

**SERMON THEME: FACING THE END WITH SOBRIETY**

**SERMON TITLE: THE ANTICHRIST – EXALTING HIMSELF, BY REV DR ANDREW PEH**

**SERMON TEXT: 2 THESSALONIANS 2:1-10 (NASB 1995)**

<sup>1</sup>Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, <sup>2</sup>that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. <sup>3</sup>Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, <sup>4</sup>who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God. <sup>5</sup>Do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things? <sup>6</sup>And you know what restrains him now, so that in his time he will be revealed. <sup>7</sup>For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way. <sup>8</sup>Then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming; <sup>9</sup>that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, <sup>10</sup>and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved.

### **PROLOGUE**

- Since the days of the Thessalonians, man have been trying to predict the end of times, and to decipher who is the man of lawlessness.
- The second epistle was penned shortly after Paul received updates on:
  - The Thessalonians facing intensified persecution, and
  - The prevalent erroneous teachings about Jesus Christ and the Second Coming of Christ, which were spread in his name from unknown source(s), creating more confusion and anxiety to the oppressed believers.
  - As a result of all the confusion and anxiety, the believers questioned:
    - Their own salvation.
    - Whether the Messiah had abandoned them to their own sufferings.
  - In the first part of this letter, Paul addresses a specific issue related to the return of Jesus, referenced as the Day of the Lord in the Old Testament.
- Eugene Peterson's translation of the first two verses of today's text (The Message), lends an assuring voice of Paul's admonishment to the faith community:
  - "Now, friends, read these next words carefully. Slow down and don't go jumping to conclusions regarding the day when our Master, Jesus Christ, will come back and we assemble to welcome him. Don't let anyone shake you up or get you excited over some breathless report or rumored letter from me that the day of the Master's arrival has come and gone. Don't fall for any line like that."

### **A. PAUL'S ADMONISHMENT**

- Paul reassures the Thessalonians that:
  - He is not the author of the misinformation.
  - There is no cause for panic.
  - They should recall all that he had taught them about the coming of Jesus.

- The Greek word used by Paul is 'Parousia'.
  - It is a theological term that references the return of the Lord.
  - It means 'coming', 'arrival', 'presence of the Lord'.
- He writes to correct the misinformation on the 'Parousia', and on two 'Parousias' - the 'Parousia' of Our Lord, which is preceded by the 'Parousia' of this man of lawlessness.
  - Michael W. Holmes summarized in 'The NIV Application Commentary', the sequence of events that Paul has laid out in his letters to the Thessalonians:
    - First comes the time of rebellion/apostasy.
    - Then the appearance of the man of lawlessness, with a short ruling period.
    - Followed by the return of Christ and His confrontation with the rebel and all who perpetrated evil.
    - And ends with the gathering of the believers with Christ.
- According to biblical scholars, this chapter of Thessalonians may be hard to understand.
  - Because Paul makes references about what he taught to the Thessalonian church, details of which we are not privy to.
  - This leads to speculations and conjectures, which are not of importance to us.
  - We have the clear understanding about the main thrust of Paul's explanation on the man of lawlessness and his activity.

## B. MAN OF LAWLESSNESS

- The man of lawlessness is one who does the deceptive work of Satan.
  - He opposes God directly, seeks to push God aside and seats himself on God's throne.
  - His interests are of self-exaltation, which is one of the biggest sins, to put oneself above God, seeking after personal glory.
  - Characters of such a man have been detailed by many prophets.
    - Isaiah 14: King of Babylon who puts himself above God.
    - Ezekiel 28: The fall of King of Tyre used to reference the fall of Satan.
    - Daniel 11: The King of the North.
    - These rulers openly defied against God and regarded themselves as God's equal.
- For Paul, these ancient kings and prophecies set a pattern that the Jewish people have witnessed for themselves not too long ago.
  - Before the birth of Jesus, the Jews had acknowledged this person Antiochus IV Epiphanes.
    - The Jews know him as the abomination of desolation, from the writings of the prophet Daniel, who desecrated the Jerusalem temple by erecting a statue of Zeus and slaughtering pigs as offerings.
  - Paul personally witnessed the fulfilment in Roman emperors such as Caligula and Nero, authoritarian rulers who openly opposes God.
  - He expects a recurring appearance of the man of lawlessness and that the end times would culminate with:
    - A rebellious rule, empowered by evil.
    - Someone who will wreak havoc and violence in God's world.
  - Paul's description about the man of lawlessness aligns with references in:
    - 1 John 2:18 – 'Antichrist', the antithesis of who Jesus really is.
    - Revelations 13 – The beast.
- Paul's intention in his letters to the Thessalonians and to us are:

- Not letters supporting the apocalyptic speculation.
  - He rebukes the apocalyptic speculation and discourages the believers from participating in it.
  - His rebuke is grounded in Jesus' warnings with regards to the end times.
- To remind of the basis of our beliefs and to comfort the anxious and doubtful hearts.
  - God is in control of everything in the world, *He will make things right in His time.*
  - Paul ended 2 Thessalonians 2 with a prayer for God to bring comfort and strength to the believers to remain faithful to the teachings of Jesus.
- Referenced to the teaching of Jesus in the gospels of Mark 13, Matthew 24 and 25:
  - Only the actual day of Jesus' return is left untold (shrouded in secrecy)
  - The events leading up to Christ's return will be public and obvious and taught to us (not shrouded in secrecy).
  - They need not worry about being left behind.

### C. JESUS' TEACHINGS (MATTHEW 24 AND 25)

- Matthew relays Jesus' message on the cosmic upheaval and all the things that would happen before Jesus' return.
- Jesus's speech about the cataclysmic events, the end times and His coming are:
  - Riddled with symbolic themes and imagery from Jewish apocalyptic texts.
  - Full of frightening images, metaphors and shocking admonitions.
  - Reminiscent of the book of Daniel.
  - A clear warning that we are to expect and be wary of false prophets who claim knowledge of the exact details of end times.
- Matthew 24:36 and Matthew 24:42 states Jesus' instruction that nobody is privy to the date and time of the Second Coming of Christ.
  - Hence, we can deduce that anyone who claims to have such knowing is a false prophet.
  - Yet, the church paid little attention to Jesus' (and Paul's) reminders and warnings against apocalyptic speculations.
- Humans are drawn to deciphering and attempt mastery on the signs of the end times, out of worry of having missed the Second Coming and being left behind.
  - Such natural tendency is the fuel for false prophecies and reason for the prevalence of fictional stories and movies with the doomsday theme (e.g., Left Behind series by authors Time LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins).
    - This fictional series is based upon a faulty theological premise of dispensational theology, with little or no scriptural warrant.
    - It is shocking to note that many scholars have endorsed this as a less than critical approach in trying to understand the end times, especially the dispensational theology.
  - Variants of dispensational theology have emerged amid this global pandemic and have generated hostile view which caused divisions within evangelicalism.
    - Example of anti-vaxxers claiming that the vaccination is a mark of the beast, and therefore refusing vaccination, causing confrontational divide within communities and nations.
    - New Testament scholar Ben Witherington III reminded the Methodists in May 2008, during his lectures at Wesley Methodist Church, to renounce dispensationalism.

- Jesus uses analogies to make his point.
  - Story of Noah and the time of flood: the days of His return will be like the days of Noah.
    - Noah had warned the people of his time, about the flood, but nobody took heed.
    - They were caught unprepared by the 40 days of unabated rain and resulting flood and were swept away while Noah and his family were kept safely in the ark.
    - This analogy is Jesus' reminder to His disciples to stay awake and be vigilant, as *we know that He will return, but not when He will return.*
    - It is clear from Jesus' alluding to Noah, that those who are swept away are taken away in judgement, while those left behind have survived the judgement on the Day of the Lord.
    - *Would you prefer to be taken away (in judgement)? Or would you choose to be left behind (safely in the ark)?*
    - "Here, as is always the case, God reveals enough about the future to give us hope, but not so much that we do not have to live and walk by faith day after day." - Ben Witherington.

## **CONCLUSION**

- As we approach the Day of the Lord, world happenings and reported destructions often distract our focus on Jesus and cause us to forget Paul's admonition and the words of Jesus.
  - The signs of approaching end times are clear.
  - Arno C. Gaebelin in his editorial contribution for the Christian magazine "Our Hope", reminds readers "...why should Christianity have any interest at all, in that coming man of sin? We have nothing to do with that lawless one. Our interests must be in Christ and not the Antichrist".
  - *When we contemplate the end times, it is crucial that we fixate our focus on Jesus only.*
- The book of Thessalonians comprised of 2 Es:
  - Eschatology – Things concerning the end times, and
  - Ethics – How should we then live our lives as we know about what is coming.
- Teachings on the end times are many and contrasting, which invites speculations and introduces confusion; hence it is important that we renounce such frenzied guesswork and focus on Christ and His teachings.
- "Turn full your soul's vision to Jesus and look at him, and a strange dimness will come on all that is apart from Him." - Lilius Trotter.
  - This quote inspired the song "Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus" written by Helen H. Lemmel.
  - Will you be grounded in the truth of His Word, keep your eyes locked on Jesus amidst all the distractions of the world?

## **REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

1. In a context where contrary opinions, misinformation and scams abound, how can we ascertain the veracity of what we read in the "news" these days?
2. What is the point Paul is making with regards to his warnings about the man of lawlessness?
3. What are the main tenets of the scriptural teaching in regard to the return of Jesus?