

2 Thessalonians 2:1-15

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[0 : 00] Notice how Hollywood puts out some endless stream of movies about the end of the world. But that actually our planet is vulnerable to the chance and random chance, pitiless chance of the universe.

And only science can save us. Science in the form of Ben Affleck and Bruce Willis and the rest of the crew. Of course last year Interstellar came out. Which I'd love to see if anyone's got a DVD. I'm happy to borrow it from you.

I speak as one who's only read the synopsis under reviews. So now the great threat to the world is a dust bowl and environmental catastrophe. The hope, the solution is Michael Caine, the great scientist, who can send Matthew McConaughey and his fearless troops out through a wormhole in space to a place where there are three planets that may possibly be a suitable home for them. So what do we need to be saved from? Well, ourselves and the damage we do to the environment. What's the saviour? Well, science again. There's a theme there, isn't there?

But it's interesting to me how many films come out about the end of the world. There is something deep enough conscious, even for those who reject Christianity, reject religion even, that there is an end out there.

[1 : 41] Or there could be. What we see in these movies is the latest, greatest fear of the Hollywood producers being the thing that we're scared of, the thing that's going to kill us, be it alien invasions, be it asteroids, be it environmental catastrophe.

As we turn to Thessalonians, we see there's actually something bigger going on in the world. Life on this planet is not just about our struggle for survival.

The end of the world will not come through our struggles for survival. It will come as part of the ongoing conflict between God on the one hand and Satan, his enemy on the other.

It's bigger than us. It's not about us. But it involves us. And that's what Paul is getting to here at 2 Thessalonians. As you guys heard, as Paul was reading here, they were pretty worried.

They were confused and they were worried. They were young Christians. Paul hadn't been with them very long. Before persecution meant he had to leave. He'd written them one letter already. Now he writes them a second letter precisely because they're confused.

[2 : 43] Let's start with chapter 2. He tells them not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word or a letter, as seemingly for us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.

See, amazingly, they had taken the idea that somehow they kind of missed out on the day of the Lord coming. Perhaps teachers had come who told them it was just a spiritual event.

A friend of mine is in Anglican church recently at Easter Day. And when they were told that actually the thing that's not important about the resurrection is whether it actually happened. So I want to invite this vicar around for dinner and then serve them a plate with nothing on it.

And so actually what's important about this is it's not the food on the plate, but the symbolism of being together in the community of the plate. Because there's nonsense. But somehow the Thessalonians seem to perhaps brought in to some kind of similar idea that the Jesus return was just a spiritual return.

And that actually it already happened. So they're panicking that they missed out on something. So Paul is waiting to convince them they haven't missed out on anything. They haven't missed the day of the Lord. But it hasn't come yet.

[3 : 49] Now if someone said to you, you've missed out on the day of the Lord. Or I feel I might have missed out on it. I might have missed out on the day Jesus comes back. I wonder how you or I might like to answer.

We might in the first place go to Matthew chapter 24 where Jesus himself says that when he comes back it's going to be like a lightning flashing across the sky from east to west. It will be unmissable. Or we might take them to Revelation chapter 19.

Or chapter 20 rather. Everyone standing before the great white throne to be judged. But Paul doesn't do that. Paul instead tells them about some other things that have to happen before Jesus comes back.

He wants them to be ready. He wants them to know they haven't missed anything. And so he tells them about things which might to us sound surprising. But they're things he'd spoken to them about before. And one of the difficult things about this passage is that Paul doesn't tell us everything. Because he'd already said it to them face to face. So he just jogs their memories. So there are some things which are not spelled out the way we might like. But they're spelled out sufficiently. That's all God has given us.

[4 : 52] So we're going to look at this number three headings. I put them there on the notes. Which I'll wait for you precisely, probably. But first of all, what? What is this about? And secondly, so what? Why is this important to us?

We're not sitting in Thessalonica thinking we've missed the day of the Lord. And finally, now what? What do we do with this information? How should it change the way we live and breathe today and tomorrow and for the rest of this week?

So first of all, what is this about? Well, Paul is saying there are two things that have to happen before the Lord Jesus comes back in glory to judge the world, as he talked about in chapter one. And you can see them there if you look at verse four.

Or verse three, rather. The day of the Lord will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the man of lawlessness is revealed. The summit of destruction.

So Jesus won't come back until those two things have happened. So don't panic. Remember what I've already told you, says Paul. Verse five, he literally says, remember I told you these things. Now that's interesting, isn't it?

[5 : 50] Because that implies that in the very short time that Paul had in Corinth, one of the things he spent a lot of time telling him about was what was going to happen before Jesus would come back.

Now I've read a lot of discipleship courses. I've read a lot of discipleship manuals. And these days very little is said about what's going to happen before Jesus comes back. Oh, we know, sure, he's going to come back and judge the world, but very little is said about before then.

I wonder why. I wonder why. Is it possibly because in a previous generation that caused so much controversy? Or is it that actually we're quite happy with the way life is?

I leave that to you to think about. But what is this stuff that's going to happen? What is this rebellion that verse three talks about? And who is this man on lawlessness? And what is it that's restraining him at the moment?

And what is the final outcome of all this? Well, let's look at those things briefly. So first of all, what is the rebellion? Verse three. Now the word of the original language is actually apostasy. That is the falling away from faith.

[6 : 53] The falling away from a profession of faith. From belief in God. And that seems to be what Paul is talking about here. There would be a great time of people falling away from professing faith in God.

That's certainly how the word is used elsewhere in the Bible. It's used in Acts 21, verse 21. People believing Paul was causing them to fall away from Moses. It's used in the Greek version of the Old Testament as well.

In a similar vein. Of people falling away. So it seems this is talking about a great time of apostasy. Of churchgoers. Of people who claim to be Christians.

Deserting the faith they once professed. And that's what Jesus says will happen as well. Matthew chapter 24. He says this, verse 10. There will be many. Then many will fall away. And betray one another.

And hate one another. And many false prophets will arise. And lead many astray. And because lawlessness will be increased. The love of many will grow cold. See Paul is saying this is one of the signs that will happen before Jesus comes back.

[7 : 58] If we have time to do a whole survey of the New Testament. The Old Testament as well. What things will happen. There are a number of signs. Before Jesus comes back. There's a general

sign of God's judgment. The earthquakes.

The famines. The wars. Which will go on throughout this age. From Jesus' time until he comes back. There are also signs of the grace of God. Of the gospel going to all nations. There are also signs of opposition to God.

The tribulation. Suffering for God's people. The apostasy that we see here. And the Antichrist. Which we'll come to in a minute. Paul is saying remember this has to happen before Jesus will come back.

There has to be this rebellion. This apostasy. There's not someone who's involved in that apostasy. Look again at verse 3. Somebody gets named. And the man of lawlessness is revealed.

The son of destruction. He's somebody who seems to come out of this great apostasy. And the word Paul uses there is very interesting. He is revealed. That is a word Paul has used back in chapter 1.

[9 : 01] For what's going to happen when the Lord Jesus comes back. He will be revealed. But this man of lawlessness will be revealed as well. The sense of him already existing. But the spotlight will fall on him.

At some point. After this rebellion. And look what he'll do. Verse 4. This man of lawlessness. Who opposes and exalts himself. Against every so-called God or object of worship.

So that he takes his seat in a temple of God. Proclaiming himself to be God. This is a person. A man. With a huge ego.

Isn't it? Claiming to be God. Now through history various people have done that. A.D. 40. Roman Emperor Caligula. Wanted to take over the temple in Jerusalem. And set himself up as a God there. Well back in Daniel chapter 11. Verse 36. In a prophecy that was mainly. But not exclusively. Fulfilled. About 169 years B.C.

[9 : 58] Daniel talks about King who will do this. Who will attack God's covenant people. He goes on. The Lord reveals through Daniel. This person will exalt himself. And magnify himself above every God.

And speak astonishing things against the God of gods. Who shall prosper till the indignation is complete. And what is decreed shall be done. Now much of that prophecy was fulfilled in 169 B.C. When a Syrian king. Antiochus Epiphanes. Great name. Came into Jerusalem. Set up images in the temple. Sacrificed pigs in the temple.

All sorts of things. And deliberately attacked God's covenant people. But what Daniel prophesied then. Was a prototype. Of what was going to come.

That Paul is speaking about here. The two are related. But Paul sees something else at work here. And where is this man of lawlessness. Going to set himself up. Verse 4. He's going to set himself up. In the temple.

[10 : 57] Isn't he? Take his seat. In the temple of God. Now at the very least. That means he sets himself up. As God. But by the time.

But not long after Paul wrote this letter. The temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. Destroyed in 70 AD. About 20 years after this. So where is this temple. This man of lawlessness. Is going to set himself up in.

Well what else in the New Testament. Is referred to as the temple. As the temple of God. It's the church. It's the church. Paul says. Ephesians 2.

The church is God's temple. Which we dwell by the spirit. So he sees this man of lawlessness. Is so powerful. He will infect the church. And that will increase the apostasy.

No doubt. How does he do it? Look on to verse 9. Look how he does it. The coming of the lawless one. Is by the activity of Satan. You have Satan's power behind him. With all power.

[11 : 53] And false signs. And wonders. This man of lawlessness. Is he Satan's man? He's a person. That's the language that is used here. But with Satan's power. He will do things that.

In a sense. Imitate. Mimic. The Lord Jesus. We see that in. He will be revealed. Just as Jesus will be revealed. We see that in. That he does signs and wonders. As Jesus did signs and wonders. Whereas Jesus did true signs and wonders. The man of lawlessness. First writers. Does false signs. And wonders. Now that's not that they were hoaxes. It's not that you could analyze them under a microscope.

Or do the before and after analysis. And see they're flaws. They're false signs. In that they do not point to the truth. They contain a lie. There's a sign like that on our road.

I want you to take it down one day. There's a sign at the end of our road. That says. University of Brunel. Osterley Campus. Nonsense. It's a new housing estate. It hasn't belonged to Osterley Campus of Brunel University.

[12:49] For eight years. But that sign is still there. It's a false sign. Now these signs and wonders. The man of lawlessness will do. Will deceive many.

They might be real. They might be miraculous. But they're done with Satan's power. They do not point to the truth. But away from it. And also he does false teaching. You notice that verse 10. He does with all wicked deception. That's what he's teaching. All wicked deception. For those who are perishing. So he's mimicking Jesus. Every way. The signs.

The wonders. The teaching. And yet it's all false. So this man of lawlessness. He is. But not just. A very evil. Godless individual. But he's a very embodiment.

Of human rebellion. Against the living God. He's the embodiment. Of Satan's determination. To fight God's purposes. To the last. It's often that way. In a cup tie.

[13:47] I know it wasn't like this yesterday. I was really hoping. It would be a close game yesterday. So that's a good illustration. As an Arsenal sport. I quite glad it wasn't. 4-0. I'll take. Apologies for your Aston Villa fans out there. But if you're watching a cup tie.

On television. And often it's those last few minutes. That the side that is a goal down. Will throw everything. At the opposition. And it's a bit like that here. That as human time draws to the end. Satan throws everything. Into the battle. It's a battle he can't win. And won't win. It's a battle he's already lost. But it causes as much trouble as he can. And that's what he's doing. Through the man of lawlessness. Here is in fact.

The Antichrist. Paul only uses the phrase. Antichrist is causing the man of lawlessness. And yet he does the things that. The Antichrist. That John speaks about. Does as well.

We see that. As I've already mentioned. That kind of comparison. Between the things that. This man of lawlessness does. Being revealed. Teaching. Doing signs and wonders. That Jesus did.

[14:45] And how he tries to take Jesus' place in the church. Jesus the one. Who is worthy to be worshipped. As head of the church. The one who does. Sit down in the temple. And he tries to take that place.

So he's a person. He's Satan's man. He will deceive many. There's another thing we need to know about it. Most important. Look back to verse 3. What's the other things called?

It's called the man of lawlessness. The son of destruction. That's a kind of Jewish way of speaking. The son of destruction means. That is his very character.

His character is defined by destruction. In other words. He's doomed. He's doomed. That phrase is used elsewhere. In John chapter 17. Jesus uses it to speak of Judas.

The son of destruction. The one who is doomed. To destruction. Doomed to death. And so it is with the man of lawlessness. He will be destroyed. He will be doomed.

[15:43] And how? Well verse 8 tells us. The lawless one will be revealed. Whom the Lord Jesus will kill. With the breath of his mouth. And bring to nothing.

By the appearance of his coming. It's a powerful image isn't it? This man of lawlessness. May burn bright. On the stage of human history. He may cause havoc.

And devastation. And yet. We put out. Like a candle on a birthday cake. By the breath of the Lord Jesus mouth. Of course that's a picture. Of Jesus' word.

The word that calmed a storm. In his earthly ministry. The word that drove out demons. The same word. That slays and destroys. This man of lawlessness.

He will be reduced to nothing. Like the incoming tide. Flattens the sandcastle. He will be gone. So that's what's going to happen. There's going to be apostasy. There's going to be a man of lawlessness. Then Paul also mentions.

[16:42] Something restraining him. What is that? Look at verse 6. You know what is restraining him now. So that he may be revealed. In his time. For the mystery of lawlessness.

Is already at work. Only he who now restrains it. Will do so. Until he is out of the way. At which point we say. Well what is restraining him Paul? What is restraining him? Well the simple truth is.

We don't know. Paul doesn't tell us. He says. Thessalonians. You remember. I told you what's restraining him. Go on. But for whatever reason.

The Holy Spirit didn't cause Paul to write that down. At this point in time. So we don't actually need to know. There are lots of guesses through churches. Let me give you two for the sake of that.

There are at least seven different options here.

Perhaps the two most popular. One is that it's good government restrains lawlessness. I mean that is true. Romans 13 says that. So that's a possibility. It could be.

[17:36] That it's the preaching of the word of God. That restrains lawlessness. That will. The gospel will go to all nations. And perhaps when it ceases. Having gone to all nations. That's when the man of lawlessness comes. Either of those are possible.

We don't know. And we don't know. Because it's not that important to know. The main things are the plain things. And the plain things are the main things. That's the way it always is in scripture. And what is certainly behind the restrainer.

Is the living God. Do you notice. This man of lawlessness is on a leash. He can only do so much. He won't be revealed until it is his time. Verse 6.

He will be destroyed by the Lord Jesus. Verse 8. So ultimately what restrains him. Is the work of the living God.

We have nothing to fear. He can only do so much. Because he is restrained. The triune God. Who is in control of everything. Is if you like. The ultimate restrainer.

[18:35] And that takes us on then. To the final result. What's going to happen. After all this apostasy. And lawlessness. Well there are two important facts. We look through verses 8 to 12. There are two important facts to bear in mind.

Firstly. God defeats his enemy. Most important. And secondly. God uses his enemy. God defeats his enemy. God uses his enemy.

So verse 8. We've already looked at. The Lord Jesus will bring him to nothing. And destroy him by the breath of his mouth. So God will defeat his enemy. But God uses his enemy.

Because he's so powerful. I've never done judo. But as I understand it. In judo. One of the things you're taught to do. Is use your opponent's attacks. For them to just flatten them. But it's all about. Sort of self defence. And you manage to get that other guy on his back. Because you're using all his force. To squash him. And the sense of which God does that. That everything. The enemy throws.

[19:29] At God's people. God will use it. To further his just purposes. Look at verse 9. Why is it. As we read this. Why is it people believe this man of lawlessness.

Why do they end up worshipping him. Worshipping him. The coming of the lawless one. Verse 9. Is by the activity of Satan. With all power. And false signs. And wonders. And with all wicked deception. For those who are perishing.

Because they refuse. To love the truth. And so be saved. If we were to ask people. If we go around with a microphone. In the crowds. As this guy's preaching.

They tell them. We believe him. Because look at those miracles. Listen to what he's saying. It's fantastic. That's their presenting reason. But if we could look at their hearts.

As the Lord God does. We'd know they're believing. For a different reason. The underlying reason. Is they refuse. To love the truth. And so be saved. G.K. Chesterton.

[20:25] Is alleged to have said. That the first effect. Of not believing in God. Is to believe in anything. And that's what we see here. We actually see it on our televisions.

All the time. I've watched a couple of documentaries. Over the last few months. One on the BBC. One with. Sue Perkins. Traveling up the Yangtze River. One with. Kate Humble. Investigating volcanoes.

In the Pacific Ocean. Around the Pacific River. And in both those documentaries. At various points. These women. Came into contact. With the film. Local spiritual beliefs. So the local shaman. Trying to control the volcano.

Or various. Buddhist monks. Of various types. Doing various things. Up the Yangtze River. And in both cases. They were so respectful. So awed.

By the genuine spiritual feelings. They had. In these. In the presence of these men. Could you imagine. For a moment. Having a documentary.

[21:18] About the. The evidence for the resurrection. Or the reliability. Historical reliability. Of the gospel narratives. And treating that with such awe. And reverence. Respect. Frankly.

I can't imagine it. Why? Because people. Refuse. To love the truth. And so be saved. It's in our human nature. Our rebellion.

Against God. So we shouldn't be surprised. When we find. Christian belief. Mocked. Laughed at. Repudiated. In the news. In the documentaries.

And yet. The truth is great. Isn't it? For those of us. Who by grace. Do believe. It's a wonderful thing. To believe. Isn't it? There is a God. Who made us. Who despite the fact. We rejected him. And turned away from him. In love. So in his own son. To take the penalty. We deserve. To rise to new life. To give us new life. And hope. To give us a future. With him.

[22 : 14] The future. The life we were created for. In a new creation. A perfect relationship. With God. That's a wonderful thing. To believe. Isn't it? That is truth. Not just to believe.

But to love. For those of us. Who know the truth. It's a wonderful thing. But yet. Such a stubborn part. Of human nature. Is to not want to admit. Our dependence upon God. Or our rebellion against him. For the Lord uses. The man of lawlessness. For his own purposes. Look on to verse 11. Therefore. For these people who. Refuse to believe the truth. God sends them a strong delusion. So they may believe. What is false. In other words. God gives them over. To what they want. It's like in Romans 1. It's like part of God's judgment. Is to step back. And give them.

What they want. And I love the word here. He sends them a strong delusion. Richard Dawkins famously argues. That belief in God is a delusion.

[23 : 10] Actually atheism. Is the delusion. Atheism is the suppression. Of all we know. And our very beings. To be true. That there is a God out there. Who made us. That the creation proclaims.

His eternal qualities. To not believe that. To suppress the truth. To reject it. Is to accept this. Strong delusion. That God will give people over to. This is the real God delusion.

But you notice. The problem is not intellectual. The problem is moral. It's not that people cannot. Believe in God. It's not that there isn't enough evidence. For God. It's not that people aren't smart enough.

It's simply that. They don't want to believe. It's a moral problem. Look at verse 12. God gives the moment. To believe what is false. Verse 12. In order that. For the purpose. That all may be condemned.

Who did not believe the truth. But had pleasure. In unrighteousness. They didn't believe the truth. Because they had pleasure. In unrighteousness.

[24 : 06] One of the interesting things. About reading Christopher Hitchen's book. God is not great. How religion poisons everything. Is it becomes quite clear. As you go through. One of the things he hates about God. Is the fact that.

Religious teaching. He would. Suppress. What he wanted to do sexually. They didn't believe the truth. But had pleasure. In unrighteousness. So God will use.

The man of lawlessness. To let people go their own way. To believe the lies. They'd rather live. So they can practice. The unrighteousness. They want to practice.

So that in the end. His judgment. Will be proved righteous. They may be condemned. He did not believe. The truth. But had pleasure. In unrighteousness. See what people will be condemned for. Not merely for not believing the truth.

But because of the way they lived. Because they loved. Unrighteousness. Well that is what all this is about. That's very briefly. Very briefly. Be glad to hear. Do the last couple of things. So what? Why is this important?

[25 : 05] Why is it important? Well firstly. Because Paul is writing here. So that they don't panic. Don't panic Thessalonians. Jesus hasn't come back yet. Everything's not going perfect yet.

And we need to hear that as well now. Don't we? We need to hear. We don't need to panic. As Europe shrinks. In Christian influence. As the church seems to shrink numerically.

It's easy to panic. Some of you have been around long enough. To know there was a time. When everyone knew lots of Bible stories. When many people go to church. And that's not the case in this country now.

It's easy to panic. And yet Paul said don't panic. Things may get worse before they get better. That doesn't mean that Jesus isn't in control. Doesn't mean that God won't win.

So don't panic. But definitely don't sleep either. Don't sleep. Why do I say that? Well look at verse 7. The mystery of lawlessness is already at work.

[26 : 04] The mystery of lawlessness is already at work. And in the Bible the mystery is not something we have to solve. Rather it's something God has to reveal to us. And the mystery of lawlessness.

Particularly something that is fulfilled in the New Testament. In a way that seems a bit unexpected. Compared to what was said in the Old Testament. Paul says there's a mystery of lawlessness at work. It's happening.

We don't need to. So for us we need to make sure we don't fall asleep. Lawlessness is already at work. As John says. 1 John 2:18. The Antichrist is coming.

Even now many Antichrists have come. Down through church history people have often pointed and said. Nero. He's the Antichrist. He's the man of lawlessness. Or Mohammed. He's the man of lawlessness.

Or the Pope. In the papacy. See there. They're the man of lawlessness and the Antichrist. That's what's there in the Westerns to confession. Yet throughout history. There are people who seem to almost live up to the role.

[27 : 00] Because lawlessness is already at work. So the point is not to try and guess. Who is this person going to be. But the point is to be ready. To not fall asleep. Because even now we have false teachers.

Don't we? Even now we have people who claim to do great miracles. Now in response to that shouldn't be to try and discredit the miracles. But just reject them completely.

And just trust the word of God. That was Paul's message for the Thessalonians wasn't it?

Remember what you've heard. So don't panic. Don't sleep. That's why it's important for us to know this stuff.

And now what? What difference does that make for us right now? Well I've actually added a couple of things. So I'll read through them very briefly. Firstly we need to hold to the truth. That's what Paul encourages them to do.

Verse 5. Remember what I told you. Hold to the truth. And we'll see that more next week when we look at verses 13 to 15. Hold to the truth you've heard. And we can be encouraged to do that by the Lord Jesus' words as well.

[27 : 59] In Matthew 24 as he's describing some of the signs of his return. He said verse 24. False Christs and false prophets will arise. And perform great signs and wonders. So as to lead astray if possible.

Even the elect. Implication. For those whom God has chosen they will not be led astray by this. So we need to hold to the truth. We also need to check our hearts.

Why do the people reject the truth? Verse 10. They refuse to love the truth. Verse 12. They refuse to believe the truth. And instead took pleasure in unrighteousness. What do we take pleasure in?

Do we take pleasure in teaching that makes us feel good about ourselves? If we delight in the truth that tells us we are not good. We need Christ to change us. To forgive us and make us new.

Hold to the truth. Check our hearts. Set our expectations correctly. Set our expectations correctly.

[29 : 00] There will be. Lawlessness is already at work. There will be heresy in the church. There will be false signs. There will be people who reject. That doesn't mean that Jesus isn't still sitting on the throne.

It just means God is still working his practices out. So we need to set our expectations right. There's this general idea, isn't there? That life should keep getting better. And sometimes we can even take that into our Christian thinking as well.

Actually the church will keep growing. Life will keep getting easier. Well it may not. In fact before Christ comes back it will probably get worse. It will get worse. That's what Paul is saying. So let's not fall in line with our culture's naive optimism.

Let's get our expectations right. And as a result let's teach our children. And pray for our children. I don't know if the man of lawlessness is going to come in my generation. My children's generation.

Or my great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great, grandchildren's generation.

I don't know. But all of us can teach our children. And most importantly teach them the contrast.

Between God's plans for the end of the age. And Hollywood's vision of it.

[30 : 05] The world will not end with environmental catastrophe. Or asteroids hitting the earth. Important as it is that we look after the planet. It will end when Jesus comes back. Because our biggest problem.

Is not asteroids that might end up hitting us on our orbit. Or environmental problem. Or some terrible virus that could decimate the population. Our biggest problem.

Is our enmity. Against the living God. For which there is one cure. And that is the man Christ Jesus. The one mediator between God and man. And human history is not ultimately a battle of us trying to overcome our odds.

The odds. It is a battle of Satan trying to rebel against the living God. And in that battle there are no neutrals. We're either on Jesus' tide. Or we're following the man of lawlessness.

We either go our own way. And take pleasure in unrighteousness. Or we cling to the truth. And delight in Jesus. And if we cling to the truth.

[31 : 05] We have nothing to fear. Because when Jesus comes back. He will destroy that great destroyer. The man of lawlessness. With the breath of his mouth. And bring him to nothing. So for those who trust in him.

The future is bright. Even if the journey there is hard. Let's pray.