2nd Thessalonians 2:1-17

Key Verse 2:15

“SO THEN, BROTHERS, STAND FIRM AND HOLD TO THE TEACHINGS WE PASSED ON TO YOU, WHETHER BY WORD OF MOUTH OR BY LETTER.”

We are studying Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians. Paul had already written to them concerning the glorious Second Coming of Jesus Christ in his first letter. In it he taught them that first the dead in Christ, and then those that remain alive will be gathered up to meet him in the air and to be with him eternally. Paul warned them that no one knows the day or hour of his coming. But as children of God, Christians should not be caught off guard by Jesus’ coming. Christians must live a holy life, in order to be ready and blameless when the Lord Jesus comes. In this second letter, St. Paul had many things he wanted to tell the Thessalonians, who were undergoing severe persecutions for their faith. But St. Paul considered it essential that these young Christians had an absolute hope and faith in the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. In the first chapter of this letter, Paul taught the Thessalonians the principle of being ready for the second coming. In a word, it is “more and more”. To be worthy of God’s calling, we must grow in faith and love more and more as we wait for the coming of our Lord. In this passage, Paul teaches them about the tragedy of fallen man. Even as God gave his life on the cross to show men the way to the kingdom of God, fallen men condemn themselves by refusing to love the truth. God will give them every opportunity to repent. But they will follow a lie instead. Paul’s main point is that we should not be worried or fearful about the coming of Jesus. Those who stand firm by loving the truth and believing the gospel of Jesus Christ have been saved already and will share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. May God help you to overcome the lawlessness of our times by standing firm in the truth.

FIRST, “don’t be alarmed” (1-2). Paul wrote this second letter in response to a rumor spreading among the Thessalonians regarding the Second Coming of Christ. Look at verses 1 and 2. “Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered up to him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come.” My family occasionally drives up to Chicago to visit friends and relatives. As soon as we leave the city of Macomb, my son Joseph has a question: “Dad, are we there yet? How many more hours?” He is very impatient to get the journey over with, and begin to enjoy playing with all the other young children and cousins. Apparently, the Thessalonian Christians were impatient for Jesus’ coming and the chance to experience the glory of God in the kingdom of God like my son Joseph. They were so taken by the vision of Jesus’ victory over sin and death that they forgot there is a journey that lies between them and that final day. We can understand the Thessalonians very well. Even Jesus spoke with impatience about the day of judgment and the establishment of the kingdom of righteousness. In Luke 12:49-50, Jesus says, “I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed!” Jesus, God’s one and only Son, had to undertake a journey, enduring the baptism of suffering and death, before he could be raised up and receive the crown of victory from God. How much more so do we, Jesus’ followers, need to undertake our spiritual journey before receiving the reward? Luke 17:23 says, “Then he said to his disciples, ‘The time is coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but you will not see it. Men will tell you, “There he is!” or “Here he is!” Do not go running off after them.”’ The Thessalonians were eager to be done
with their trials and persecutions. But there was a long way to go. Paul counsels them, saying, “Don’t become unsettled or alarmed. Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way.” Sometimes in our minds we imagine that we have worked hard enough, or suffered enough, and that it is time for Jesus to come. But let’s listen to St. Paul, and learn what to look for as we live as pilgrims on this earth, headed toward the kingdom of God.

SECOND, God’s history (3-8). The famous historian, Arnold Toynbee, wrote that history can be understood in terms of “Challenge and Response.” That is, the history and development of a people, culture or a nation depends on the challenges presented to it, both internally and externally, and its responses to those challenges. Recently, the author Francis Fukuyama claimed that, because of the downfall of most communist governments, we have reached the end of history. In his view, the end of all history is...constitutional democracy, since democracy has met and overcome all challenges to human progress and development. St. Paul respectfully disagrees. Let’s read verse 3 together. “Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction.” The Bible tells us that there is one challenge that faces all people and all societies which mankind can never resolve on its own. In a word, the greatest challenge facing mankind, and the underlying dynamic of all history, is the “lawlessness” or “sin” of mankind. Because of sin, mankind is in rebellion against the Creator God. Because of sin, mankind becomes groundlessly proud. One day, because of sin, mankind’s pride will be manifested in the “man of lawlessness,” one who not only denies God as God, but puts himself in God’s place as one who is “above the law.” Look at verse 4. “He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God.” The sin of mankind is growing and growing. But it will not last forever. Its apex will be the man of lawlessness. And when he is revealed, the day of the Lord will come, the rebellion finally quashed, and the man of lawlessness will be destroyed.

After God sent the flood to destroy all the earth because of man’s sins, mankind looked so nice and sweet, like a child after receiving a spanking. They obeyed God’s commands to be fruitful and multiply in order to spread out and rule over all the earth as the stewards of God’s creation. But in a short while, some proud men got together and decided that, instead of spreading out, they would gather together in order to build a great city (Gen. 11:1-4). They laid out all of their plans, and decided that at the center of their city, they would build a tower reaching up to the sky. It would not be a temple for worshiping their Creator God. It was to be a monument to themselves, and to their skill and ingenuity. They got really excited, and began at once to build the tower of Babel. Then the Lord came down to see the city the men were building. He said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.”(Gen. 11:6) God should have destroyed mankind there once and for all, because the lawlessness of mankind was beyond control. But God had made a promise to his servant Noah that he would not destroy all mankind. God had a plan to save all mankind through the Messiah, the Savior of the world. So God instead simply frustrated man’s plans by confusing their language, so that the carpenters spoke German and the brick layers spoke English, and they had to abandon their plan and were forced to spread out over all the earth.

No matter how many times God humbled proud mankind, the lawlessness of mankind has not decreased. This lawlessness has been fed by man’s pride that it is he, not God, who provides for his own well-being and security. The characteristic of the man of lawlessness is that he will trust in his
own wisdom and skill above that which we can receive from God. Just as the prophets foresaw the coming of the Messiah, God’s anointed to save the world from sin, they also saw the rise of the man of lawlessness. In Ezekiel 28:2 the Lord laments concerning the king of Tyre, the capital of Phoenicia, “In the pride of your heart you say, ‘I am a god; I sit on the throne of a god in the heart of the seas.’ But you are a man and not a god, though you think you are as wise as a god.” Today, scientific advancement has given mankind unprecedented power and skill. Our weapons can destroy the world 50 times over. Our medicines are on the brink of cloning human beings. Our computers will soon think as fast as light. The truth of the gospel is for now holding mankind’s pride in check, in large part as expressed through the Constitution of the US. But that is not the end of history, as scholars might like to think. The end of history will come when the lawlessness of man is fully revealed through the man of lawlessness, and our Lord Jesus will come to overthrow him by the breath of his mouth, and destroy him by the splendor of his coming. (8)

THIRD, the tragedy of fallen man (9-12). Why is the lawlessness of mankind so persistent, in the face of God’s boundless love and mercy and his eventual judgment? It is because we have some help. Look at verse 9. “The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders...” The history of mankind is being played out in the context of the spiritual battle between God and the devil. Proud men want to be their own man. But it doesn’t work that way. When men in their pride reject the love of God, they become slaves of sin. Against their will, they become children of the devil (Jn 8:44). Satan gives his servants the strength of demons to do great damage. Mostly, Satan entices people to enjoy all kinds of sinful pleasures, so that they come under the power of sin and death (10a). God sent his one and only Son into this dark world to free all mankind from the power of Satan’s darkness. In order to rescue sinful mankind, the Lord Jesus had to humble himself and submit to sinful man’s judgment and execution on the cross, the symbol of shame and disgrace. God humbled himself and bore all the pain and shame of the cross to make atonement for all mankind’s wretched sins, and to enable us to serve him without fear and in holiness and righteousness all our days (Lk 1:74-75). Because God so loved the world, Jesus came not to condemn the world, but to save the world through faith in him (Jn 3:16-17). But fallen man has refused to love the truth. Though they heard the gospel, they followed the lie instead. God is not ready to judge them for their stubbornness and pride (7). But when the time is right, God will take away what is holding back the lawless one. At that time, there will be two choices for mankind – the man of righteousness, our Lord Jesus, or the man of sin, the lawless one. God will not condemn anyone. But fallen man will condemn himself by openly rejecting the way of love and life in humble Jesus for the sake of the power and glory they think they will have with the lawless one. Look at verses 11 and 12. “For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.”

FOURTH, “stand firm” (13-17). Look at verse 13. “But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.” At one time, Paul was Saul, a bigoted Jew who thought that the Gentiles living in Greece, Ireland and China all deserved God’s wrath and judgment because of their unclean bodies and lives. Now, however, Paul serves the living God as a light to the Gentiles. And Paul rejoices over the salvation of the Gentile believers in Thessalonica. Once, they were a people who did not know God. But God in his great mercy called them in accordance with his plan for world salvation which he had made from the beginning of time. God used his chosen people the Jews to bring
his Son Jesus into the world. Now, God was using his people to spread the gospel of life and light to all people of all nations. Now, God had opened the way for dirty and ignorant Gentiles to come into the kingdom of God through the sacrifice of his one and only Son, Jesus Christ. It was so that all people of all nations could come and share Jesus’ glory and joy at the wedding banquet in the kingdom of God. Look at verse 14. “He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.” What a wonderful grace of our Father God! What a wonderful salvation we have through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ! Once, we were a people of darkness. Once, we believed the lie. But now, through the gospel God has called us into his wonderful light (1 Peter 2:9). Now, we can give our lives to love and serve the truth. Now, we have a sure reward and rest in the kingdom of God when our pilgrimage on earth is done.

In the light of God’s mercy and grace to sinners, we must not harden our hearts nor reject his love and truth. Though the journey is not easy, we must remember God’s grace and hold on to the truth that saved us and promises us eternal life. Look at verse 15. “So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.” In this selfish and greedy world, it may seem crazy to love God and to love others first. It may seem foolish to deny ourselves sinful pleasures when everyone around us is plunging into a flood of dissipation (1 Pe. 4:4). But God has given us eternal encouragement and a good hope through the promise of eternal life in his kingdom. And he will encourage our hearts and strengthen us to do good and to bless others with the words of our mouth. Let’s read again verse 15. “So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.”

In this passage, St. Paul helps young Christians to see the world from God’s point of view. Christians are impatient to receive the rewards of a godly life. But we must know that God is delaying the judgment on man’s sin so that all who can be saved will be saved through the gospel message of life and love. May God help us not to be anxious, but to stand firm and put into practice what we have learned through God’s word. God who has called us to life is faithful, and he will do all things in his time. May God bless you to stand firm and live a holy life as a child of God in this wicked generation. May God raise you up as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation to bring many young American students out of the darkness of sin and into the light of his life.