

Christ in 2 Thessalonians

TRANSCRIPT (AUTO-GENERATED)

It was voted the number one most influential book in business of the 20th century. Its author was named one of Time Magazine's 25 most influential Americans. What's the book and who's the author?

Well done, Stuart. The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People by Stephen R. Covey.

You missed the middle name. Be proactive, put first things first, think, win, win, seek, first you understand, then to be understood. Synergise, sharpen the saw.

But it's the second habit of so-called highly effective people that I want to draw your attention to. Begin with the end in mind. Begin with the end in mind.

Covey, in his best selling book, says that we need to, before we engage a task, think about what we're trying to accomplish, to begin with the end in mind. Otherwise, we're likely to start something that's not worth doing in the end.

Begin with the end in mind. I think that's actually a deeply Christian idea. Christianity teaches that what we believe about the future impacts the present.

Begin with the end in mind. In two Thessalonians, that's what Paul does. He begins with the end in mind, because what we believe about the future shapes the present.

So the invitation for us is to live with the end in mind. And that's what Paul's going to say. Speaking of the end in mind, we have an ambitious goal at this church.

We desire, we have a heart, to spend one week in every book of the Bible, seeing how that book points us to the gospel of our Lord Jesus. We call it the Christ in Scripture Project. And I'm pleased to report, we are just over one third done.

We are 23 out of 66. And within this project, we're in a series called The Letters of Paul. Paul wrote 13 letters, which make up the bulk of our New Testament.

And we're up to number six of his letters.

If you were here last week, John had preached on Christ in one Thessalonians, giving us three prayers, two big lifestyle challenges, three curious statements, and one significant teaching on the afterlife, calling us to be a people who walk by faith,

are known by love, and with a voice of hope. Today we're in two Thessalonians, Christ in two Thessalonians. Rob has read for us the first verses. Let me read it again.

Two Thessalonians chapter one, verse one. Paul, Silas, and Timothy, to the Church of the Thessalonians, in God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace and peace to you from God the Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul, Silas, and Timothy. This was a trio of missionaries who were traveling throughout the Roman Empire, proclaiming the good news that Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not. Thessalonica, or in Greek, Thessaloniki, was a city in the north of Greece.

If you go from Athens and you hug the eastern coast and head north, you'll eventually arrive at Thessalonica, which was close to Philippi in that area. Paul wrote the Letter of One Thessalonians, which we looked at last week.

Scholars think it was probably his first letter, or maybe his second. These are very, very early letters.

And scholars are united in thinking that Two Thessalonians was written very shortly after One Thessalonians, which means that as we read these words, we are reading very, very early Christian literature from St. Paul. This is the early 50s AD.

Two Thessalonians is probably 52, 53, 54 AD just 20 years after the resurrection of Jesus.

So Paul writes a letter to this church in Thessalonica to correct the ways that they have been thinking wrong and correct the ways that they have been acting wrong. And the way that he does that is to begin with the end in mind.

We read in verse 3, Paul says, We always, sorry, we ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love all of you have for one another is increasing.

Therefore, among God's churches, we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring. Persecutions and trials. That's the present experience of the Thessalonians.

That's what they're going through. That's why Paul writes the letter, because they are experiencing persecutions and trials. Now the second letter that he wrote to Thessalonians is shorter than the first one.

And it picks up on some of the same themes. But I love this letter because the structure is so clear. Three chapters, each covering a different topic, each covering a different time period.

And after each chapter, there's a little prayer. So chapter, prayer, chapter, prayer, chapter, prayer. Two Thessalonians.

And as you look at the structure of two Thessalonians, Paul begins with the end in mind, and then he works backwards. Because what we believe about the future shapes the present.

Paul talks about what will happen on the day, then before the day, and then until the day. So this, try to get your head around this.

Paul covers these topics in reverse chronological order, because he begins with the end, and then he lands in the present. On the day, before the day, until the day. Firstly, on the day.

In the first chapter of 2 Thessalonians, Paul places his vision on the day. The day of the Lord, the day when Jesus returns, the day when Christ is all in all, and he wipes every tear away from our eyes.

The dominant theme of chapter one is what will happen on the day when Jesus comes back, because Paul begins with the end in mind. Verse five.

Paul says, all this, and he's referring to perseverance amidst persecution, all this is evidence that God's judgment is right.

And as a result, you will, note the future tense, you will, in the future, be counted worthy of the kingdom of God for which you are suffering.

God is just, he will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels.

He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might on the day.

On the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. And this includes you because you believed our testimony to you. It's all future tense.

You will, he will, they will, this will. All these things will happen on the day, the day of the Lord. That's what the Hebrew prophets spoke about from the depths of exile.

If you can remember that part of Israel's story, they looked forward to God's consummation of history, to the moment when God would both judge wickedness and sin and provide salvation for his people. They called it the day of the Lord.

So Joel chapter 3, for instance, Multitudes in the valley of Decision. For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of Decision. The sun and moon will be darkened and the stars no longer shine.

The Lord will roar from Zion and thunder from Jerusalem. The earth and the heavens will tremble, but the Lord will be a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel. That's the day of the Lord.

This universe-shaking event, when God will deal with sin and he will provide salvation. So here in Two Thessalonians, the topic of chapter one is the day. On the day Jesus comes back, five things Paul says will happen.

The faithful will be counted worthy of the kingdom. The troublers will be paid back trouble. The disobedient will be punished with everlasting destruction.

The unbelievers will be shut out from the presence of the Lord, and the Lord Jesus will be marveled at among those who have believed, or those who believe on the day. Now that is kind of heavy stuff, no?

This is pretty intense stuff that Paul talks about here in chapter one. You know how there's a lot of tears in this world? You know how creation groans under the weight of sin?

The great promise of the day of the Lord is that it will not always be so. On the day that Christ returns, he will wipe every tear from our eye. He will make all things new.

And so we look forward to that day, to the comfort and salvation that we will receive. But then there's this other part of the day that Paul talks about, the everlasting destruction part.

In verse eight, he will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.

I want to address this everlasting destruction so that it doesn't become something that you kind of cling to and can't kind of move through. Everlasting destruction. There are many different interpretations of the specifics of death after death.

By that, I mean not physical, bodily, natural death, but what comes after. Lots and lots of different options.

For what it's worth, my view, Jono's view is what has been called conditional immortality, which is the simple idea that unless God gives you eternal life, you don't get to live forever.

John 3.16, God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him shall have eternal life and not perish.

So conditional immortality is this view that everlasting destruction doesn't mean being destroyed for all eternity, but it means a destruction that is final and has an everlasting effect.

In the same way that when Scripture talks about the eternal salvation, the everlasting salvation, it doesn't mean that Jesus is forever hung on the cross, but it means that salvation was accomplished and then stands forever.

Whatever your view on the specifics of death after death, Paul's point I think is clear in 2 Thessalonians chapter 1. It is a dividing day, a day of division. That's the day of the Lord.

There's no gray on the day. It's black and white. It's night and day.

It's comfort and salvation or judgment and destruction, and there is no middle path. On the day, a line will be drawn, and that line is everlasting. On the day of the Lord.

Speaking of days, do you know what this Tuesday is? Stuart knows. What's Tuesday?

Census Day. Once every five years. You guys know it's Census Day, right?

Tuesday. That's a PSA. Tuesday is Census Day, where Australians fill out the census and give our government and services really important data.

There's a question in the census. What is the person's religion? And there's ten options.

No religion, Catholic, Anglican, Islam, Hinduism, Uniting Church, Buddhism, Presbyterian, Greek, Orthodox, Baptist, or other, please specify. And on Tuesday, if you've not done it already, you will make a decision. You will tick one of those boxes.

The day of decision. If I can pause for one second. If you are affiliated with the Baptist Church, put Baptist.

I know that we often preach that we're not, you know, Jew or Gentile, male and female, Anglican and Baptist, Presbyterian and Uniting, we're Christian, right? That's true. But for the sake of ABS, is that right?

The Australian Bureau of Statistics, Tick Baptist. This is coming from Steve Bartlett, who is the head of our Baptist churches in this state. It's really helpful for the government to have accurate data about the size of our movement.

So, if you're affiliated with the Baptist Church, and you are because you're in the room, vote Baptist on Tuesday. Vote Tick Baptist on the census day. What is your religion?

You're going to be asked that question. The day of decision is census day, but far more importantly, and far more urgently, the day of the Lord is coming. And there are not ten options.

There is no box that says kind of interested in Jesus, but keeping my options open. It's black and white, with Christ or without Christ, saved or not. So I'm trying to poke you a little bit to get you to make a decision.

CS. Lewis famously said, Christianity, if false, is of no importance whatsoever, and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important.

There's no gray on the day of the Lord. It's black and white. And so Paul begins with the end in mind, and he wants us to live in the present, in the light of the day of division that is coming.

There's no black and white. So as you fill out the census and as you tick Baptist, I wonder if you might think about the day of the Lord that is coming and that that might propel you to trust in Jesus today.

And that's how Paul closes chapter one with this prayer, verse 11.

With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith.

We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ. On the day, secondly, before the day.

In the second chapter of Two Thessalonians, Paul shortens his vision a little bit from what happens at the end of history to what comes before the end of history. That's the dominant theme of Chapter Two of Two Thessalonians.

What will happen before the day? So Paul continues with the end in mind, Chapter Two, verse one. Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, that is the day, on the day.

We ask you brothers and sisters not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by the teaching allegedly from us, whether by a prophecy or by word of mouth or by letter, asserting that the day of the Lord has already come.

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.

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.

Evidently, there was anxiety in the Thessalonian Church, that the day of the Lord has come and they've missed it. They've missed the train. But Paul says, the day has not come yet, because two things will happen before the day comes.

And you'll know the two things when you see them. He says, the rebellion will occur, and the man of lawlessness will be revealed. These are the two things that come before the day.

Rebellion is the Greek word, apostasia, apostasy, to abandon the faith, literally to stand apart from.

Lawlessness is anomia, from the word nomos, meaning law, to be without law, to not submit to structures of authority, especially to not submit to God.

So Paul says, two things will happen before that final day, the rebellion and the man of lawlessness will be removed. It will be, will rise, will ascend. What does that mean?

What is going on? Throughout church history, there have been countless options. Almost every generation has thought that it was somebody in their generation that was the man of lawlessness.

Pharaoh, king of Egypt, kind of fits the description. The kings of Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Antiochus, Epiphanes, Emperor Nero, lots and lots and lots of figures throughout church history have fit the bill.

But the problem with interpreting the man of lawlessness and the rebellion to very specific historical events is that Paul is a bit unclear. Let me give you a tip.

When you're reading the letters of the New Testament, remember you're reading somebody else's mail, which means you're only getting half the conversation.

Now that is important whenever you read any letter in the New Testament, especially here in 2 Thessalonians chapter 2, because Paul alludes to teaching allegedly from us, and we don't know what that is.

He then says, remember what I told you when I was with you, and we don't know what he said. So it's very clear that we're listening to somebody else's mail. We only have half the picture.

And so multiple scholars that I read in studying for this message gave the wise word of caution to us to avoid overly narrowly identifying the man of lawlessness with somebody in our generation.

Because it is sort of unclear what Paul is referring to. If nothing else, we know that the man of lawlessness has not yet fully come because the day of the Lord has not come.

And so we're not supposed to kind of go crazy with conspiracy theories, but I think we are invited to begin to look for the pattern that plays itself out throughout history.

Pharaoh, King of Egypt, didn't submit to God's law, pulled people away from faith in God. Countless stories throughout the history of the Bible and the history of the church. There have been apostates, people who leave faith.

I'm sure you know people in your life. It's hard when they walk away from faith. And there is this attitude of lawlessness under God.

So rather than going conspiracy hunting, I think the light shines on our hearts for the places where we are tempted to walk away from faith, where we are tempted to assert ourselves over God. The light of truth shines on us.

And so Paul says in chapter 2 verse 15, so then brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings, traditions is the word there, teachings that we passed on to you, whether by word or mouth or by letter.

So we are called to live faithful lives to God, clinging to him even amidst the questions that come in view of the day that is coming. And so Paul prays to close the second section, chapter 2 verse 16.

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope. May he encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.

Living with the end in mind, on the day, before the day, and finally until the day. In the third and final chapter of 2 Thessalonians, Paul lands his vision on the present day.

He's begun with the end in mind, on the day of the Lord, and then he's spoken about what comes before the day. Finally, he talks about the present, the kinds of lives that we are supposed to live until the day.

Paul concludes by reflecting on living with the end in mind. So, chapter three, verse six.

Paul says, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers and sisters, to keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive and does not live according to the teaching you received from us.

For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it.

On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this not because we don't have the right to such help, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate.

For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule. The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat. We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive.

They're not busy, they're busy bodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the food they eat. And as for you brothers and sisters, never tire of doing what is good.

We touched on these themes last week in One Thessalonians. Paul revisits them again. The context is that the Thessalonians thought Jesus was returning any day now.

Literally, he could be coming on the clouds right now. So why would I bother working? If he's literally coming any week, any day now, then what's the point of doing anything?

Why would I work for food? And so these Thessalonians who believe this would leech off of other people's generosity. The people who are working would feed them.

So Paul says, you've got this completely wrong. Keep away from believers who are idle. He points to his own example.

He worked night and day to not be a burden on anyone else as he preached the gospel. The Thessalonians thought that Jesus was returning any day now. And this was in the 50s AD.

Can you imagine if we time traveled and told them that we would be talking about this letter in 2000 years time? They were so wrong.

Well, imagine if somebody from 20,000 years into the future comes to us right now and says Jesus still hasn't come back yet. We don't know when the day of the Lord will come. But notice what Paul doesn't do in his response.

The Thessalonians think Jesus is coming back any day. Paul doesn't tell them that he's not. Paul doesn't say, by the way, guys, God's given me a tip.

It's not coming for at least 2,000 years, so chill. He never says that. Instead, he says, never tire of doing what is good.

Remember all those parables that Jesus told us, the parable of the 10 virgins, always ready. We don't know when the day will come. Only the Father knows, not even the Son.

But he will come one day when we don't expect it. And so our vision for these two years is that we might be a people always ready to see Christ, serve Christ, share Christ, and steward Christ, because we don't know when he is returning.

And Paul never promises that it's far off, but it is close. His point is verse 13, never tire of doing what is good. As long as it is called today, there is good works in the kingdom to do.

That's what we're supposed to do until the day. And we don't know when the day is, but we have the opportunity to do what is good. Have you heard the expression, rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic?

Rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic. It's an expression which means what you're doing doesn't matter. It's meaningless.

I mean, think literally. The Titanic is sinking, and people care about the orientation of the deck chairs. So people say, mate, waste of time.

We're rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic. That's the view that Paul is countering. People are saying, Jesus is coming back any day now, and yes, this world is broken.

Yes, there is good to do, but he's going to make it all better when he comes. So why would I bother doing anything? My life is just rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic.

It doesn't matter. That's the view that Paul is dealing with. And he says, no, you've got it so wrong.

Not because Jesus is coming back later than you think he is, but because while it is still called today, we have good works to do. He says, never tire of doing what is good.

The sum total of our life's work is not rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic. It's not a string of meaningless acts that don't do anything in the end. It's not a bunch of good that no one ever sees or cares about.

The sum total of our life's work is not rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic. But I think there's another image from the Titanic that is helpful for us, that gives us a vision of life until the day.

If you've seen James Cameron's movie, Titanic, do you remember the scene with the string quartet at the end of the movie? The Titanic is sinking. The unsinkable ship is sinking.

1,500 souls are perishing. It's chaos everywhere.

And on the deck of the sinking Titanic, a string quartet is playing a hymn to God, nearer my God to thee, nearer to thee, even though it be a cross that raiseth me, nearer my God to thee, nearer to thee.

That's a different perspective from rearranging deck chairs in the Titanic. In that moment, a bunch of Christians in history tells us they were Christians, played a hymn as the Titanic was sinking.

And the pragmatist trying to find a lifeboat says, what a waste! What is the point of playing a hymn while the Titanic is literally sinking? But what they're doing is consecrating that moment to God in beauty.

And what they did matters. It matters for eternity. They are not just rearranging deckchairs on the Titanic.

They're doing what Mary did with the alabaster jar. Do you remember days before Jesus was crucified, Mary broke the jar, a very expensive perfume, and poured it on Jesus' feet. And what did the pragmatist say?

What a waste! That money could have done so much stuff. But what does Jesus say?

She has done a beautiful thing to me. And he says, whenever the gospel is told, what she has done will be told. I'm going to, this is going to sound irreverent, but I mean this with all sincerity.

It's beauty for God's sake. A beautiful act, consecrating the Titanic as it was sinking, lasts for eternity. Our life is not rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic.

Every moment of goodness and truth and beauty for God's sake will last forever. And the pragmatist doesn't see that. The Thessalonians don't see that.

They say, what's the point? Jesus comes back and it's going to burn in hell anyway. He's going to make all things new, so why bother working?

Paul says, no, our lives matter. The things that we do matter. When we do beautiful acts in worship for God, it resounds for all eternity.

And so the young mother cleaning poopy nappies, beauty for God's sake. The grandfather praying for his lost grandson to come home, beauty for God's sake. The full-time worker laboring to bring good into this world, beauty for God's sake.

The single parent working multiple jobs to provide for her family, beauty for God's sake. A high school student going above and beyond in exams, beauty for God's sake. Can I encourage you in the name of Jesus, your life matters.

Your life is not rearranging deck chairs on the sinking Titanic, but we are invited until the day to consecrate every moment in beauty for God's sake. And that will last, and it will resound for all eternity.

Jesus said, it's a beautiful thing, and it will always be told. And so Paul prays to close the third section. May the Lord of Peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way.

The Lord be with all of you. I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand, which is the distinguishing mark in all my letters. This is how I write.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. And that's the end of Two Thessalonians. Paul begins with the end in mind.

He casts our vision, our eyes to the day of the Lord, the day of decision, and the fact that that changes the way that we live in the present. It changes the way we tick the box on the census.

We're called to be faithful before the day, to watch out for a faithless heart and for a heart that exalts itself above God.

But until the day, we are called to be people who never tire of doing what is good, who consecrate every moment in beautiful worship before God, even as the Titanic is sinking, because it remains. So live with the end in mind.

Live with the end in mind. And now to finish, I want to invite you to sing with the end in mind. Sing with the end in mind.

Have you ever noticed how all of the best psalms and spiritual songs from church history have an end verse?

Often it's the last verse, verse four or five, that lifts our focus, not in the past from what God did in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.

It tells that story, not even on the present, what God is doing right now, but lifts our eyes to the future because what we believe about the future shapes our present.

So think about this, how great thou art, when Christ shall come with shout of acclamation and take me home, what joy shall fill my heart. Think about, it is well with my soul. Lord, haste the day when the faith shall be sight.

They're singing about the end, amazing grace. The earth shall soon dissolve like snow. And then the next one, when we've been there 10,000 years, bright shining as the sun.

All these songs, I stand amazed, we sang it just this morning. And with the ransomed in glory, his face at last I shall see. It will be my joy through the ages to sing of his love for me.

A more modern example, I praise the name, he shall return in robes of white. The best songs of the Christian tradition lift our eyes onto the future because what we believe about the future impacts the present.

So I want to invite you now to sing with the end in mind. We're gonna sing two songs that have that kind of verse. And as you sing that, can we together believe what we are singing, that he shall return and he will wipe our tears away.

He will renew all things, not because our lives don't matter, but precisely because they do. Can we sing with the end in mind? Would you like to stand?

As the band come up, let me pray for us. And then we're gonna sing until the day of the Lord. Our father, we thank you for your grace.

We thank you that our past has been dealt with in Christ's death on the cross and by his resurrection. We thank you that your spirit is present even now. You're the god of the eternal now, and you always meet us right where we are.

But god, we thank you for the future. We thank you that we know how the story ends, and it gives us hope today. So I pray for my brothers and sisters.

We are a kind of motley crew in this room. We've had all sorts of weeks of suffering and of joy and of challenge and of opportunity. We bring it all before you.

Grateful that we know how the story ends, that you're the god who works all things together for your purpose, for the ones that you love.

So now god, as we sing, by your spirit, would you give us more passion, more volume, not because volume is the end, but we want to mean the things that we're saying, that as we sing about the end, it might transform our present for your glory.

In Jesus' name, amen.