

Some Thoughts on 2 Thessalonians 2.

The people of God at Thessalonica were, with patience and faith, enduring persecutions and tribulations at the hands of them that knew not God, and that obeyed not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Nevertheless as some were troubled and shaken in their minds Paul wrote to encourage them to stand fast, and that they must expect these things to come upon them prior to the day of Christ: the coming and revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven.

Here Paul is writing as he would again to the church at Philippi: ‘...that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel; and in nothing terrified by your adversaries... For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake...’, Phil. 1:27-29. ‘Wherefore’, continues Paul to the Thessalonians, ‘we pray always for you, that our God would count you worthy of this calling, and fulfil all the good pleasure of his goodness, and the work of faith with power: that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and ye in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.’

So he beseeches them in the light of the truth of the eventual coming of Christ, and of their ultimate gathering together unto him, that they be not deceived into believing anything other than the fact that the day of Christ will not come except there be a falling away first – that is, an apostasy in the professing church, amongst professing Christians – surely the most painful cause of trial to the children of God – and that the man of sin be revealed, obviously to lead astray those who once professed faith in Christ into error and lies. And neither was this the first time Paul had told them these things.

But although they were thus suffering yet they knew that the Wicked, although active, was as yet largely restrained in comparison to how it would be immediately before the Lord's actual second coming. He was being ‘let’: withheld, hindered in his desires, suppressed by One mightier than he till He ‘be taken out of the way’; then would that Wicked be fully revealed and, as it were, let loose; who already worked, but only in a limited way. Now what does all this mean?

In Revelation 20:1-3 we read of ‘the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan’ – that is, ‘the Wicked’ – bound for a thousand years in a bottomless pit. The one who binds him is said to be ‘an angel come down from heaven.’ This is evidently the Lord Jesus Christ who, by his work upon the cross and his subsequent empty tomb, bound the strong man Satan bringing in the dispensation of the gospel in the New Testament in which the evil one is powerless to hinder the work of God in bringing salvation to his elect, calling them out of the darkness and bondage of sin and spiritual death, releasing them from the clutches of the prince of the power of the air, and translating them into the kingdom of his dear Son, yea, into his marvellous light.

This is taught by Christ in Matthew 12:28,29, where he said, ‘If I cast out devils by the Spirit of God’, and not by Beelzebub as the Pharisees had charged, ‘then the kingdom of God is come unto you.’ Then the Saviour asserts, ‘How can one enter into a strong man’s house, and spoil his goods, except he first bind the strong man? and then he will spoil his house.’

Paul, in his doctrine, speaks of this same ‘spoiling’ to the Colossians, 2:12-15: they were ‘buried with [Christ] in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead. And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses; blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross; and having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it.’

In John 12:31 Jesus had said in relation of his being ‘lifted up’, ‘Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out.’ And in the Old Testament figure the children of Israel, through the shedding of the blood of the innocent lamb on the night of the Passover and the Exodus out of the house of bondage, ‘spoiled the Egyptians’, Exodus 12. Wonderful !

Sin, sins, hell, the powers of darkness were spoiled, overcome, defeated by the blood and death of Christ at the cross, and death was defeated at the empty tomb for the people of God. Christ through death destroyed him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; thereby delivering them who through fear of death had been all their lifetime subject to bondage, Heb. 2:14,15.

Union with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection is called 'the first resurrection', Rev. 20: 5, thus, verse 6, 'Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years.' But when the thousand years are expired Satan will be loosed out of his prison and deceive the nations as if unhindered. This is the revealing of 'that Wicked' of 2 Thessalonians 2:8. The restraining hand of God being 'taken out of the way' it will seem that, for a little season, evil will be let loose upon the earth as if unrestrained; although even then Christ's hand will not be totally withdrawn, he will still be in ultimate control, Matt. 28:18.

This may be what Jesus was referring to in Matthew 24:21,22: 'For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be. And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved', when 'that Wicked' that Paul writes of will muster all his, or their efforts to pursue, persecute, and kill the Lord's people; 'but', says Christ, 'for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened.' And they *will* be shortened for the Lord, shortening those days himself, shall suddenly come and consume that Wicked with the spirit of his mouth, and the brightness of his coming, 2 Thes. 2:8; or as it is recorded in Revelation 20:9, 'fire came down from God out of heaven, and devoured them.'

Satan, and all who follow him, will for ever be destroyed by Christ at his coming again in power and great glory. O yes, they will have seemed to have defeated God, Christ and his religion, and all but wiped it off the face of the earth in those very last days of time. The blood of the few remaining adherents of 'Jesus Christ, and him crucified' will be sought out over all the earth, much of it flowing. Old fashioned religious, biblical, 'Puritanical' restraint will more or less have been wiped out – well, isn't it

disappearing even as we speak? – men will think that they have finally ‘arrived’ as being gods on earth – the ancient lie still being believed, Gen. 3:5. The Wicked, the seducer, exercising all power and signs and lying wonders will apparently rule the world, and the people who receive not the love of the truth, that they might be saved, will be willingly subdued as they that wonder after the beast, saying, ‘Who is like unto the beast?’ And the world-wide cry will at last be ‘Peace and safety!!’ But it will be short lived, merely ‘a short space’, Rev. 17:10, but ‘one hour’, verse 12, ‘then sudden destruction’, 1 Thes. 5:3.

That in general, I believe, is the meaning of the passage. Now we must look at the two types of people referred to by Paul to the Thessalonians, namely, ‘them that know not God,’ who ‘obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ’, 1:8, who ‘received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved’, 2:10, who therefore ‘believed not the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness’, 2:12; and those who do believe the truth, have been effectually called by our gospel and have obtained the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ, 2:13,14.

First, them that ‘know not God.’ To ‘know not’ is to be in a state of ignorance: blindness and darkness pervade the mind, heart and understanding in relation to the things of God. And do not think that these are just the irreligious. For included in this number are those which have fallen away, apostatised, who now ‘trouble’ those who do know God. There had been a time when they did know God – though not savingly – they had professed him and his Son, but eventually because of unbelief, they became vain in their imaginations, their foolish hearts were darkened, and they were given over, by God, to a reprobate mind: reprobate concerning any understanding of God and his will and ways; reprobate concerning truth; reprobate concerning salvation in any or all of its aspects; in fact they became nothing better than the Gentiles that Paul wrote of to the Ephesians: walking in the vanity of their minds, having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance which was in them, because of the blindness of their hearts, who being past feeling willingly abandoned themselves unto lasciviousness, uncleanness and greediness: which is, ‘believing not the truth, but having pleasure in unrighteousness’, Ephesians 4:17-19.

That's an apostate. That's those who hear the word, receive it with joy, run a while, but upon persecution, or the rise of the cares of this world, or the love of riches, and with no desire to deny themselves and walk in the way of the cross, nor to hunger and thirst after spiritual sustenance, soon look back, then turn back, walk no more with Christ, and presently manifest themselves his enemies, and the enemies of his people.

Furthermore, to know God is to love him. Demas knew not God, and therefore loved him not for he loved this present world and forsook the right way. Judas knew not God, even though chosen as an apostle and declaring his Son to be 'innocent blood'; but he loved money and died in his sin. Paul declared that of the Ephesian elders there were some who would be manifest in time as those who knew not God, nor loved him, for, 'of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things', liars, 'to draw away disciples after them': to follow them instead of Christ – apostates, antichrists, Acts 20:29,30.

How many are there in churches today that 'know not God'? 'Many' said Christ, Matt. 7:21-23. They think they know him, they call him Lord, they declare him, seem to have power, even over devils, because of their profession of his name, and in his name do 'many wonderful works'; but in reality they never 'do the will of my Father which is in heaven'; never hear his voice, as all who know him do and, following blind guides, blindly and ignorantly stumble into the abyss with the name of Christ upon their lips. And these may never outwardly fall away; they may profess Christ to the end, their strength remaining firm, Psalm 73, but inwardly, and in reality, they never knew God, and always opposed those that did, even though they often did so with a Christian smile on their lips, but there was always a loathing look in their eyes.

Secondly, these that 'know not God' are also they that 'receive not the love of the truth' and therefore 'believe not the truth.' This is an obvious fruit. How can the ignorant, the blind, the careless, yea, the dead, receive a love of, and believe the truth! Being outside of Christ – despite the profession of many – they hate the truth and love vanity and lies, deceit, pretence and hypocrisy. The truth is anathema to them. How prevalent are 'Bible-believing Christians' who oppose the revealed word of God! View the catalogue of the religious professors in the Scriptures that withstood

God's revealed way, truth and light. Religious Cain brought an offering to the Lord knowing full well, as Abel, that bloodshed was the key element in sacrifice to God, and that it had to be offered in faith; but he, without faith, blatantly and deliberately disobeyed, incurred the displeasure of the God he mocked with his unholy sacrifice, slew his godly brother, was cast out and fell away; we never read of him sacrificing again.

View faithful Noah moved with the fear of God, building an ark – preaching the gospel – to the saving of his house and the condemnation of the whole world. And are we to suppose that Noah was the only religious, God-worshipping professor of his day? Surely not. Jesus said that the world immediately prior to his second coming would be as it was 'in the days of Noah'; there must have been many an observer of Noah's strange labour who had a 'Lord, Lord,' upon their lips; but the old man of faith was the only one 'doing the will of the Father in heaven', who 'heard his word and did it', Matt. 7:21,24.

It is part of the 'much tribulation' that the children of God must pass through and endure: opposition from the religious. Who were the most vociferous enemies of Jesus? The Pharisees, scribes, Doctors of the law, Sadducees, chief priests; all highly religious, worshipers of the Lord God of heaven, all of the seed of Abraham; but they hated and opposed his doctrine for it condemned them and their outward show of religion; it exposed their death within and their spiritual hypocrisy. Paul's enemies likewise were the legalists; they who said it was right and good to believe in Christ for salvation but that they must also continue in the law – carnal ordinances.

The outcome of all this being that, because they know not God, and have no love for the truth, they 'obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.' To obey here literally means to come or fall *under the hearing* of the gospel savingly. Many hear the truth of the gospel declared but relatively few fall under it, believe it, submit to it, obey it. This truth is related to what Jesus declared, that 'many are called but few chosen.' Many hear the sound of the truth with the natural ears, but only those 'ordained unto eternal life' hear in the inner man unto salvation and believe. How can two people hear the same message, one shrug their shoulders and say, That means nothing to me, it is irrelevant; and the other hear words of

eternal life, fall under the truth and believe? Because few are chosen thereto; so, few 'obey the gospel.'

As has already been stated, many who call Jesus 'Lord' in this life actually never obey or fall under the hearing of his word savingly. They oppose the gospel when it cuts across what they fancy the way of salvation and the Christian life to be; they variously smile sweetly and ignore, or rage furiously against the doctrine of the gospel when it undermines their idolatrous ideas of free will; they rise up in self-righteousness and pride when the gospel of Christ teaches that the Saviour is 'the end of the law for righteousness' to every one that has true saving faith in him, when all their secret trust is in works of righteousness which they like to think they do, Rom. 10:1-4; and they seek to side-step the clear teaching of scripture regarding the believer's relationship to the world because they retain friendship with, and the love of the world in their hearts, James 4:4, 1 John 2:15-17, Acts 7:39. And are we to suppose that the prayer of the Saviour will not be answered? cp. John 17:14-17. These are, in many ways more so than the world, the greatest enemies of the gospel of Christ; who, though they hear it and say they believe it, never obey it.

But, saith Jehovah, 'to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word', Isaiah 66:2, and not only does he look to them but he dwells with them also, Isaiah 57:15. These only are they which in their poverty of spirit, ongoing contrition of heart – an inward work, you see – love of the revealed truth – though it is painful to receive – and their submission in humility before God, are said to 'obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.'

'Brethren beloved of the Lord', the apostle addresses them; and because loved of God then 'from the beginning chosen to salvation.' The beginning? 'Chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world', Eph. 1:4; therefore, 'predestinated', Rom. 8:29, 'elect according to the foreknowledge of God', 1 Peter 1:2. And foreknown means foreloved, not foreseen. It is not that God foresaw who would believe on his Son and therefore elected them, but that he loved them from all eternity and in love chose them and wrote their names in the Lamb's book of life. Liars and perverters of the truth are all those who assert the former; and unless their eyes are opened by the grace of God; unless they submit to the

revelation of God, they will remain those who, in this instance, ‘obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.’

Paul goes on then to describe how the beloved of the Lord are brought to a knowledge of salvation; a love of the truth; obedience of the gospel. It is ‘through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth’, 2 Thes. 2:13. The Spirit of God through his sovereign working regenerates the elect of God, those separated unto him from all eternity. In regenerating them he gives them spiritual life, that eternal life necessary to hear the voice of the Son of God in the gospel, and live. Separated and awakened unto God and the realm of eternity they are taught by God of their own sinfulness and enmity toward him; of their natural state of active, constant rebellion towards their Creator; and of their refusal to submit to and believe in Jesus Christ. Pride, self-righteousness and their natural bent to live actively at odds with God’s revealed will drives them into bondage and darkness. The people ‘rage, and imagine a vain thing’; they rage against the convictions of sin; rage against God’s increasingly revealed Person as one Holy, and Pure, Righteous, and Sovereign, and that he has the right to expect constant obedience from his creatures in all the exercises of their minds, desires, intentions, hearts, affections and wills, cp. Deut. 6:4-9; and as they imagine, vainly, that they can live and die without him and his salvation, Rom. 1:18ff, so they increasingly ‘set themselves against the Lord, and against his Christ’, and say in their hearts, ‘Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us’, Psalm 2:1-3. But of course they cannot. Why? Because they have been sanctified by the Spirit, specifically separated unto God, *to* submit eventually. The ‘bands’ and ‘cords’ are cords of love, designed and used of God to draw them to the Saviour, Hos. 11:1-4. Jesus taught that no man could, or indeed would, come to him except the Father draw him, John 6:44; after all, ‘It is written in the prophets, And they shall be all taught of God. Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto’ Christ, vs.45.

Learning of the Father they are taught – and they feel it – the barrenness of this world and all things therein; that light, shallow, vanity of which the world is full. Nothing satisfies. All those things which used to drive the ambition are seen to be just vain mists and mirages, nothing, in reality, to aim for, as, ultimately, they bring no sense of fulfillment or peace. Those

things which formerly amused, entertained and stirred the passions turn out to have been fleeting, empty, and in time repulsive. No lasting substance to anything. Even loved ones, to whom we can sell ourselves emotionally in full commitment, often turn out to be weak, sinful creatures like us, with no answers to the reasons and meaning of life, who fail us, and can never save us.

Learning of the Father teaches that to look within for answers and meaning leaves us still lost and in despair. No strength within, you see, to effect a cure to the fundamental problem of our standing before God. The Father's teaching exposes the barrenness of the soul and spirit when it comes to attaining contentment in this life. But even when all this is brought to light and felt, still, there is this thing in us which *will not* fall before God and submit to him, as David well expressed in Psalm 32:3,4, 'When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me: my moisture is turned into the drought of summer.' This is being brought to an end of self in sin and despair. And it is not till we are brought to this place, where we feel not to have one drop of moisture left – that is, one scrap of life, or hope, or will to try any more to seek to save ourselves, will we then acknowledge our sin unto him, no longer seek to hide our iniquity, and begin to confess our transgressions to the Lord, that he will then forgive the iniquity of our sin, verse 5; and it will be a felt deliverance.

Yea, indeed, it must be felt. 'Day and night thy hand was heavy upon me'? 'Moisture turned into the drought of summer'? To know these things is to feel them. And most professing Christians never feel them. But being sanctified of the Spirit – which comparatively few in any given generation are – is to have Christ revealed as the only possible Saviour. He is shown to the barren soul as the one able to save, and not only able, but 'mighty to save!' and not only mighty but actually willing to save, 'I will', he cries, 'Be thou clean!' His sacrifice of himself upon the cross is shown to be 'the way of salvation.' His shed blood, his broken body, dealing with and putting away not only sins, but even sin itself. He, the great propitiation for his people, as one 'being made sin' for them, the Father's righteous wrath, anger and judgment for that sin been diverted away from them onto the Son, who himself experiences all the fury of God's holy and righteous judgment upon sin, all the curses of the law against sin, all the penalty due

to sin and sins 'in his own body upon the tree.' And not only in his body but in the depths of his very soul; as it is written, 'his soul was made an offering for sin', Isaiah 53:10.

The righteous judgment of God upon sin meted out mercilessly upon the willing substitute for his people, and meted out fully until sin was put away, sins were fully punished and borne away, and until not one sin was left, then enabling the Saviour to cry, 'It is finished', and the Father to confirm the same in raising him from the dead.

All this is shown to the child of God when brought to despair of ever finding hope of salvation; and as he is shown *faith* is given to see it, believe it, to lay hold upon Jesus Christ, to look to his work as the only hope of acceptance before God. Then will be experienced, as it were, Christ, the 'one' of Matt. 12:29, entering into the heart, soul and conscience – the places of, until then, the dominion of Satan, 'the strong man' – armed with his finished work and binding the evil one, casting him out and 'spoiling' all that he had in the house. The child of God, upon forgiveness of sin, belief of the truth, and obedience of the gospel of Christ, is therefore set free from the bondage, darkness, ignorance and despair that marked his life under the reign of 'the prince of the power of the air'; the light of the gospel, the light of Christ's glorious person floods in, *Christ* himself! takes up abode; truth is known and believed; enmity is dispelled and the soul desires Christ: to know him, love him, obey him, and follow him whithersoever he leadeth, even unto death. Why? Because he is Lord, he is Master, the Saviour, the life-bringer, the Deliverer; and the servant desires only to serve him; this is called, 'showing forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light', having obtained mercy! 1 Peter 2:9,19.

Yes, 'sanctification of the Spirit, and belief of the truth' is how Paul calls this when writing to the Thessalonians, and we will only be saved at last if, in measure, at least, we have been brought to believe in Christ the same way. This is called, 'Entering in at the strait gate', a gate, the only gate, which opens on to the narrow way, which is itself 'the only way which leadeth unto life, and few', saith the Son of God, 'few there be that find it.'

‘Strive therefore to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able’, Luke 13:24.