

DON'T BE ALARMED **2 Thessalonians 2:1-12**

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Introduction

In our first lesson from 2 Thessalonians we looked at 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4: Paul's words of thanks for a maturing church. Specifically, we saw how Paul viewed their growing faith, their increasing love, and their continued perseverance as marks of God's bringing them to maturity in the faith. Next, we looked at 2 Thessalonians 1:5-12, Paul's words of comfort to a suffering church, and particularly at how Paul encouraged them with his prayers and by reminding them of important truths that their hearts needed to hear concerning God's justice and Christ's return.

In this lesson we come to what is really the heart of this letter. While the other issues we have discussed are important, it is the subject before us that brought about the writing of this letter in the first place. Paul demonstrates here his deep concern that the Thessalonians get their thinking straight with regard to the Second Coming of Christ, including their understanding of what is happening now and what will and must happen before Christ returns.

First Move

“Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying 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” (2 Thess. 2:1-4).

In this section of the letter, we see Paul's great pastoral concern for the Thessalonian believers. He knows that they have been upset and disturbed by reports circulating about the return of Christ. He knows that there are many new, young Christians in the church who could be easily led astray on these matters. And so, he very lovingly urges them here not to be alarmed and not to be deceived by these false reports.

Now, it is important to remember that the congregation Paul addressed here was a suffering congregation. They were having a hard time. They were enduring a great deal of heartache because of their faithfulness to the Lord. And people who are suffering, people who are hurting people, people who are needy are, in my experience, also vulnerable. They are ripe for believing almost anything that promises some kind of relief, no matter how remote.

I remember working late one night in the emergency room of Rankin General Hospital outside Jackson, Mississippi. Somewhere around 2 a.m., this car came screaming up to the emergency room entrance, the four car doors opened all at once, and this family quickly brought in this man, in obvious distress, half-walking, half-dragging him through the door.

Well, it was obvious that the man was in respiratory distress and so we promptly put him on a bed, took him to one of the trauma rooms and began working on him at once.

Eventually, we were able to get him stabilized and into slightly better condition. And then, not long after that, the family thanked us, hustled him back into the car, and took off again, into the night.

The story was that this man had been diagnosed with inoperable cancer a few months before and the family, in great distress, had heard about this alleged "miracle drug" that was only available in Mexico but not yet legal in the United States. So, they were making this desperate dash toward the border, clinging to this faint hope that he might be cured. On the way, the father began to have trouble breathing. So, they pulled into the nearest hospital - ours - just long enough to get him patched up for the journey, and then they were on their way again.

You see, in their distress and suffering, they were vulnerable people, willing to believe almost anything that offered the slightest glimmer of hope. And it was very sad to see. No amount of talking or explaining could convince them that their efforts, which were certainly well-intentioned, were nevertheless futile. There really wasn't any such miracle drug out there.

People who are suffering, people who are in distress, people whose hearts are broken, are vulnerable people. That's what the Thessalonians were like: vulnerable. Paul knew that. He knew that in their current state they would be willing to accept almost anything which offered some relief. But Paul also knew that hope that is false is no hope at all, and that in the end it is extremely damaging as people become disillusioned and disheartened over the fact that the thing promised has never materialized. Paul did not want the Thessalonians to be taken in by these unhelpful and irresponsible teachings going around, teachings which would only cause great harm. So, he urged them not to be unsettled by these things, not to be deceived.

Lest you think that the situation described here is unique to some tiny little church in the first century, let me assure you that the so-called prophecies and false reports concerning the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ continue right on into our own day. It was only a few years ago now that a book came out titled *The Second Coming of Jesus Christ Already Happened*¹ in which the author promoted the same sort of nonsense that was going around in Thessalonica. I personally know a number of people who were influenced by and caught up in all of this.

These sorts of things continue to be promoted amongst believers today. Witness the on-going popularity of the “Left Behind” book and radio series by LaHaye and Jenkins. End times delirium is still among us, and my suspicion is that if the current Anti-Christian cultural trends continue, many Christians will be increasingly vulnerable to it and will go on being unsettled by these things.

Now there’s something else I want you to see here and which is related to all this. It’s found in verse 2 where Paul talks about a letter “supposed to have come from us.” Someone had *forged* a letter, put Paul’s name on it, and circulated it among the churches (cf. Paul’s comments in 3:17). Apparently, many people were taken in by this forgery. The same thing still goes on today. False rumors and manufactured reports circulate all the time, but they simply aren’t true.

Paul’s word of instruction in the midst of these sorts of circumstances was: Don’t be deceived; don’t panic. Even if you hear a report that, allegedly, comes from a reliable source, consider the source very carefully because what is often reported to be straight from the “horse’s mouth,” so to speak, may be nothing of the sort.

Dick Lucas tells the story of how years ago John Stott wrote an excellent book titled *Baptism and the Fullness of the Spirit* in which he gave a very sound exposition of the Bible’s teaching on the subject of the Holy Spirit. Well, it was not long after Stott wrote that book that reports began to circulate that Stott had completely changed his mind on the matter. Lucas, who was a close friend and fellow Anglican minister in London, heard these reports and simply dismissed them. However, after a while the reports were so strong and so frequent that he, with great reluctance, phoned John Stott and said, “John, please forgive me for bothering you with this, but these reports are going around that you have changed your mind on the subject of the Holy Spirit, and they are so strong that I felt I must at least contact you and ask, have you changed your mind?” Stott replied that he hadn’t changed his mind at all.

All this took place in a day and age long before the Internet. Do you know that at least three times in the last year I have received these desperate emails from distressed and unsettled Christians who had gotten a report which they

¹ By Ward Fenley (Kingdom of Sovereign Grace, 1997).

were convinced was true, talking about some atrocity going on somewhere? And then about three days later I would get a very humbled and sheepish email from the same person telling me that the information which they had believed was unquestionably true was, in fact, a complete fiction.

Do you see where I am going with all this? As the cost of being a Christian increases in our culture, we are going to be more and more vulnerable, just as the Thessalonians were, to being deceived and unsettled, especially by reports having to do with the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. And Paul's instruction to you and me is, again: Don't be alarmed; don't be gullible; don't panic. These sorts of things have been going on for centuries, and they will keep going on right up to the moment that Jesus returns.

Second Move

Well, Paul does not simply urge the Thessalonians not to be alarmed. He goes on to give them some clear teaching and sound reasons why they shouldn't be alarmed and unsettled. The reasons he gives them revolve around two main ideas: 1) things to look for now, in the present, which are setting the stage and preparing the way for the return of Christ, but which are not to be read as indicators that the return of Christ is imminent; and 2) things to look for in the future, i.e., events which must take place and which will signal that the time of Christ's return is imminent.

Let's look more closely at verses 5-7 to see three things which were already taking place in Paul's day and which continue to take place in our own day. These are preparing the way for those events which will precede Christ's return:

“Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things? And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way”
(2 Thess. 2:5-7).

The first thing that is already happening is something called the “secret power of lawlessness.” Now, it's obvious from the text that this is a subject about which Paul has already spoken to them, so his words here are brief and somewhat cryptic. However, the way Paul described this “power” provides us with an important clue as to what he had in mind. The word translated “lawlessness” is a word that is often translated as “sin.” In other words (as 1 John 3:4 points out), it is that which is opposed to the law of God as seen in Scripture.

What makes it the “secret” power of lawlessness is the fact that although this power of lawlessness is operating everywhere, it is not currently seen for what it truly is. I recently heard a speaker talk about the reigning philosophy in some of the prison systems in Scandinavia where criminal behavior has been redefined as a form of mental illness. In short, sin does not exist, only sickness. What is that? It’s the secret power of lawlessness already at work – accepted, approved, and adopted by the governing authorities.

In our country, the way that people use the First Amendment to justify any form of art and almost any action – no matter how vile or disgusting it may be – is another example of the secret power of lawlessness already at work, masquerading as “freedom of speech.” It pretends to be one thing, even a noble thing, when in fact it is an instrument of Satan.

It makes me think of the two Siamese cats in *The Lady and the Tramp*. Do you remember them? These two cats were allowed into the house because they seem to be all right, but in fact they turned out to be quite evil and even sadistic. That’s a picture of the secret power of lawlessness at work. It is ideas and beliefs which we allow to come into our “house,” our minds, our hearts, our culture, even our churches, ideas and beliefs which are really nothing more than the secret power of lawlessness already at work.

The second thing going on even now, alongside the secret power of lawlessness, is that which Paul said was “holding” the power of lawlessness back. It was and is a restraining influence, preventing the power of lawlessness from breaking out into complete anarchy.

As we’ve already seen, we are at a bit of a disadvantage in this regard since Paul assumed certain knowledge on the part of the Thessalonians which we unfortunately do not have. Still, as usual, Paul gives us enough clues to reach a reasonable conclusion. Let’s think about what we do know about this “restraining influence”. The Greek words Paul used here show that he could have been referring to either an institution or a person, or more likely, an institution which can be manifested in a person. Further, we see here that this restraining influence is something which can be taken away – it can be removed. The third clue involves taking into account the fact that Paul seemed to be reluctant to make anything other than the vaguest of references here. Paul was very careful not to name any names. Why?

Well, without going into all the possible interpretations of this, the one that makes the most sense is that the restraining influence is the power of the state. In the time of Paul, this would have been the Roman government, manifested in the person of its emperor. Indeed, Paul in other places talked about human governments serving this very purpose (e.g. Romans 13). Stott points out that this understanding makes sense for several reasons:

1) The natural restrainer of lawlessness is, of course, the law, enacted and enforced through the will of the state.

2) Paul had benefited from the state's stepping in and restraining evil on his behalf. He had seen the state act as an agent of restraint against those who wanted to harm him.

3) It makes perfect sense to think that, in writing to a church already being persecuted for their faith, Paul would not openly speak about the eventual demise of the Roman government. To use such language would only needlessly bring further trouble upon the Thessalonians and upon himself.

So, again, although the secret power of lawlessness is already at work, Paul recognizes that God sovereignly uses the institution of human government to check the inherent lawlessness that is within us and to maintain a certain minimum level of justice, order, and decency in society.

The third thing that was going on in Paul's day, and it is in ours, was the rejection of truth and the delight in wickedness. These two things really go hand in hand because truth has moral implications. If something is true, then you have a moral obligation to believe it, to treat it as truth. The most natural thing in the world for people who delight in wickedness to do is to reject truth, to resist the idea of truth, to embrace relativism. After all, if you delight in wickedness, then truth is a luxury you just can't afford.

Now I don't think it would take a lot of convincing to demonstrate that Paul's description of people in his day as "delighting in wickedness and refusing to love truth" exactly matches the description of people in our day. Someone observed that if you want to know the condition of a culture, the state of a culture's soul, look at what that culture calls "art," look at how that culture entertains itself. To put it another way, popular art and entertainment are the megaphones of a culture. To use another image, they function like a magnifying glass to make the values of a culture bigger, more obvious.

What does our art and entertainment say about us as a culture if not that we are a people who delight in wickedness? Walk down the aisles of any video store and ask yourself how many of the movies you see would be ones which you would be happy to watch with Jesus at your side. Look at the most popular games in the arcades at the shopping mall. Look at the subject matter of the most popular magazines. Have a look at Internet statistics to see what web pages get the most hits. Look at the popularity of talk shows which regularly traffic in the bizarre, the depraved, and the sensual. Even better, sit down and watch what happens on even the less sensationalist shows like "Oprah" and see how truth is butchered, sidelined and relativized on a regular basis.

Even in the church, of all places, we see the gradual slide into sensuality taking a foothold as more and more worship services are designed, seemingly,

more for their entertainment value than for anything else. This is not to say that our worship services should not appeal to and engage our emotions – they should. But in all too many cases, the engagement with emotion (which is a good thing) comes at the cost of content and substance (which is tragic).

What do these things tell us about our society? When you have a culture that does not love the truth but delights in wickedness, what does that tell you? What are the “believable futures” for a society like that? Is it not painfully obvious that a culture such as ours could easily be deceived, could easily buy into a delusion? Is it not easy to see how a people like that, whose minds are fat and flabby and undisciplined, could fall into deception and delusion? Os Guinness points out in his book *The American Hour* that over and over again foreigners who visit our country are amazed at the amazing naiveté and gullibility of our culture. Not long ago I was listening to a presentation on the New Age, and it is truly amazing what people today will believe. They won’t believe the resurrection, but they will easily accept the most ridiculous stories and fairy tales. Satan must look at us and laugh.

The secret power of lawlessness, the restraining influence of human government, and the rejection of truth and delight in wickedness – these are the things which Paul wanted the Thessalonians and us to see as already taking place, already at work in the world. And that means that when you notice these things taking place, you shouldn’t be surprised by them. And neither should you take them as indicators that the Second Coming is just around the corner. Instead, remind yourself that these same things were happening in Paul’s day and that they will go right on happening until the Lord comes.

Third Move

Finally, in addition to telling the Thessalonians what to expect in the present, Paul offered some instruction regarding what they could expect to take place immediately prior to the return of the Lord Jesus. In so doing, he gave them more sound reasons why they should not be alarmed and unsettled by the wild reports that were circulating in the church. Listen again to what he says..... (Read verses 3-4 and 7-10a)

“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... For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming. The coming of the lawless

one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing” (2 Thess 2:3-4,7-10a).

In these verses, Paul made it clear that at least two specific events must take place before Christ returns: 1) something referred to as “the rebellion”; and 2) the unveiling of the “man of lawlessness.” Unfortunately, Paul didn’t elaborate on this “rebellion,” so there’s not a great deal we can say about that at this stage. For now, let’s turn our attention to the “man of lawlessness.” Who is he? What can we know about him?

Answering the first question is rather simple. I have no earthly idea who he is. In the words of one preacher, “I am scandalously *uninterested* in figuring out who this person is.” Over the decades, many pages have been written, probably a few doctorates have been awarded, but still, after all the ink that has been spilt, we are not any closer to knowing who this person is. So, I won’t waste any time on that aspect of the question. However, while I don’t want to speculate on who this might be, I would like to focus on those things we can know about this person simply from paying attention to the text.

From Paul’s description of him as the “man of lawlessness,” we know that he will be a person who is opposed to every sort of moral and civil absolute. He will be anti-authority. He will challenge the right of governments to rule. He will be opposed to religion in general and Christianity in particular. Not only that, he will direct people’s worship away from God and toward himself. He will stand in the way of any attempts to give honor to God and, at the same time, will actually attempt to take the place of God himself, even making claims to being God or at least a god.

It is plain from the events described here that the rise of this “man of lawlessness” is something that will be a worldwide, all-encompassing event. In other words, this passage is talking about the rise of a totalitarian ruler such as the world has never known. A ruler who will make Hitler look like a benign gentleman, and Stalin like Santa Claus.

Another thing we know about the coming of this lawless one is that it will be “in accordance with the work of Satan.” I take that to mean that it will be in accordance with the work of Satan which is going on right now. What this man says and does will fit in perfectly with the spirit of the age. He will be right in step with those who refuse to love truth and who delight in wickedness. He will not seem odd or out of place or strange in any way because peoples’ hearts and minds by that time will be numbed and calloused by evil. People will be easily fooled, easily deluded such that they will call evil “good” and good “evil.”

Still another thing we can see here is that the coming of this lawless one will be accompanied by counterfeit signs, miracles and wonders. In other words,

the strategy of the man of lawlessness is imitation. Think about it: What better way to oppose the work of Christ than to present oneself as a viable alternative? Notice how the language used here to describe the “coming of the lawless one” is the same sort of language used to describe the coming of Christ. And have a look at Acts 2:22. Notice what it says: “Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs.” In a similar fashion, the man of lawlessness will perform counterfeit miracles, wonders and signs. Now what does Paul mean by “counterfeit”?

He doesn't mean that the miracles and wonders won't be *real*, but that they won't point people to the truth. Their effect will be the opposite of what signs and wonders are meant to do. You see, the purpose of miracles, signs and wonders in the New Testament is to authenticate the one performing them and to point people to the truth of God. In contrast, the signs, miracles and wonders of the man of lawlessness will be *real* miracles and *real* wonders (cf. Rev. 13:13-14), but they will authenticate the wrong person and will point people away from God, away from truth, they will contradict the Scriptures. And, as a result of this deception, many will be taken in. In fact, they will be predisposed to being taken in because they have refused to love the truth and thus have no discernment, no criteria by which to judge.

Finally, with regard to this man of lawlessness, we see that in spite of his power and worldwide influence, he will be defeated easily “with the breath of [Jesus'] mouth.” He will be slain by the word of Christ, destroyed by the splendor of his coming. What a marvelous image!

Now I ask you, is it not painfully easy to imagine this sort of thing happening in our day and age? Given the current state and reach of our modern telecommunications – satellites spinning around the globe, instantaneous information from every corner of the planet, email, the internet – is it not painfully easy to imagine a person having worldwide influence now?

So, while we don't know who he is, we do know that he will be a moral and civil anarchist with worldwide influence. He will oppose the worship of the true God, and set himself in the place of God, even making that claim for himself.

Now, as we've already seen, there's not a great deal said about “the rebellion.” But it makes sense to assume that this rebellion is connected to the “unveiling” of the man of lawlessness. That is, when the “man of lawlessness” comes into his own, it will either be in the midst of a time of great social and civil upheaval, or he will in fact be the instigator of such an uprising. Indeed, one commentator has suggested that it is quite possible that he will be one who, for a time, was used of God as one of the restraining influences – in other words, a government figure – who will, at the appointed time, take advantage of the chaotic state of affairs and even promote it further, uniting people around his person in defiance of Christianity in particular and religion in general. However it

happens, the two events of “the rebellion” and the “revealing of the man of lawlessness” will almost certainly occur in close proximity to one another.

Please don't miss the force of Paul's words here. Paul says that such a man is bound to arise and such a rebellion is bound to happen before Christ returns. Because it hadn't happened before he wrote his letter to the Thessalonians, Christ could not yet have returned. On this basis he assured the Thessalonians that they had not missed the Second Coming. If I am correct about the meaning of this passage, the rebellion still has not happened. That means when a person says to you, “Christ could come back today or tomorrow,” you shouldn't believe him or be unsettled. If the “rebellion” spoken of here has not happened today, if the man of lawlessness has not yet been revealed, then Christ will not come back today or tomorrow. He may come back soon. But Paul's words are here so that we will not be easily deceived, so that we will not believe false reports about the coming of Christ, so that we won't be fooled by the counterfeit miracles and signs of the man of lawlessness.

Conclusion

At the end of the day, what we see here is Paul's shorthand for the future of the church. To use Stott's language, “Now is the time of restraint, in which the secret power of lawlessness is being held in check. Next will come the time of rebellion in which the control of law will be removed and the lawless one will be revealed. Finally will come the time of retribution, in which the Lord Christ will defeat and destroy the antichrist.” Those who have believed the lie will be condemned, and those who have believed Christ will share in his glory.