

Dr. David Mathewson, New Testament Literature,

Session 24 - Philemon, Thessalonians

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Welcome to our deep dive, you guys, into Paul's letters. Today, we're looking at Philemon and the Thessalonians, and we're going to be using Dr. Dave Mathewson's New Testament lectures as our main source. So get ready for some seriously thought-provoking stuff.

We're going to tackle some big questions, like why didn't Paul just come straight out and condemn slavery, and what can we learn from what he taught the Thessalonians about the end times? It's so easy to look back at these letters, you know, through our modern lens and wonder why Paul didn't take, like, a more radical stance, you know, on certain issues. But to understand his message, we really need to step back into the first-century world. Okay, so let's talk about slavery.

Paul wrote a letter to Philemon Wright, a slave owner, but he never explicitly says, "This is wrong; stop it. Was that just Paul turning a blind eye, or is there something more to it? It's a question that has puzzled scholars for centuries. Dr. Mathewson reminds us that slavery in the Roman world was drastically different from what we think of today.

For example, it wasn't based on race. People became slaves for all sorts of reasons, from war captivity to crushing debt. So if you hit hard times, you could actually choose to become a slave just to survive.

That's mind-blowing. It is. And the treatment of slaves varied so widely.

Some were subjected to brutal conditions, like those working in the mines. Others, especially household slaves, might actually have a better life than they did as free people. Wow.

So slavery wasn't this clear-cut, universally evil institution like it is in our minds today. It was woven into the fabric of society almost like a necessary evil. Exactly.

And that's where Dr. Mathewson's insight gets really interesting. He suggests that directly attacking slavery head-on could have actually backfired, maybe even harmed the early Christian movement. So instead of a direct assault, could Paul have been playing the long game? Maybe he believed that the gospel's message of equality in Christ would slowly but surely dismantle slavery from within.

That's a compelling theory. And it aligns with what Paul wrote in Galatians. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

If you think about it, that statement was radical for its time. Could Paul have been planting these seeds of social change? You know, the ones that would eventually bloom into the abolition movements we saw centuries later? It's like those ripples he created are still expanding outward even today. Absolutely.

Dr. Mathewson quotes scholar F.F. Bruce. He said that the gospel would have created an environment where slavery could only wilt and die. It makes you wonder how Paul would tackle these complex social issues in our world today.

Speaking of challenging social norms, Paul's letters to the Thessalonians also tackled some pretty controversial issues of the time. In these letters, we see Paul addressing the very real concerns of an early Christian community, you know, grappling with anxieties about the end times. Remember, this was a church Paul founded in Thessalonica, which is in modern-day Greece, during his second missionary journey.

And just like with his letters to the Corinthians, it seems he was putting out fires and offering guidance on specific problems popping up in the church. What kind of issues were the Thessalonians facing? Well, Dr. Mathewson points out that in 1 Thessalonians, Paul covers two major areas. Sexual purity and anxieties about the second coming of Christ.

Makes sense. Thessalonica was a Roman city, and let's just say Roman culture wasn't exactly known for its prudishness. Paul is probably urging the new Christians to break away from those old habits.

Exactly. He was calling them to a higher standard of living, one that rejected the rampant immorality of Roman society. Now, when it comes to the second coming, the Thessalonians had some really specific anxieties.

I bet. The end of the world- that's always a popular topic. What were they freaking out about? It seems they were wrestling with a question that has haunted humanity for ages.

What happens to those who die before Christ returns? Do they miss out on the whole shebang? It's a natural concern, wouldn't you say? Absolutely. What does Paul say to comfort them? He actually offers a very comforting message. In chapter 4, he assures them that when Christ returns, those who have died in Christ will rise first, and then they'll be reunited with believers who are still alive.

It's such a powerful image of hope, and it's no wonder that passage is often read at funerals. But its message resonates beyond just grief. It taps into a deeper longing for reunion and the ultimate triumph over death.

Precisely. And this leads us into a deeper exploration of how Paul addressed the whole end times maze, which, let's be honest, can be both fascinating and a little confusing. Okay, so let's unpack that.

Help us navigate this end-times maze. What were the prevailing beliefs about the end of the world back then? To understand Paul's teachings, we need to look at Jewish eschatology, which heavily influenced early Christian thought. Dr. Mathewson explains that Jewish eschatology viewed history as being divided into two ages.

There's the present age, which is dominated by evil and sin. And then there's the age to come when God will ultimately triumph, bringing judgment and renewal to the world. Exactly.

And many Jewish texts envisioned a period of intense suffering preceding this age, often described as birth pangs, those painful contractions before new life emerges. Okay, I'm starting to see the picture here. So where does 1 Thessalonians 4.17 fit into all this? You know, the verse about being caught up in the clouds, which many call the rapture.

Ah, yes, the rapture. It's a verse that has sparked endless debate and speculation. The big question is, when does this catching up happen in relation to those end-times woes? The tribulation.

So are we talking pre-tribulation, mid-tribulation, or post-tribulation rapture? I've heard all these terms thrown around, but I could use a little clarification. You're not alone. Let's break it down.

The pre-tribulation view, probably the most popular, says believers are raptured before the tribulation begins. So we get whisked away to safety while everyone else goes through the wringer. Interesting.

What about the other two views? Well, as you can guess, mid-tribulation places the rapture smack dab in the middle of the tribulation. So we get front-row seats to the apocalypse for a while before being rescued. You can see it that way.

And then there's the post-tribulation rapture, which holds that the rapture and the second coming are actually the same event happening after the tribulation. So in this view, believers go through the entire ordeal alongside everyone else. Wow.

Those are three wildly different interpretations. Which one is right? Mathewson, spill the beans. Well, here's where it gets even more intriguing.

Dr. Mathewson, the rascal, refuses to reveal his own stance on the rapture. He does, however, emphasize that throughout history, the church has tolerated diverse views on this issue. The core belief is in Christ's return; the timing and details are open to interpretation.

That's a good point. We can agree on the main event, even if we disagree on the pre-show. What are some other important details from 1 Thessalonians that help us understand what Paul was trying to convey? Well, there's 1 Thessalonians 5.1, which suggests that Paul had already talked about these end-times matters with the Thessalonians in person.

So what he's writing in the letter is more of a recap than a comprehensive explanation. Ah, so we're missing some pieces of the puzzle. Maybe that's why it's so hard to figure out exactly what Paul meant about the timing of the rapture.

Exactly. There's also debate about whether the phrase Word of the Lord in 4.15, refers to a direct revelation that Paul received, or if it's echoing Jesus's teachings in Matthew 24. Matthew 24.

What's so special about that? Well, Matthew 24 is where Jesus delivers his longest teaching about the second coming. And there are some striking parallels with what Paul says in 1 Thessalonians. It's like a deep dive within a deep dive.

So to really get this, we have to piece together information from multiple sources and keep the historical and cultural context in mind. It's like being a biblical detective. Precisely.

And speaking of piecing things together, we need to address the elephant in the room. Why did Paul need to write a second letter to the Thessalonians so soon after the first? It seems their apocalyptic anxieties hadn't quite settled down. What happened? Did they misinterpret something in the first letter? It seems so.

From 2 Thessalonians, it appears the Thessalonians took Paul's words a bit too literally and got the idea that they were already living in the day of the Lord, God's final intervention. So they thought the world was about to end. I can see why Paul needed to step in and clarify things.

Dr. Mathewson even makes a humorous comparison to modern-day doomsday predictions. He mentions one recently that claimed the world would end on May 12th, which of course would have meant his students would miss their finals. Oh no, not finals.

Too bad for them that prediction didn't pan out. So what did Paul say in 2 Thessalonians to calm their apocalyptic fears? He reiterated that the day of the Lord hadn't arrived yet and explained that certain events must precede it. Okay, I'm on the edge of my seat.

Tell me what these events are. Give me the details. He mentions a rebellion, the emergence of a man of lawlessness, and the removal of a mysterious restrainer that's currently holding back evil.

Whoa, that sounds intense. But what do those things actually mean? Well, that's where things get a little murky. Paul's descriptions are pretty vague, leaving much open to interpretation.

It's almost as if he's dangling a carrot, giving us a sneak peek behind the curtain of history, but leaving us wanting more. Okay, now I'm really hooked. We've covered a lot of ground here, but it feels like we're just scratching the surface.

What's next on our deep dive agenda? Let's delve deeper into those events preceding the day of the Lord. The rebellion, the man of lawlessness, and the mysterious restrainer. It's a topic ripe for analysis.

I think you'll find it quite fascinating. Ready to continue. Absolutely.

Let's dive back in. Okay, so we're back, and we're about to untangle those mysterious events Paul says will happen before the day of the Lord. He mentions a rebellion, a man of lawlessness, and a restrainer.

And I don't know about you, but this has my imagination working overtime. It's like Paul's giving us all these puzzle pieces, but without the picture on the box. So we have to use our knowledge of scripture and history, and even a little bit of intuition, just to try and figure out what he meant.

Okay, let's start with the rebellion. You mentioned that it's often interpreted as a turning away from God, a kind of spiritual apostasy. But how widespread does this rebellion have to be? Does everyone abandon their faith? That's the million-dollar question.

And unfortunately, Paul doesn't give us a percentage or a head count. It's possible he envisioned a mass exodus from the church, like a dramatic in-your-face rejection of God. Almost like a spiritual revolution, where people are just throwing off the shackles of faith and declaring allegiance to something else.

Yeah, that's one interpretation. But it could also be a more subtle erosion of faith, you know, a slow but steady drift away from God's truth. So instead of a sudden explosion, it's more like a gradual fading away, like a fire slowly burning out.

That's another possibility. It's fascinating to think about how this might play out in different historical contexts. What do you think a rebellion against God would look like in our world today? That's a tough one.

I guess it could manifest in a lot of ways. The rise of secularism, the rejection of traditional morality, maybe even the outright persecution of believers. Those are all valid interpretations.

The point is, Paul leaves enough ambiguity to make us really think critically about what constitutes a true rebellion against God. It challenges us to examine not just the actions of others, but also the state of our own hearts. Okay, now let's talk about the man of lawlessness.

It's a phrase that just conjures up images of this charismatic leader, someone who seduces people with empty promises and leads them down a dangerous path. Yes, it's such a powerful image. And many scholars believe that Paul had a specific individual in mind, someone who would embody the spirit of rebellion against God.

Some even point to the concept of the Antichrist. Like the ultimate bad guy, the embodiment of evil. Exactly.

But remember, Paul's writing was often very symbolic. So it's possible that the man of lawlessness isn't a literal person, but rather a representation of something bigger. So it could be a system of beliefs, a corrupt institution, a movement, or an ideology that just opposes God's will.

Precisely. And that interpretation is especially relevant in our world today, where we see so many competing ideologies vying for our allegiance. It challenges us to discern the spirits behind these movements and just hold fast to what is true.

And then there's the Restrainer. This one really stumps me. We know it's something that's holding back evil, but Paul doesn't give us many clues about its identity.

It's like a riddle wrapped in a mystery. It is. And scholars have come up with all sorts of possibilities.

God himself, the Holy Spirit, the Church, even the Roman Empire. Wow, that's quite a range. It seems Dr. Mathewson, true to form, doesn't take a firm stance on this one either.

Does he offer any insights that might help us kind of narrow it down? He does point out that Paul may have been referring to something he'd already discussed with the Thessalonians in person, so they may have known exactly what he meant while we're left in the dark. So we're missing some inside information. I guess that's the nature of studying ancient texts.

Sometimes we just have to be comfortable with a bit of mystery. But even without knowing the Restrainer's identity, we can still glean something valuable from this passage. Absolutely.

The key takeaway here is that God is actively involved in restraining evil in the world. It's not like he's sitting on the sidelines watching chaos unfold. He's working behind the scenes, setting limits on the power of darkness and preserving a space for good to flourish.

That's a very reassuring thought, especially when we look around and see so much suffering and injustice in the world. It's easy to get discouraged and wonder if God has abandoned us. But Paul's words remind us that God is still in control, even when things seem bleak.

The Restrainer, whatever it may be, is a testament to God's mercy, you know, his desire to give humanity time to repent and turn to him. It's like a buffer, a period of grace where God is holding back the full force of evil to give us a chance to choose good over evil, light over darkness. Exactly.

And it reminds us that we have a role to play as well. We're not just passive bystanders in this cosmic drama. We're called to partner with God in restraining evil through our prayers, our actions, and our commitment to living lives that reflect his goodness.

So it's not just about waiting for God to swoop in and fix everything. It's about actively participating in the work of bringing light and hope into the world. Precisely.

And that brings us back to the Thessalonians and their anxiety about the end times. And they were so focused on when and how it would all happen that they were missing out on the present moment, on the opportunity to live their faith in tangible ways. So Paul's message to them and to us is to keep our eyes fixed on the horizon, but to also be fully present in the here and now, to live each day as if it were our last, but to also work towards a future where God's kingdom is more fully realized on Earth.

Yes. It's a delicate balance, but a necessary one. And that's the beauty of Paul's letters.

They challenge us to think deeply, to wrestle with these complex ideas, and to find meaning and guidance for our lives, even amidst uncertainty and ambiguity. Okay, so we've explored the rebellion, the man of lawlessness, and the restrainer. It feels like we've been on this rollercoaster ride through Paul's apocalyptic vision, but amidst all the twists and turns, I'm starting to see a bigger picture emerge.

What's that? It seems Paul is giving us more than just a preview of what's to come. He's also challenging us to live our faith in a way that prepares us for whatever the future holds. He's calling us to be agents of light in a world that's increasingly shrouded in darkness.

That's a profound insight, and it leads us perfectly into the final piece of this puzzle. How do these three elements, the rebellion, the man of lawlessness, and the restrainer, all come together in Paul's vision of the end times? Ready to tackle that? Absolutely, let's get to it. All right, so we've been on this incredible journey through Paul's letters, and now it's time to connect the dots.

We've got these three elements: the rebellion, the man of lawlessness, and the restrainer. How do they all fit together in Paul's vision of the end times? It's like those mystery novels, where all the seemingly random clues start to make sense as you get closer to the end. Yeah.

Remember Paul was writing to a community that was deeply anxious about the future? I mean, they thought the world was about to end. Right, they were so focused on the when that they missed out on the how. You know, how to live faithfully in the present.

Exactly. So Paul reassures them. He's like, hey, God is in control.

He explains that certain things need to happen first. And he uses these vivid images of the rebellion, the man of lawlessness, and the removal of the restrainer to kind of paint a picture of what that might look like. So it's not just a random list of events.

They're connected somehow. Precisely. It seems Paul is suggesting a sequence of events, a kind of chain reaction.

The removal of the restrainer will likely pave the way for the rebellion. And that rebellion will culminate in the appearance of the man of lawlessness. So it's like a dam holding back a flood.

Once the dam breaks, the water rushes in, and all hell breaks loose. That's a powerful analogy. And it underscores the idea that even though God is ultimately in control, he allows evil to have its season, you know, to run its course before he intervenes.

But why would God allow that? Why wouldn't he just, like, stop evil in its tracks? That's a question that has challenged theologians for centuries. Some believe it's about free will. God allows humanity to make its own choices, even if those choices lead to suffering.

Others suggest it's about revealing the true nature of evil, exposing its emptiness and futility. So it's not that God is powerless to stop evil. It's that he has a deeper purpose in allowing it to play out, even if we don't fully understand that purpose.

That's one way to look at it. And it reminds us that God's ways are not our ways. His thoughts are higher than our thoughts.

We may not always understand his plans, but we can trust that he is working all things together for good. That's a comfort, especially when we look at the state of the world and all the chaos and suffering. It's easy to feel overwhelmed and wonder if there's any hope left.

But Paul's message, even amidst these apocalyptic images, is ultimately one of hope. He assures the Thessalonians and us that God is not absent. He's not indifferent to our suffering.

He is actively working to bring about his kingdom, even if it doesn't happen on our timetable. So what are we supposed to do in the meantime? How should we live in light of these end-times prophecies? Paul's message is consistent throughout his letters. Live faithfully in the present, love your neighbor, share the good news of the gospel, and be prepared for the Lord's return.

It's a call to action, not a call to despair. It's about living with purpose and intentionality, knowing that our actions have eternal significance. Exactly.

And remember, these end-times prophecies are not meant to scare us into hiding. They're meant to inspire us to live lives that matter, to make a difference in the world, and to shine the light of Christ into the darkness. So as we wrap up our deep dive into Paul's letters to Philemon and the Thessalonians, what's the one thing you want our listeners to walk away with? I think it's this.

Don't get bogged down in trying to decode every detail of these prophecies. Focus on the heart of Paul's message, a message of hope, love, and perseverance. Live your faith boldly, knowing that God is with you every step of the way, and that his kingdom will ultimately prevail.

It's a powerful message, and I think it's one that we all need to hear, especially in these uncertain times. So to our listeners, keep seeking, keep questioning, keep exploring these ancient texts. The journey is just as important as the destination, and who knows what treasures you might uncover along the way.

Thanks for joining us on this deep dive.