

# Route Sixty-Six

*Part Fifty-Three*

*2 Thessalonians*

*Be Not Shaken or Troubled*

*(1 Corinthians 15:3-5; 2 Thessalonians 2:1, 2)*

*With Study Questions*

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11/15/2020*

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**For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, <sup>5</sup> and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve (1 Corinthians 15:3-5).**

**Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you, <sup>2</sup> not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come (2 Thessalonians 2:1, 2)**

## **Introduction**

It is widely conceded that eschatology (the study of end times) is a secondary issue among Christians. This is not due to its inherent lack of value; heaven forbid we say such a thing of any topic addressed in Scripture! It has more to do with the difficulty of arriving at a consensus. What is to happen in God's history and what role are we to play in that history?

The most popular view circulating in western evangelicalism postulates that it is God's will for history to end in cultural and religious apostasy and failure. In short, it's God's plan for things to get worse. In a book entitled *The Greatest Book on Dispensational Truth in the World*, author, Clarence Larkins offers a shocking title followed by disquieting words.

In large font, the words fire across the page, *The Failure of Christianity*. The author (whose book written over one hundred years ago is still in print) then writes,

**It is evident that there are more than a 100 times as many persons born into the world each year, as there are persons 'New Born', and that thus far Christianity, as a world converting power, is a failure, all of which proves that, if after**

**1900 years of gospel preaching the world is not converted, it is not God's purpose to convert the world by the preaching of the gospel in this age, but simply to gather out an 'elect body' – the church. The 'Millennial Age' will be the 'Dispensation of the Spirit,' then righteousness shall cover the earth as the waters cover the deep.<sup>1</sup>**

According to the current eschatological majority report, the fact that Jesus was born, lived a righteous life, died, rose again, was given all authority in heaven and earth and put forth the Great Commission will have no power to impact the world for the better. The world is a sinking ship and to seek to improve it is tantamount to arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

Many a Christian has rested his/her head on this pillow of prophetic destruction. Yes, things may be getting worse, but I have access to God's secret plan that this is the way it ought to be. On my worst days it is appropriate for me to pine away for the rapture.

A more moderate eschatological view is that evil will increase, as will righteousness. This polarization will occur throughout history without one side prevailing. The wheat and the tares will ever grow, and it is unrealistic and, presumably, unbiblical to expect or work toward the demise of evil and the ascent of that which is good. "Culture wars," according to this view, are a waste of time and lack spiritual value.

A third, more optimistic view, is that the truth of Christ will, through much pain, work and tribulation, yield a world where,

**All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you.<sup>28</sup> For kingship belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations (Psalm 22:27, 28).**

As Dr. Bahnsen was fond of saying when confronted with the parable of the wheat and tares, "Let us remember, it is a wheat field." The preaching of the Gospel will be the instrument through which God saves souls and changes lives. As His kingdom grows, we should expect a changed world.

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<sup>1</sup> Clarence Larkin *The Greatest Book on dispensational Truth in the World* (Rev. Clarence Larkin Est. 2802 N. Park Ave., Philadelphia 32, Pa. U. S. A., 1918), p. 77 1/2

Amidst this eschatological confusion, people are loath to make a commitment. When we get to the Revelation, I will offer a story as to why that might be. Suffice it to say for now, most people don't view the subject as important to their own spiritual well-being. They glance at it with a sort of hat-tipping acknowledgement. They lightheartedly wear the label, Pan-millennialist. It will all pan out in the end.

Yet eschatological error, like all Christians doctrines, yield consequences. If we are convinced that it is God's will for the church and world to wax cold morally and theologically, we should not be surprised to see this happening. It becomes a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy.

If we are convinced that it is God's will for good and evil to advance equally and that the promises associated with the Messiah should all be consigned to the immaterial (rather than primarily immaterial but demonstrably affecting the material), then we should not be surprised to see the church/Christians become culturally insignificant, almost cloistered.

If we are convinced that the Scriptures promise a changed world, in every respect, as a result of the fulfillment of the Great Commission, we will pray and work toward the end (which, interestingly enough, almost Christian does in spite of their eschatology). All of these views have their consequences.

If a coach convinces his team that it is inevitable that they lose, he shouldn't be surprised that they lose. If he believes a tie is the best-case scenario, expect a tie or a loss. But if a team realizes that the Captain of their salvation has determined to subdue the entire earth with His love, grace and wisdom, they will tend to embrace that glorious task as His call in their lives. And with their eyes on whole domain of human existence, they will seek to bring the light of Christ.

### **Survey of Second Thessalonians.**

In surveying Second Thessalonians we will discover that eschatological error had captured this young church. It was significant enough for Paul to write this letter, likely within a few months of the first. Prior to addressing that error, Paul, similar to his first letter, extends words of encouragement.

**We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of**

**every one of you all abounds toward each other, <sup>4</sup>so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure (2 Thessalonians 1:3, 4).**

Almost like a proud parent, Paul boasts of their spiritual direction. He also acknowledges that their budding maturity is in the face of persecution and tribulation.

Instead of this being a negative, Paul addresses this opposition as...

**... evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer (2 Thessalonians 1:5)**

After having been beaten for preaching Christ, the apostles had a similar experience.

**So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. <sup>42</sup> And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus *as* the Christ (Acts 5:41, 42).**

Little wonder that the early church prayed for wisdom, in terms of where to fight the good fight, but also boldness, that having drawn battle lines, they would not shrink back.

It is toward the end of chapter one that Paul encourages the church that their antagonists will face the judgment of God both in history and eternity. A recurring promise in the Scriptures is that God will protect His church, providing it remain His church. The **“gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18)**. This is reflected in the Westminster Confession of Faith with these words.

**The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated, as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan. Nevertheless, there shall be always a church on earth, to worship God according to his will (WCF, 25, 5).**

Having encouraged them to fight the spiritual fight, Paul now turns to misinformation they had been given. This information had caused them to be shaken in mind and deeply troubled. Somehow, they had arrived at the conclusion that **“the day of Christ had come” (2 Thessalonians 2:2).**

What is this day of Christ? The phrase, **“the day of the Lord”** is common Scripture and can be referring to many different events where God intervenes in history in an extraordinary way. It is very common for commentators to put forward the opinion that the Thessalonian Christians thought they had missed the rapture. A natural reading of the Scriptures renders this interpretation highly unlikely.

We haven't time to dig as deeply as many of you would no doubt like. When we reach the Revelation, this will be addressed more thoroughly. I will offer a few observations that should help us.

First, all Paul would have to do to help them dismiss their fear of missing the rapture would be to acknowledge his own presence. That he had not been raptured should be the end of their troubled minds.

Second, Paul wants them to know of things which must precede this day of the Lord. One of these will be a great apostasy. If the day of the Lord is the end of history, that the church should acknowledge and, at some level, embrace this great apostasy. Perhaps you can see where this adds to the package of eschatological defeatism. But, as we shall see, Paul's language doesn't allow (apart from great strain) this/these events to be thousands of years in the future.

Third, the infamous **“man of sin, the son of perdition” (2 Thessalonians 2:3)** must make an appearance. There is no end to the speculation as to who this man may end up being. But we do know this about him: it is his intention to exalt himself and sit as God in the **“temple of God” (2 Thessalonians 2:4).** How would the original recipients of Paul's letter understand this? At this point in history there was a standing temple. Within about twenty years it would be destroyed. So whoever this person is/was there were about twenty years for this prophecy to be fulfilled.

Fourth, this man of sin was currently being restrained and Paul's readers (based upon Paul's instructions) knew what was restraining him.

**Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? <sup>6</sup> And now you know what is restraining, that he may be revealed in his own time. <sup>7</sup> For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work (2 Thessalonians 2:5-7).**

If this passage is addressing the end of history, how do Paul's readers know what is currently restraining this man of lawlessness?

Fifth, as we just read, the "**mystery of lawlessness is already at work.**" The man of sin is somehow connected with this mystery of lawlessness which was already at work. Unless the man is currently two thousand years old and the mystery of lawlessness abides for that period of time as well, we have great difficulty making sense of this chapter.

Add to this, that Paul is promising his readers that the man and his lawlessness will be destroyed (2 Thessalonians 2:8-10). How would be significant or of comfort to Paul's readers if Paul is addressing events two millennia (or more) in the future?

Suffice it to say for now that Paul is, as he does in all of his letters, addressing the current issues of those at that church. Similarly, we are to benefit from his words of encouragement when it comes to the enemies of that which is good and true.

Consistent with Paul's first letter, he will place their comfort primarily and squarely upon the election of God. This is the front line of our comfort and the fountain from which all other graces and callings follow.

**But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth, <sup>14</sup>to which He called you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>15</sup>Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle. <sup>16</sup>Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and our God and Father, who has loved us and given *us* everlasting consolation and good hope by grace, <sup>17</sup>comfort your hearts and establish you in every good word and work (2 Thessalonians 2:13-17).**

The epistle concludes with some warnings. Although Paul does not state it directly, the general conclusion is that their obsessing over the day of the Lord along with their troubled hearts, had a negative effect upon the church. It is worth noting that cults and reclusive sects of Christianity will often obsess over the coming of the Lord to the extent of quitting jobs,

ceasing to educate their children and moving to geographical locations which better accommodate surviving Armageddon.

They had become idle and disorderly. They had ceased from work and increased as busy bodies. They are exhorted to be productive.

**For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat (2 Thessalonians 3:10).**

This is not to say that there is no place for the feeding of the poor (Proverbs 14:31; Matthew 25:35). It is to say that the overall and general theme of a godly and thriving society is one of hard and faithful labor.

Recognizing the difficulty of faithfulness over an extended period of time, Paul addresses the Thessalonians as he has other churches with the call to persevere. He will also exhort his readers to be willing to love others at a level that may appear uncomfortable yet is truly brotherly.

**But *as for you, brethren, do not grow weary in doing good.* <sup>14</sup> And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed. <sup>15</sup> Yet do not count *him* as an enemy, but admonish *him* as a brother (2 Thessalonians 3:13-15).**

The one confronted may view you as an enemy, but never give in by treating them as an enemy.

**Faithful *are* the wounds of a friend, But the kisses of an enemy *are* deceitful (Proverbs 27:6).**

Paul again concludes with a benediction, as will we.

**Now may the Lord of peace Himself give you peace always in every way. The Lord *be* with you all. <sup>17</sup> The salutation of Paul with my own hand, which is a sign in every epistle; so I write. <sup>18</sup> The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ *be* with you all. Amen (2 Thessalonians 3:16-18).**



## Questions for Study

1. Why do you suppose eschatology (the study of end times) is a secondary issue among Christians (page 2)?
2. What are some of the views regarding how history is to unfold? Do some of these seem more or less tenable? Why (pages 3, 4)?
3. In what ways can eschatological errors have consequences (pages, 3, 4)?
4. What is the Apostle Paul's disposition toward the church in Thessalonica (pages 4, 5)?
5. Is suffering something Christians should not expect? How should we think of suffering (pages 4, 5)?
6. Will there always be a church on earth? How do you know this? What should this produce in us (page 5)?
7. Discuss whether or not it makes sense that the Thessalonians thought they missed the rapture (pages 5-7).
8. How does the doctrine of election elicit comfort in the Christian (pages 7, 8)?
9. What are some of the final exhortations Paul directs toward the church (pages 7, 8)?