the breath of his mouth...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

In other words, with his Word. God just speaks the Word and it happens.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; or Jesus just kind of goes: Huh...pooff, just like blowing out a match, and he will be gone. It reminds me...some of our listeners may be familiar with the Harry Potter series of books, or the films...and the great evil figure in Harry Potter is Voldemort; and at the end of the last book and at the end of the last movie, finally Harry Potter kind of overcomes Voldemort. Voldemort actually issues a curse that ricochets and comes back on himself; but what is interesting is that when Voldemort finally dies, he just sort of disappears into ashes that blow away on the wind. It was as though he was never all that substantial in the first place...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He just sort of blew away on the breeze when it was all done; and that is what Paul is saying here. This lawless figure...he is going to be powerful. He is going to have some bells and whistles and some tricks up his sleeve, and people are going to believe it; but when Jesus comes back, he is going to be revealed as having been nothing all along. So, it is easy for people to get a little fearful from a passage like this, and we have all heard some preachers who like to do scare tactics to scare people into faith...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But we are not supposed to be afraid by what Paul says here will happen some day, we are supposed to take comfort from the fact that, for Jesus, this will be like nothing, because he has already won the victory.

DAVE BAST

There are also bad things that happen to people here. We saw that, really, in Chapter 1 in the first program of this series, that there is a reality that some, according to the New Testament, will be lost, just as many will be saved; and Paul says here that the reason they are lost, though, is not because of some predetermination by God or some sort of trap that they are in, but because they refuse to believe the truth. People apparently will have a choice, Paul says, even at the end; and those who were taken in by the lies and the tricks and the fake miracles of evil really have only themselves to look to. They refuse to believe.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Although Paul does have that very curious line in verse 11, that God will send them a powerful delusion...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So they will believe the lie. So, that could make it sound like God's fault...

DAVE BAST

Which is also biblical, though. I mean, you see that again and again and again: Pharaoh hardens his heart, and finally God hardens it. It is as though God finally says: Okay...if that is the way you want to go, I'll confirm you in this.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; which is why verse 10 is important, too...the one right before that...where he says: They already refuse to see the truth, which was right in front of their eyes—the truth of God's kingdom, the truth of God's grace. So, they already were saying: I don't want to have anything to do with God; so God will say: Fine. C.

S. Lewis said that. We have quoted this line before: For those who in this life refuse ever to pray: Thy will be done; God will, in the end, say: Fine; *thy* will be done. You don't want to have anything to do with me; that is the way it will be, now and forever. It is a horrible reality; it is a sad reality. As we said in the previous program, we are not supposed to take delight in the idea that anybody will finally be lost, but there it is. Some will be lost. Maybe a whole lot more are going to be saved than we think; we should hope that...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But, that there could be a final divide is something that we see all over the New Testament.

DAVE BAST

So, there is a lot that is still unclear about all of this...a lot that has been said...a lot more could be said, but let's leave it at that. Jesus is going to come, and very quickly and instantaneously evil will blow away. It will turn to dust and be no more; and there is a very practical and wonderfully positive message in this chapter as well. We will turn to that before we close out the program.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and here is the conclusion of the chapter—2 Thessalonians Chapter 2. Paul writes: ¹³We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters...you know, let me back up. I left out a very important first word in that verse: *But* we ought always to thank God for you. So, Paul turns from all this chaos and lawlessness to a wonderfully positive word of thanksgiving for *you*, brothers and sisters loved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. ¹⁴He called you to this through our Gospel so that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁵So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; so, as you said there, Dave, a bit of a relief there. It is nice to come up to that little conjunction *but* because we didn't want another *and* at this point. It has been sort of a lot of heavy stuff in this second chapter of 2 Thessalonians. Now we turn to the good news, that there is a Gospel and it has been proclaimed to them; and they have been saved: You are the firstfruits; you are among the earliest believers, Paul is saying. There will be more that will follow; and what good news it is to know that we are held by the hands of the God who has history in his hand, who has won the victory; and, Paul says, because of that we share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. What an amazing thing. We think about the glory of God and the glory of Jesus, and that we get to share in that already now. What a great promise.

DAVE BAST

So, his encouragement, after his thanksgiving for them, is stand firm; just, you know, don't panic. Hang in there! Hold fast to the truth—to what you heard me teach. You heard me teach both in person...by word of mouth...and in these letters that I have written to you. And, that reminds me incidentally of something we didn't mention earlier in this program about that man of lawlessness business. Paul says: Well, you know all about it because I told you about it. Our reaction in reading, as you said, this one-sided conversation is, well, we weren't there. We wish we knew more; but, we have enough, Paul says. We can hang in there. We can stand firm.

I remember reading once that in 1939 the British government published a famous poster...you still see it sometimes referred to or even reproduced...addressed to the British public that said: Keep calm and carry on;

and that could be a perfect summary of what Paul says here in this encouragement.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is interesting that here, too...and we have seen this now in both of the first two chapters, really, of 2 Thessalonians, but we see it elsewhere, too...how much Paul puts on the notion of how important it is to believe the truth, as opposed to those who refuse to believe the truth, and therefore believe the lie. I wonder if we think about that and the importance of that as often as we do, that there is...in history...there is finally a truth and there is finally falsehood. The truth is that there is a God who came to this world through Jesus Christ, his Son, and has brought good news in the Gospel to the world. That is the truth; and how important it is to believe that truth. You know, these days, Dave, we hear a lot about so-called fake news, and we know that there are a lot of people on social media who peddle falsehood, whether it is a small lie about a politician or a policy or a program, or a larger-scale lie. There is just a lot in the wind these days, right about now, in the early years of the 21st Century about truth and fiction; what to believe, what not to believe; and maybe this is a time to therefore kind of cut through all that and remember that as Christians it is awfully important to know the truth—the ultimate truth—and then all the little truths that spin out of it; because for Paul, that is the difference between salvation and being lost.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely; I mean, listen to what he says here. This again is the great paradox of the Gospel, of God's grace and our responsibility. It runs right straight through the whole New Testament; but he says: God chose you...he gives thanks to God because they are loved by the Lord...because God chose them to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, *and* through belief in the truth! So, there it is...this double thing. Are you saved because God chose you; because God gave you his Spirit? Yes. Are you saved because you believe the truth? Yes. Yes, to both. So, we can never bifurcate this and sort of divvy it up. The temptation is always to just emphasize one or the other. It is all on you or it is all on him, there is nothing you can do. No. It is always in the New Testament both/and. As you said, Scott, it is so important for us to give our minds and hearts to the truth, not to believe the lie.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is a great blessing, that we have been actually enabled to believe the truth, because without God's help, we too would not believe the truth. It is, indeed, all grace; and so, even though this isn't the end of the letter...indeed, we have another program in this series on the third chapter...but nevertheless, even though this chapter had some difficult things in it, at the end of 2 Thessalonians 2, at verses 16 and 17, he ends with a great blessing:

¹⁶May our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father who loved us, and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, ¹⁷may he encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.

I think that is as good a place to end this program as any.

DAVE BAST

Amen to that. Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork* today. We are your hosts, Dave Bast and Scott Hoezee, and we hope you will join us again next time. We will wrap up this series on 2 Thessalonians by looking together at 2 Thessalonians Chapter 3.

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