

Stay on the Path

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[0 : 00] Good evening. As ever, do keep that passage open in front of you. Apologies, I've got a little bit of a cough, so hopefully that won't bother us too much. But yes, do keep that passage open in front of you and let me pray before we begin.

Heavenly Father, would you open our eyes that they would see, and our ears that we would hear, and our hearts that we might receive your Son this evening.

For we pray in his precious name. Amen. And when I was at school, there was one day in particular in the school calendar that I dreaded above all others.

Maybe this is familiar to you if you think back to your time at school. There was one day in the school year that I think almost nobody looked forward to. Of course, there probably were those who actually did look forward to it.

Each year must have had one or two nutters in it that we all knew would probably do quite well. There was always chat about which of those nutters would win. But most of us, certainly me, I dreaded that day.

[1 : 10] It was the school cross-country race. Don't know if your school had a day like that, but for me it was awful. At my school, we were right out in the middle of nowhere, and so the course, the path that we had to run, and we did have to run it, it was mandatory unless we were in a hospital bed.

And the path, it took us through dense woods, across a badly kept countryside golf course, through farmer's fields. We really were in the middle of nowhere. And so there I was, 16 years old, never really been a runner, more of a rugby player, most of you know that, and I was on the start line.

And I know that the only way that I'm ever going to finish this race is to stay on the path. Lots of opportunities for me to get lost in the woods, to cut across the golf course.

But if I'm going to finish this race, I need to put one foot in front of the other and stay on the path. That might be a familiar metaphor for the Christian life.

Lots of writers have taken up this metaphor. Maybe most famously, John Bunyan in Pilgrim's Progress. It's sort of like that as Christian, the main character. He navigates life. And the key takeaway for him is to stay on the path.

[2 : 20] And of course, the New Testament writers, they employ a language like that, even specifically about the race. The writer to the Hebrews does that. And Paul, who wrote the letter that we're in this evening, as he wrote this other letter to guys in Corinth, he says, run the race.

Finish the race. In other words, keep the faith. Don't get distracted. Stay on the path. And I think that's precisely Paul's point for us this evening.

As we think about all the different ways that we might think about how the world works, as we consider what we believe about life, about humanity, about God, about the final destination of it all, the end of the race, there are just so many options out there, aren't there?

So many worldviews competing in the great marketplace of ideas. There's all the different religions. There's all the non-religious ideas. But even within those, I mean, even within Christianity, the options are endless.

Different styles of worship, different ways of organizing church leadership, different schemes for understanding the big picture of the Bible. And most relevant for us in our passage today, different ideas about what will happen at the end of the race.

[3 : 35] But Paul's main point for us, and the main point of this passage is this. More often than not, those things are distractions. Distractions away from a simple, humble faith in Christ.

Distractions seeking to take us off the path. You see, that's really what Paul is saying to the church in Thessalonica. Stay on the path. And this is the issue in verse one.

Have a look at verse one. The issue straight off the bat concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus and our being gathered to him. So there are some ideas circulating in this church about Jesus's return, about when that might happen, even that it already has.

And exactly what might happen to Christians at that time. It's speculation. Speculation that the end of the race has already come. It's as though you get to school on the day of the cross country run. And you've got all your kit on. You're ready to go. And you bump into a friend. And he couldn't look less prepared for the race. Haven't you heard? Didn't you know the race has been cancelled?

[4 : 42] You don't need to run. You feel this great wave of relief. Except he's lying to you. It's a deception. And that relief will very soon be shattered when you realize that the race is in fact not over.

And it's a deception a bit like that going on in Thessalonica. And so he urges them. Paul urges this church in verse 2 not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by this teaching allegedly from us.

The church there, they seem to have received a letter. And there's some teaching going around claiming to be from Paul, saying that the race has been run, that Jesus has already returned.

And I guess there are a number of things that that sort of teaching might have caused. They might have said something like, Jesus has come and the kingdom has come. And so now everyone can be healed of all sickness and poverty and suffering.

Everything should be God as God intended it today. And if you have enough faith and believe well enough, you will experience that here and now because Jesus has come. Sounds attractive, that sort of teaching, doesn't it?

[5 : 47] But it doesn't take long to realize just how disappointing that sort of teaching would have been. Not least for this church facing, as we've seen over the last couple of weeks with Alistair, real persecution for their faith.

How disappointing when they're being taught that Jesus has returned, that the Christian then has already arrived. I think that's probably why there's an emphasis here in this book at the end of chapter one.

And in our passages, we'll see that the emphasis that in this life, the Christian is to live a particular way to grow and to be transformed in this life. But also that, and implicit in that, that the Christian has not yet already arrived, does not yet share in the perfect glory of Jesus.

Why? Because he has not yet returned. And so they've got to be thinking, if he's come, if Jesus has come and this is it, well, either we were never really saved, or what he actually came to do wasn't really that good.

So disappointing. And not only disappointing, but apparently for them, demotivating. This is even more explicit in this letter. This teaching seems to have caused members of this church to stop going to work.

[7 : 01] We'll come to that in a couple of weeks in chapter three. But this is really the main practical problem that Paul is addressing in the church in Thessalonica. It's idleness. It appears as though they've given up their jobs, that they're demotivated.

And maybe because they think, well, the kingdom has come. We have arrived. We don't need to work anymore. Maybe they're devoting themselves to promoting this new sort of teaching. And I dare say it looked holy and impressive.

But, says Paul, it is a deception. They have strayed from the path. But for us today, well, the issue here in 21st century Scotland probably isn't the same, is it?

I don't think we've got people here at Brunfield quitting their jobs in order to preach this sort of message. And so I think most fundamentally for us, the key here, the main application for us is that we ought to avoid the sort of teaching that claims as Christians that we have already arrived.

The sort of claims that say we can bring heaven to earth. That because Jesus has returned, we can share in his glory today. Because that is the great deception that the Thessalonians face.

[8 : 09] And Paul would say to us, stay on the path. Stay on the path. There is another temptation, I think, for us when we come to a passage like this.

And it's actually just to ignore Paul's main point altogether. To ignore that primary application. And instead to dive headfirst into all sorts of speculation. As we've seen right at the start in verse 1, it's about the coming of our Lord Jesus and our being gathered to him.

I think there are probably few verses, let alone topics, that have caused so much disagreement in the church as this. We all come at it with our own ideas and our frameworks.

And we'll come to our own conclusions on it. But Paul would, I think, urge us in unity not to waste our time. Not to get distracted by that sort of thinking, but instead to stay on the path.

We could go around the houses discussing and speculating and proof texting. But for what it's worth, I think we really have to say on this stuff that we just don't know everything.

[9 : 13] And no amount of chart making or diagramming or even Bible study is going to give us everything that we would like here. Because ultimately, see in verse 5 what Paul says.

He says to the church there, don't you remember that when I was with you, I used to tell you these things? You know, I would have just loved to have been there. In Thessalonica, when Paul was explaining exactly what's going to happen when Jesus returns, exactly what that will be like.

I would have loved to have been there, but I wasn't. We weren't there and it's clear then that we just don't know everything about these things. We don't know what Paul said to them.

And so it's very hard to know exactly what Paul is talking about here. I trust the original readers, the guys who received this letter, were able to make more of it than we can. But wherever we land on this, on the coming of Jesus and precisely what will happen to believers and when that will happen, we have to come to a text like this with real humility and say that we just don't know everything that we would like to know about these things.

And yet we have been given everything that we need to stay on the path, to see, as is Paul's main point, that Jesus hasn't come yet and to know that one day he will.

[10 : 34] And that when he does, the victory will be his and that if we stand firm and hold fast in faith, we will share in his glory. But first we have a race to run.

So that's where we're headed this evening. And as we do that, as we walk through this text, we're going to meet these two characters, the man of lawlessness and then Jesus himself. And we'll sort of compare and contrast them.

So let's begin with this man of lawlessness and see what Paul tells the Thessalonians at the end of verse three. That day, the day that Jesus returns, will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed.

So the first thing that he says about this man is that he will be revealed along with the rebellion before or maybe even alongside Jesus's return. And as he is revealed, we will see that he brings his own sort of deception.

You might think of it like that. I guess if we're going to keep going with this cross-country run illustration. It's as though Paul is saying you won't get to the finish line without meeting this guy. Maybe you can picture the sort of guy in your head.

[11 : 45] He's sort of the year's cool kid. Really, he's just badly behaved and lazy. And all the teachers seem to love him. And no one knows why. You know the guy. And you're on the cross-country run. You're on the path.

And it's not far from the finish line. And he's there leaning against a tree. He's probably smoking a rollie. And he says, this race is a waste of time. Come and hang out with me instead.

And it sounds fun. And it sounds exciting. And it sounds easier. See, the man of lawlessness, he has a deception of his own. And it's sort of like that what he's doing here.

See in verse 4. In other words, he sets himself up as an alternative way.

He proclaims himself to be God. He wants people to worship him. He says, you don't need to run this ridiculous race anymore. Come and hang out with me. And this is what Paul is warning against.

[12 : 41] And in a sense, this has already started. See in verses 6 and 7. Again, we see there that there is a sense in which his secret power is at work already.

Yes, it has not yet been revealed. He is held back in some way. Again, I don't think it's worth speculating on precisely what that looks like. As we look at verse 5, remember that we weren't there.

Augustine, one of the most famous commentators on the Bible of all time, he said about this, frankly, I have no idea what Paul is talking about. And so I think we can safely say that we don't either.

But what we can say is that it's clear that that power is at work in the world today. We all know that there is a power that is beyond our control, that is deceiving people and leading them off the path of faith in their creator.

And yet, that power is restrained and held back. That one day it will be revealed. But Paul says to the Thessalonians, until that has happened, and I think the implication here is that you will know

that it has happened.

[13:50] Until that has happened, you can be sure that the Lord has not returned. So, how will they know?

How can they be sure? What will he be like? Well, have a look at verse 9. Some clues for us. In verse 9, it says he will come with real power. That it's the power of Satan.

That there will be signs and wonders. That it will look like the real deal. It's persuasive. As you run the race, it's like he says, I know a shortcut, a better way to the finish line.

Come with me, we can skip the golf course. Cut out a mile or two. You'll win the race with me. Paul says, beware. This is going to be super persuasive, but it is a deception.

And it's a deception that leads in verse 10 to what? Perishing. And why do they perish? Perish. It's because they refused to love the truth.

[14:53] This, I think, is so important in this letter. The refusal to love the truth. It's not simply that the man of lawlessness will cause people to walk away from Jesus in their minds.

To stop simply believing in him. But that he will stir their affections away from the truth. Again, don't we see that this power is at work today and is yet restrained?

And as a result, and this is pretty chilling, isn't it? In verse 11, God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie.

As their affections are turned away from their creator and as they willfully reject him, as they follow this man of lawlessness, God gives them over to their own wickedness.

Friends, this is happening today. As the world around us is walking out of step with their creator, deceived, away from the truth. Though he has not yet been revealed and he is restrained, this power is clearly at work today.

[16:00] Turning humanity's affections away from the truth, away from Jesus, away from their creator. It's just worth pausing here. A brief aside for us, I think, because there may be a tendency to be ultimately concerned for us about an intellectual assent to the truth of this.

In other words, what we are trying to persuade people of and keep ourselves in is this. A belief in the historical event of the resurrection. I guess that's what it boils down to.

If Jesus lived, which all serious historians agree that he did, if he claimed to be God, again, most historians think he probably did, if he died on a cross, again, historians agree, the question is, did he really come back to life, proving that he was who he said he was, proving that his death on the cross really was effective, that through him we can be forgiven and granted eternal life in him.

It's the gospel. It's what we believe is true as Christians. But, says Paul, it's not as simply as objective as that, because God is also concerned, maybe even primarily concerned with this.

Do we love the truth? The gospel is true. Objectively, it's true. Jesus really did die. He really did rise again. That is true.

[17:24] We read just earlier in Acts chapter 17, how Paul, when he was in Thessalonica, reasoned and explained and proved the gospel. It's true.

And we should be convincing people that it's true. But the question here is this. Is the news really good? Do we really love the God whose gospel it is?

The one who created you, who knows every hair of your head, who has seen and does see the murky depths of your heart, and yet who loves you dearly, so much that he would do everything in his power to rescue you from the condemnation that your rejection of him deserves.

Because he first loved you, would you refuse to be deceived and love the lie, and instead love him in return? And if that's true of you, and if you are known and loved by God, and you know and love him too, wouldn't you want others to know and love their creator too?

Not for your sake, not even just for their sake, but for the sake of this glorious and wondrous and jealous God. The one who, as we heard this morning, is seeking worshippers who will worship him in spirit and in truth.

[18:50] Because this is the deception of the man of lawlessness. It is to draw the affections of humanity away from their maker. Until he is revealed, this power is at work today.

And as he is revealed, what does he do? He sets himself up to be worshipped explicitly in the place of God. He comes with real power and persuasive signs and wonders, and many will be deceived by him into perishing.

But ultimately, and this is the kicker, this is how we'll know, in these verses, he is not going to win. See at the end of verse 3, this is a man doomed to destruction.

And again, in verse 8, it seems immediately, as he is revealed, and then straight away with a mere breath, the Lord Jesus will destroy him.

He will not win. Paul says to the Thessalonians, Jesus has not yet come. He has not returned. I think even going from what we have here, even without having been there for this sort of conversations alluded to in verse 5, we can say, the man of lawlessness has not yet been revealed. [20 : 04] His power is at work today, but he has not yet been fully revealed. For when he is, he will be finally defeated, and Jesus will return. It's worth saying then, for us, it remains the burden of this passage.

Paul would say, stay on the path. First and foremost, do not stray in the direction of the sort of disappointing and demotivating teaching that says Jesus has returned.

But maybe more pressing for us here in the room is this warning and an encouragement not to get caught up in the speculation and the predictions. It's really just in the last hundred years or so in particular, there has been this tendency, especially in our circles, to try and equate this man with a person or an event in history.

I wonder, it might have stemmed from the world wars, and I actually have quite a lot of sympathy for those during world wars on the front line, the world seemingly collapsing around them, to point at someone like Hitler and make that sort of an assumption.

But figures like that, Hitler came and went, didn't he? And Jesus has not returned. Others would do this today, point to people or events today, to Donald Trump or the EU or the Pope.

[21 : 22] And of course, the restrained power of that man might be in any number of deceptive ideologies today. But friends, that's simply not the point of this passage.

We're not supposed to be trying to work out who the man of lawlessness is. Paul says to the Thessalonians, Jesus has not yet returned, and you'll know when he does. Because that power that is at work in the world today, he will be revealed for who and what he is, and then he will be immediately defeated by Jesus.

And until that happens, one foot in front of the other, stay on the path. As we turn then to Jesus, let's go back to that cross-country race.

This guy, he's doing everything he can to distract you from the path with all the temptation and deception of his powers. And so what is it that keeps us running?

How do we actually stay on the path? Well, let's see what Paul is saying about the church in Thessalonica. And notice his tone as he says it. Paul does not say, you idiot.

[22 : 31] I can't believe you've fallen for this deception that says that Jesus has already returned. He doesn't even just shake at them and tell them how disappointed he is. Instead, how does he combat this?

Well, what does he say in verse 13? We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, loved by the Lord.

Why? Because God chose you as firstfruits to be saved. In other words, what Paul is saying is you really are Christians. You can imagine, can't you, this church terrified that Jesus has returned and that they've missed the boat, that somehow they weren't really saved.

Well, says Paul, with deep encouragement, with gentleness, and with patience, this is how you stay on the path. As you put one foot in front of the other, fix your eyes and your heart on these truths. though you have been deceived, you are loved by the Lord. He has chosen you. You are saved. And this is how they'll know that this is true of them, back in verse 13.

[23 : 41] It is through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. Here are two sure signs that you have been chosen and loved and saved.

First, that you are actually becoming increasingly like Jesus as the Holy Spirit works in you and transforms your heart. That's part of his sanctifying work in the life of every believer. And yet, even as that happens, and secondly, you continue to believe in the truth.

In other words, you continue to daily see your need for Jesus, who is the truth. Becoming more like Jesus and yet needing him more every single day. That is what the Christian life is.

That is what the Christian has been called to. How? Well, in verse 14, it is through our gospel, through this good news that you have been saved by grace through faith for his glory.

Paul is simply saying, yes, you've been deceived. Let me remind you of the gospel. And he points them to Jesus. He says, stay on the path. Look to Jesus. You really are Christians.

[24 : 45] You haven't missed the boat. You are loved. You are chosen. You are saved. And for us, I think this should be of great encouragement.

In all of our speculation on this stuff, wherever it is that we've landed, and I know that there's disagreement in the room, which means that some of us must be wrong. Each of us, I guess, probably wrong on some details here and there.

Paul would be very gentle and patient with us, urging us to stay on the path, reminding us of the beautiful center of it all, that it is that in Christ you are loved, in Christ you are chosen, and in Christ you are saved.

And if you're here this evening and you've been sitting there really wondering, what on earth I'm talking about? You've never really thought about the end at all. Maybe you've been in Bible studies or small groups or whatever, and you just feel like you never know the right answer.

Maybe you feel like to be a proper Christian you have to have all this stuff clear in your head. We'll see how Paul approaches this issue with the Thessalonians. They've got some things, some pretty big things, really fundamentally wrong, and he is just simply and gently and patiently reminding them of the truth, and he points them to Jesus.

[26 : 06] Loved, chosen, saved. And I guess there's a lesson for those of us teaching the Bible, and there are many of us in the room who do that, whether in small groups or preaching or one-to-ones.

Certainly for me, convicted of the need to pay attention to Paul's method here, to be more humble and gentle and patient and ultimately focused on and pointing people to Christ, to stay on the path. So this is who Jesus is. In contrast to the man of lawlessness, in verse 8, he wins a victory so powerful that it's with a mere breath.

And in verses 13 and 14, as we've just read, he loves his people. He works with the Father and the Spirit to choose them and to transform them and to call them through his gospel.

He has done everything necessary to make that possible and ultimately, see at the end of verse 14, it is so that they might share in his glory.

[27 : 13] For that is the promise, that he will one day return, that he will be victorious, and that those who believe in him and who love him, who stand firm in faith, will share in his glory.

With resurrection body, they too will be raised as he was raised from death to eternal life, to be gathered to him forever. It has not happened yet, but it is the wonderful promise of the Christian gospel.

We are offered real forgiveness and freedom today as we look to the cross where he died in our place. But incredibly here, we are offered eternal glory when he returns to do final justice when the race is run.

And so this is where we finish. In verse 15, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you. The cross-country race is a daunting day.

There are temptations and deceptions from start to finish convincing you that you don't need to run the race, that it's already been run, or as you run, that you might as well give up, that there's a shortcut here or there, an easier way, more fun to be had.

[28 : 31] But then you remember, with your eyes fixed on Jesus and the finish line, the point here is not to avoid thinking about the end of the race, but to avoid speculating about it.

And instead, in faith, one foot in front of the other, stand firm, hold fast, for Jesus is and will be victorious.

Trust in him. Love him as he has loved you. Stay on the path. I'm going to hand back over to Fiona shortly as we respond to God's word, but first, a moment of silence and then I'll pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for Jesus, for all that he has done for us to make a way for us to be forgiven, to stand righteous before your throne.

And we pray that as we think about his return, his justice, his victory, that we would, in unity, be able to keep our eyes focused on this most important truth, that by your spirit you would keep us firmly on the path, that you would guide our feet and lift our eyes, that we might see Jesus, that we might know Jesus, that we might love Jesus.

[30 : 07] All for your glory. Amen.