

The Message of 2 Thessalonians

by G. Campbell Morgan

The second letter to the Thessalonians corrects a false view of the Advent and teaches the importance of the Church's role in restraining lawlessness until the Day of the Lord.

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 4:16

Topics: "The Day of the Lord", "Restraint Against Lawlessness"

Description

G. Campbell Morgan emphasizes the teachings of 2 Thessalonians, focusing on the distinction between 'our gathering together unto Him' and 'the Day of the Lord.' He addresses the confusion among the Thessalonian Christians regarding the timing of Christ's return and the manifestation of lawlessness, urging them to remain steadfast in their faith and conduct. Morgan highlights the importance of the Church as a restraining force against lawlessness and calls for courage and diligence in daily work while awaiting the Lord's return. He reassures believers that the ultimate victory belongs to Christ, who will destroy the lawless one and establish His Kingdom.

Transcript

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The Day of the Lord,

The second letter to the Thessalonians was a sequel to the first; but the purpose was different. The purpose of the first letter was comfort, while that of the second was correction.

To understand this letter it is important that we should recognize the circumstances of these Thessalonian Christians at the time when Paul wrote. Of these, we have no historical picture. The Book of the Acts tells the story of the founding of the church, and of the departure of the apostle; but gives no account of the subsequent history of the church. From these letters we may learn the condition of affairs in Thessalonica so far as these Christians were concerned.

We must bear in mind the conditions-referred to in our last study. They are distinctly described in the beginning of this letter;

"We ourselves glory in you in the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions which ye endure; which is a manifest token of the righteous judgment of God ; to the end that ye may be counted worthy of the Kingdom of God, for which ye also suffer" (i. 4, 5).

These people were enduring persecutions and afflictions, and the apostle recognized the reason of the persecution and affliction; they suffered for the Kingdom of God. These experiences of trial had called forth the first letter, and they had not changed when this second was written.

In this, however, new conditions are clearly revealed. These arose in all probability from a misreading of the first letter, accentuated perhaps by the arrival in Thessalonica of spurious letters, purporting to be from Paul himself, but in reality sent by someone else; and also from the teaching of certain people in Thessalonica.

The new conditions are seen in the first two verses of the second chapter:

"Now we beseech you, brethren, touching the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together unto Him ; to the end that ye be not quickly shaken from your mind, nor yet be troubled, either by spirit, or by word, or by epistle as from us, as that the day of the Lord is now present"

They were in danger of being shaken from their mind. That phrase is an attempt at literalness in translation, which it is not easy to improve upon, and yet it hardly conveys the idea of the text. Dr. Findlay's translation is very graphic because more literal; he renders it "shaken out of your wits." These Thessalonian Christians were alarmed, perturbed; and the apostolic word was a protest against that attitude of mind; because such mental disturbance produced another condition which is described in verse eleven of chapter three:

"We hear of some that walk among you disorderly, that work not at all, but are busybodies."

In these two references we have a description of the new conditions. In the midst of their trials they were suffering from mental disturbance, which resulted in disorderly conduct. Their mental disturbance was caused by the fact that they were expecting the immediate manifestation of Jesus in judgment to set up the Kingdom of God. The result was disorderly conduct. A great many abandoned their toil, gave up work in order to wait; yet they had to live, and consequently they were eating at other people's charges; and they became busybodies. In Paul's actual statement there is a play upon words, as though he should say, you are busy about everything except your own business.

Thus it is seen that the conditions obtaining when he wrote his first letter were still continued; they were in affliction and persecution for the sake of the Kingdom of God. But now there was this added trouble, they were mentally disturbed, by his first letter partly, and by letters received "as from us" ; they were expecting that the day of the Lord was close at hand, that He would immediately manifest Himself in judgment to set up the Kingdom ; and the result of it was that very many of them had given up their daily callings, and had become busybodies. Paul had written his first letter dealing with the fact of the second Advent in order to comfort them. Now he heard from Thessalonica, that many of them were giving up work, and waiting for the coming of the Day of the Lord and the establishment of the Kingdom. This second letter was written in order to correct that false view.

It may be said therefore that Paul wrote this letter for two purposes. First, to correct a false view of the Advent; and secondly, to correct false conduct arising out of such a false view. In these two purposes of the apostle we discover the essential message of this letter, its living, lasting, and immediate teaching; and in that part in which he corrected the false conduct, we discover the abiding appeal.

The central teaching of this letter is that of its setting forth of the Christian position concerning the day of the Lord. Students of Holy Scripture will at once recognize that phrase. So far as we are able by internal evidence to date the writings of the Old Testament we believe that the prophecy of Joel must be placed at a very early period, and therefore that he was the first to make use of it. From that time the phrase constantly recurs in the writings of the prophets. When we come to the New Testament the idea and the phrase are still present. In this letter the apostle explained to these Thessalonian Christians the relation of the Day of the Lord to the New Testament covenant, and the New Testament economy.

The importance of this teaching cannot be overestimated. The old phrase of the Hebrew prophets and the New Testament writers obtains until now. We are constantly using it in our common speech. Yet while the phrase is Scriptural and valuable, we very often use it in entire ignorance of its meaning according to Scripture. Consequently difficult and mystical as this subject may seem to be, we have no right to pass it idly over. It is most important that we should know what Holy Scripture says to us concerning " the Day of the Lord". and its relation to the Christian covenant.

There are two things we need specially to notice in considering this teaching; first the careful distinction which the apostle made; and secondly, his definite teaching concerning the Day of the Lord.

First then as to the distinction. He had written to them telling them that "the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven, with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God." He had written in such a way as to fasten their attention upon that Advent as the hope of Christian souls. He now wrote to them to tell them that " the day of the Lord " was not near, that it could not come until certain things had happened. Now the question is, did Paul in his second letter contradict the teaching of the first? Some

expositors say, yes; that when Paul wrote his first letter he said one thing, and that when he wrote his second letter he modified his statement in the direction of actual change of teaching.

Now let us carefully observe the distinction which he made, a distinction which has given rise to the view that the second letter contradicted the first. The whole burden of the first letter is this; He is coming again; wait for Him. The whole burden of the second letter is this, He cannot come yet; continue your work. Here is the apparent contradiction. As a matter of fact there is no contradiction.

The first chapter of the letter is largely introductory. When we come to the second chapter we find this distinction made;

"We beseech you, brethren, touching the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together unto Him; to the end that ye be not quickly shaken from your mind, nor yet be troubled, either by spirit, or by word, or by epistle as from us, as that the day of the Lord is now present ; let no man beguile you in any wise : for it will not be, except the falling away come first, and the man of sin be revealed."

The distinction there between "our gathering together unto Him," and "the day of the Lord is patent. The whole purpose of the paragraph is to show the difference between the two.

In the first place let us carefully notice the Greek word Parousia. That word simply means presence; it does mean the actual, positive, personal Presence. We shall see that the same word is used about the antichrist; the man of sin is to have a parousia. It is a word always used with reference to the second Advent, and suggests that it is to be personal as was the first, as definite, as positive, as visible. No man can make his appeal to the authority of Scripture without believing that He Who came is coming. We may differ as to the details; but the fact that Jesus is to come again, as surely as He came, the New Testament most certainly teaches. Parousia is the word used to describe that Coming. That Coming, that Presence, was the theme of his first letter to these people. At the close of every great section therein that word occurs. It is as though he now said: I wrote to you about the Presence; I want to say something else about it, I desire to make a distinction.

That distinction is not between the Parousia and the "Day of the Lord" ; but between "our gathering together unto Him" and "the Day of the Lord." The trouble in the Thessalonian church resulted from confusion between two aspects of the Parousia, or Presence of Jesus; those namely of "our gathering together unto Him " and "the day of the Lord."

They had received his first letter, in which he had said:

"The Lord Himself shall descend from heaven, with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we that are alive, that are left, shall together with them be caught up in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord."

That is a description of "our gathering together unto Him" at His Parousia or Coming.

He now wrote to tell them they were not to be troubled and disturbed as though "the Day of the Lord" were at hand.

Thus he revealed the fact that there is a distinction to be made when considering the Parousia or Coming of the Lord, between "our gathering together unto Him," and " the day of the Lord." The apostle desired to teach these Christians that their relation to the Parousia was that of people waiting to be gathered unto

Him and that "the day of the Lord" was not that in which they were personally interested, so far as their habits of life were concerned.

Nevertheless it is an interesting subject; and one full of importance. Therefore he proceeded with care to deal with the subject.

He first declared that before "the day of the Lord" comes, there will be apostasy and a revelation of the man of

sin; and then clearly described the man of sin, and the method of his manifestation;

"He that opposeth and exalteth himself against all that is called God or that is worshipped; so that he sitteth in the temple of God, setting himself forth as God. Remember ye not that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things? And now ye know that which restraineth, to the end that he may be revealed in his season. For the mystery of lawlessness doth already work; only there is one that restraineth now, until he be taken out of the way. And then shall be revealed the lawless one, whom the Lord Jesus shall slay with the breath of His mouth, and bring to nought by the manifestation of His coming; even he, whose coming is according to the workings of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders."

In that paragraph there are three matters we need specially to notice; first, the description of existing conditions; secondly, the declaration that there will be a crisis; and thirdly, the teaching concerning the ultimate day of the Lord.

First as to the present facts. The apostle mentions two; first, the fact that the "mystery of lawlessness doth already work" ; and secondly, the fact that there is "One that restraineth."

I am perfectly well aware of how many interpretations there have been of this passage. Everything depends upon the view held of the person here referred to. There are three descriptions; "lawless one," "son of perdition," "man of sin." The history of the interpretation of this passage is the history of the Christian Church for almost nineteen hundred years. Early Christians believed that the power that hindered the manifestation of the antichrist was the Roman Empire. Then there came a time when Christians believed that the power that prevented was the State. Views as to the man of sin have changed in the same way. There are those even to-day who say that the spirit of antichrist is Romanism, and that the ultimate man of sin will be the Pope of Rome. And some believe that the State, organized under the government of God, is the restraining force. My own view is that they are all right, and that they are all wrong. They are all right in that they all discover the working of the mystery of lawlessness; but they are wrong in that they have not apprehended the fullness of the apostolic teaching. "The mystery of lawlessness" is one of the most remarkable of Bible phrases as a definition of sin; I cannot say of evil, because evil is not only the actual moral wrong, but all that results from it, of pain and suffering. Lawlessness is the root trouble with human life individually, socially, nationally, and racially. The apostle spoke of it "as the mystery of lawlessness," and he used that word mystery as he did in all his letters. A mystery according to the Greek philosopher was something that could only be known to an inner circle of initiated, and hardly known to them. A mystery, according to Paul, was something that no man could discover, but which God reveals. The "mystery of lawlessness" is that hidden, subtle, underlying force, ruining, blighting, spoiling humanity and creation. That lawlessness has been revealed. Jesus Christ came not only to reveal God and man, but the Devil also, by dragging him out of darkness into light that man might see him. The mystery underneath; the root of all humanity's maladies and diseases; the hidden spring of poison from which the polluting rivers flow; is lawlessness. This, the apostle declared, is already

at work.

But he declared also that there is a restraining power opposing it, so that it cannot come to full manifestation ; "there is one that restraineth" and I believe that he referred to the Church of God, as created by and indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God. As all these great truths are found in germ and potentiality in the teaching of Jesus, let us go back to the Manifesto of the King. He said to His disciples: "Ye are the salt of the earth . . . ye are the light of the world." What is the effect of salt? It is aseptic. What is the effect of light? It is illuminative. Lawlessness is corruption; it is darkness. The Church is salt, to prevent the spread of corruption; it is light flashing upon the darkness, so that lawlessness is hindered from full victory, and the men of lawlessness cannot accomplish all their dastardly works. That is true of the Church of God and the Spirit of God in the world at this present moment. Lawlessness is working; it is an attitude of heart, of mind, of will. If the Church of God, the whole company of new-born souls, were lifted out of the world, and taken right away, what would be the result? Lawlessness would have its full manifestation. The thing that saves London from unutterable corruption, and from the deepest darkness is the presence in it of the Holy Spirit of God through Christian men and women. That then is the present condition of affairs. The mystery of lawlessness working, but the Holy Spirit through the Church restraining.

The second matter to be observed is the apostle's declaration that there will presently come a crisis. It will come when He that restraineth is taken away, that is when the Spirit is withdrawn. When will the Spirit be withdrawn? When the Church of God is withdrawn, and never until then. "I will pray the Father, and He shall give you another Comforter, that He may be with you forever." When will the Church be withdrawn? At "our gathering together unto Him " at His coming. When He that restraineth is withdrawn, the man of sin, the son of perdition, the lawless one, will have his apocalypse, his parousia. The apostle teaches with great distinctness that at last lawlessness will have its final manifestation in some one person, a despot far worse than any the world has ever yet seen; and yet one characterized, not by the old-fashioned brutality of the beast, but by the oppression and cruelty of culture and refinement. If you would know the character of that one, the man of sin, we have the revelation in Paul's description; "He that opposeth and exalteth himself against all that is called God or that is worshipped." He will be entirely godless, but of so remarkable a character as to persuade men that he is himself divine.

The final matter is that of the ultimate fact which will bring the Day of the Lord. At last, all evil focussed in a person and manifested; there will be an epiphany of the parousia of the Lord-that is a very remarkable phrase; not His parousia merely; that includes the whole fact of the Advent. There will be first of all that aspect of the coming which will result in the gathering together of His own to Himself; when that happens, that which restrains being taken away, lawlessness will come to its head, and will have its manifestation in a person. Then the parousia, the presence of Christ in which His own have been gathered to Him, will become an epiphany; a flaming, shining glory; destroying the man of sin, and setting up that Kingdom on the earth which is the Kingdom of the iron rod; the rule of perfect, inflexible justice; the reign of the One Who does not judge by the seeing of the eyes or the hearing of the ears, but with righteous judgment.

How often as we look at human life, or see its portrayal in literature, we feel that this is what the world supremely needs. Then for the first time the world will come to the realization of the breadth, beauty, and beneficence of the will of God. I have no hope in kings, or parliaments, or policy, for the ultimate establishment of the Kingdom. Only by the presence of the Christ, returning with the saints He has gathered to Himself, shall be set up and established His Kingdom in the world. The manifestation of the presence will be for the destruction of the lawless one, and the establishment of the Kingdom.

The abiding appeal of this letter is first a call to courage. Paul said: Do not let your mind be disturbed, do not be shaken out of your wits. Let your heart be comforted and established. Courage is always an affair of the heart. Comforted is from the same root as the word which is used for the Holy Spirit; a word of great strength, which suggests a sense of peace and quietness. Let your heart be comforted and established.

It is also a call to conduct. Get on with your work! Wait and work! The man who gives up the fulfillment of his daily vocation to wait for Christ is doing exactly what some of these Thessalonian Christians had been doing. The work to which the apostle referred is the practical, commonplace work of everyday life; that actual work by which a man supplies the necessities of his physical life.

So let us wait, with calm and steady hearts, knowing that there will be a gathering together to Him; and afterwards, an epiphany of the presence, when lawlessness having come to manifestation in a person, will be smitten to its death, and the Kingdom of God will be established.

The application of this letter to the Christian Church is in its interpretation of our own times, these are days of lawlessness, and, thank God, of restraint also. The gravest peril that we have to confront is not that of socialism, nor that of feudalism; it is rather that of a growing spirit of rebellion against all government; lawlessness. It is abroad everywhere. The gravest menace to our national life is that of the man who leaves out God, mocks at authority, and vaunts his own independence. Wherever you find him, the mark of the beast is on him. It is well that the Church should realize this.

But let the Church remember that there is One that restraineth; the mighty grip of God is on all the forces which seem to be malting for lawlessness, restraining them until He be ready that they shall manifest themselves. The crisis is coming, it will be for the world, first the unveiling of the man of sin; and then the unveiling and apocalypse of the Lord Jesus. Our hearts are to be firm and steady in absolute assurance that in that last unveiling it is not the Lord Jesus Christ, but the man of sin, who will be destroyed. Only let us also remember that in the interim the Church is the instrument of restraint. She is salt, and she is light, by the in. dwelling and power of the Holy Spirit.

What is the application to the individual? The measure in which I share the life of the Christ is the measure in which I am exercising restraint. Let each Christian ask then: How far am I by influence of speech and work restraining lawlessness? And then let us remember that the measure in which we restrain lawlessness in the world is the measure in which there is no lawlessness in our awn hearts.

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