



2 Thessalonians - Chapter Two

Summary of Chapter Two

Paul is very careful to hinder the spreading of an error into which some among them had fallen concerning the coming of Christ, as being very near (vv.1-3). He then proceeds to confute the error he cautioned them against, by telling them of two great events that were antecedent to the coming of Christ: a general apostasy, and the revelation of the Antichrist, concerning whom Paul tells them many remarkable things, about his name, his character, his rise, his fall, his reign, and the sin and ruin of his subjects (vv.4-12). He then comforts them against the terror of this apostasy, and exhorts them to steadfastness (vv.13-15); concluding with a prayer for them (vv.16-17).

III. 2 Thessalonians 2:1-17 - Refuting the False Claim about the Day of the Lord

In 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 Paul responded to a question from the community relating to the timing of the Day of the Lord. He has now heard that they have succumbed to the false notion that it has already arrived (vv.1-2). Therefore, Paul reassures the Thessalonians that the Day of the Lord has not yet come.

Paul first points out that, before that day, a final rebellion and the revelation of the lawless one must occur (vv.3-12). Then he reassures the Thessalonians that they are destined for glory (vv.13-14), and calls on them to hold firmly to the traditions he passed on to them through his teaching and writing (v.15). He concludes with a prayer of encouragement (vv.16-17).

III.a 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 - The Man of Lawlessness

Paul prophesies the future coming of an evil man who will play a distinct and crucial eschatological role. Along with Satan, sin and death, he is an adversary that Christ must defeat before all things are restored to the way God intended.

Historically, scholars and theologians have formulated three general positions for this man:

1. Many early protestant commentators, and indeed several current ones, take the position that this refers to the development of Roman Catholicism and the rise of the papacy.
2. Others viewed various Roman emperors, especially Nero and Domitian, for their opposition to Christianity and persecution of Jesus' disciples.
3. Just prior to the Second Coming of Jesus there will arise a person who is so diabolical and evil that he will be known as the Antichrist. He will lead many people into great iniquity and will attempt to totally overthrow Christianity globally, but Jesus will come and defeat him and his followers.

III.a.i 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2 - The false claim

The Thessalonians were alarmed by a false claim that the Day of the Lord had already come and they had somehow missed out.

¹ As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, ² not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here.

2 Thessalonians 2:1-2

Paul discusses the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, Greek *parousia*, his return in glory at the end of the age to save the elect and punish the wicked, and our being gathered together, Greek *episynagōgē*, to him. This can also be seen in: <<***And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other***>> (Matthew 24:31), which uses the related verb *episynagō*; and is reflected in: <<***For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord for ever***>> (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).

The idea that the Day of the Lord had already come may have made the Thessalonians fear that Jesus' coming and the gathering of his people to him were no longer legitimate or realistic expectations.

The Thessalonians were shaken into mindless panic and were alarmed or frightened by the false claim that the Day of the Lord had come. Although the source of the confusion was unknown to Paul, he suggests a number of possibilities, that it was communicated to them:

- By spirit, i.e. an alleged prophetic word.
- By word, i.e. through teaching or a sermon.
- A letter, as though from us. Paul seems to have suspected that a letter forged in his name was circulating.

The phrase the Day of the Lord is common in the OT Prophets. In Amos' day, the earliest known use of the Day of the Lord, the term was in popular use for the

time when the Lord would intervene and put Israel at the head of the nations; but Amos, and all the prophets after him, clarify what it would mean for the Lord to visit his people: it will mean judgment upon them if they are unfaithful. It refers to the great and terrible day when Yahweh will intervene to punish the disobedient, refer to Isaiah 13:6-16, Joel 1:13-15, Joel 2:1-11, Amos 5:8-10, Obadiah 15-20 and Malachi 4:5; and to save the faithful, such as Isaiah 27:2-13, Jeremiah 30:8-9, Joel 2:31-32, and Obadiah 21. In Paul's letters it is always equated with the Second Coming of Christ.

Although some believe that the Thessalonians were thinking in terms of a complex set of events that would lead to the Second Coming, Paul seems to assume here, as elsewhere, e.g. 1 Corinthians 1:8, Philippians 1:10, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-4, and 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10, that the arrival of the Day of the Lord and the Second Coming occur at the same time, as aspects of a single event.

Is already here. The Thessalonians had fallen victim to the implausible notion that the Day of the Lord has come, presumably because some source they regarded as authoritative had claimed this. There is no reason to think that the idea was part of a developed heresy.

III.a.ii 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12 - The false claim refuted

Paul insists that the Thessalonians can know that the Day of the Lord has not come, giving sound reasons why this is the case.

³ Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction.

2 Thessalonians 2:3

Let no one deceive you in any way. Paul warns the church of those who will deceive, which is in line with the teaching of Jesus, who also added some of the consequences for doing so: <<*Then many will fall away, and they will betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold*>> (Matthew 24:10-12), in what is itself an end times prophecy.

That day, i.e. the Day of the Lord, will be preceded by at least two events, neither of which has been fulfilled. The first prerequisite is the rebellion. Although some have suggested that this refers to a Christian or Jewish apostasy, in view of vv.9-12 a rebellion of humanity as a whole against God is probably in view. Just as humanity in Adam has rejected God and has been plunged into ever greater depths of sin as a result, refer to Romans 1:18-32, so it will move into all-out rebellion against God when the Antichrist appears (v.4).

The lawless one is revealed. This second prerequisite is the appearance of a powerfully evil man, referred to as 'the man of lawlessness' in some translations, as in the current section title, and elsewhere called the Antichrist: <<*Children, it is the last hour! As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. From this we know that it is the last hour. They went*>>

out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us. But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and all of you have knowledge. I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and you know that no lie comes from the truth. Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son>> (1 John 2:18-22), <<By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world>> (1 John 4:3), and: <<Many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh; any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist!>> (2 John 7), will personify hostility to God and his revelation. He will disclose who he is, the rebel par excellence. He is the one destined for destruction, the one whose destiny is to be defeated and destroyed when Jesus returns (v.8).

⁴ He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God.

2 Thessalonians 2:4

Paul draws on: <<*The king shall act as he pleases. He shall exalt himself and consider himself greater than any god, and shall speak horrendous things against the God of gods. He shall prosper until the period of wrath is completed, for what is determined shall be done. He shall pay no respect to the gods of his ancestors, or to the one beloved by women; he shall pay no respect to any other god, for he shall consider himself greater than all*>> (Daniel 11:36-37) when he says that the lawless one opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship. The Antichrist will not countenance any rivals but will insist that he alone is God.

The temple of God has been variously interpreted as the church, the heavenly temple, the Jerusalem temple, and a metaphor for supreme blasphemous arrogance modelled on the activities of the Greek king Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Whatever the meaning, the context seems to indicate a concrete and observable act of defiance against God.

In 167BC, on the orders of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, Syrian forces came to suppress Jewish religious practices. They entered the temple and stopped the regular burnt offering, and on the fifteenth day of Chislev, i.e. December, they set up an altar or idol devoted to Zeus in the temple, known as ‘the abomination that desolates’, and shortly afterward offered up sacrifices such as swine on the altar. This is the background for Jesus’ prediction of: <<*But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the reader understand), then those in Judæa must flee to the mountains*>> (Mark 13:14). Antiochus IV’s flattery enticed some of the Jews to turn against the covenant, but some faithful Jews chose to stand strong and die rather than go against

God's laws, and many did die. The priest Mattathias and his five sons led the Maccabean Revolt and in 164BC, following the death of Epiphanes, they rededicated the temple.

By taking his seat in the temple and declaring himself to be God the lawless one is committing the ultimate blasphemy, condemned by the prophet: <<*You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit on the mount of assembly on the heights of Zaphon; I will ascend to the tops of the clouds, I will make myself like the Most High'*>> (Isaiah 14:13-14), a charge another prophet was instructed to deliver to the prince of Tyre: <<*Mortal, say to the prince of Tyre, Thus says the Lord God: Because your heart is proud and you have said, 'I am a god; I sit in the seat of the gods, in the heart of the seas', yet you are but a mortal, and no god, though you compare your mind with the mind of a god*>> (Ezekiel 28:2).

⁵ Do you not remember that I told you these things when I was still with you? ⁶ And you know what is now restraining him, so that he may be revealed when his time comes. ⁷ For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, but only until the one who now restrains it is removed.

2 Thessalonians 2:5-7

Do you not remember that I told you these things when I was still with you? Paul is not revealing anything new but had already taught them that such things must occur at the appropriate time.

Paul is apparently surprised that his own teaching on the end times had not stopped the Thessalonians from believing the false claim, so he rehearses that teaching. The man of lawlessness cannot be unveiled while what is now restraining him is at work. Paul uses the Greek *to katechon*, the neuter participle of *katechō*, which also means 'to prevent or hinder'; Paul also refers to the one who now restrains, using the Greek *ho katechōn*, the masculine participle of the same word.

Scholarly theories on the identity of this restrainer include the Roman Empire or one of its emperors at least, the Holy Spirit, and the archangel Michael. According to Daniel 10:13-21, Michael restrains satanic principalities, confirmed in: <<*And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back*>> (Revelation 12:7), and in rabbinical traditions and the Septuagint of Daniel 12:1, Michael is said to 'pass away' when the Antichrist pitches his tents in Judæa: <<*He shall pitch his palatial tents between the sea and the beautiful holy mountain. Yet he shall come to his end, with no one to help him*>> (Daniel 11:45), just before the great tribulation begins: <<*At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book*>> (Daniel 12:1); the restrainer functions to make sure that the lawless one is revealed when his time comes and not before. Prior to the revelation of lawlessness personified, it

operates as an impersonal mystery, stirring up hostility to Christ and his people. Lawlessness remains in mystery form until the restrainer is removed.

⁸ And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will destroy with the breath of his mouth, annihilating him by the manifestation of his coming.

2 Thessalonians 2:8

And then the lawless one will be revealed. As soon as the restrainer is removed, lawlessness is free to manifest itself in unrestrained fashion in the Antichrist. In God's providence, Jesus' Second Coming overthrows the rule of the Antichrist.

The breath of his mouth comes from OT prophecy: <<*but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked*>> (Isaiah 11:4). The Lord Jesus will destroy the Antichrist with overwhelming ease when he comes again simply by speaking the truth: <<*which is the word of God*>> (Ephesians 6:17b).

Annihilating him by the manifestation of his coming. When Jesus does finally return there will be destruction wrought on his opponents greater than any that has gone before. Yet God used past destruction as a warning of what it would be like: <<*Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot: they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, but on the day that Lot left Sodom, it rained fire and sulphur from heaven and destroyed all of them – it will be like that on the day that the Son of Man is revealed*>> (Luke 17:28-30). God has done everything he can to make people understand the choices they have: <<*Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse*>> (Romans 1:20).

⁹ The coming of the lawless one is apparent in the working of Satan, who uses all power, signs, lying wonders, ¹⁰ and every kind of wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.

2 Thessalonians 2:9-10

The coming of the lawless one. The Antichrist has a 'coming', again Greek *parousia*, which is a poor substitute for Jesus' Second Coming, also *parousia* in v.8.

Satan is the power behind the Antichrist, working with unrestricted power on his behalf through signs, lying wonders, and every kind of wicked deception: <<*It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of all*>> (Revelation 13:13), which, although they are false, will lead people to believe that the Antichrist is God. These same people could have accepted Jesus by faith yet chose not to as the Lord indicated they would: <<*Then Jesus said to him, 'Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe'*>> (John 4:48).

Unbelievers are those who are perishing because they have failed to embrace the Gospel of Jesus, i.e. because they refused to love the truth and so be saved: <<*Get wisdom; get insight: do not forget, nor turn away from the words of my mouth. Do not forsake her, and she will keep you; love her, and she will guard you*>> (Proverbs 4:5-6). The Gospel of his Son is God's only way of eternal salvation. Those who reject it bring judgement on themselves: <<*Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil*>> (John 3:17-19).

¹¹ For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion, leading them to believe what is false, ¹² so that all who have not believed the truth but took pleasure in unrighteousness will be condemned.

2 Thessalonians 2:11-12

Because unbelievers have rejected God's offer of salvation in the Gospel, God sends them a powerful delusion: <<*And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done*>> (Romans 1:28). As part of his righteous judgment, God is instrumental in causing these unbelievers to embrace the Antichrist, i.e. leading them to believe what is false despite the warnings: <<*Then Jesus began to say to them, 'Beware that no one leads you astray'*>> (Mark 13:5), so that they advance to a whole new level of rebellion and are thus condemned as allies of the Antichrist at the Second Coming.

So that all who have not believed the truth but took pleasure in unrighteousness will be condemned. Despite the clarity of the Gospel message and the call of God for his people to be reconciled to him, there are many people who choose to believe something different and live by their guiding fictions. They will pay for their rebellion against God, as Paul concludes elsewhere: <<*while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury*>> (Romans 2:8).

III.b 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17 - Chosen for Salvation

Paul reassures the Thessalonians that, in contrast to unbelievers (vv.10-12), they have accepted God's call and so have demonstrated that they were elected by God to be saved when Jesus returns. He exhorts them to stand firm in the Gospel teaching and prays for the support they need to do so.

¹³ But we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth.

2 Thessalonians 2:13

We must always give thanks. This is technically the second thanksgiving in the letter and is very similar in tone and content to the first: <<***We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing***>> (2 Thessalonians 1:3), and makes a similar pattern with his previous letter, as seen in 1 Thessalonians 1:2 and 2:13.

Beloved by the Lord, because God chose you. This may echo: <<***Today the Lord has obtained your agreement: to be his treasured people, as he promised you, and to keep his commandments***>> (Deuteronomy 26:18), where the reference is to God's choice of Israel, thus Paul is aligning Christians to the status as the people of God. Refer also to the comments made on 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5.

As the first fruits for salvation. This indicates that the Thessalonians, as early Christians, are the first fruits of the new humanity, or of Thessalonica. First fruits is a Jewish feast held in the early spring at the beginning of the grain harvest. It is observed on Nissan 16, which is the third day after Passover and the second day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the day on which Jesus rose from death: <<***But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died***>> (1 Corinthians 15:20).

First fruits was a time of thanksgiving for God's provision. However, some manuscripts read 'from the beginning', Greek *ap' archēs*, rather than as the first fruits, Greek *aparchēn*. In that case, Paul's point is that God's choice was in eternity past. Either way, Christians were divinely elected for salvation, and this was to be the ultimate end of a journey marked by sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth, in contrast to the way of unbelievers, who are marked by unrighteousness and will believe the Antichrist's lies (vv.10-12).

Note the involvement here of each person of the Trinity: God the Father chooses; God the Son, i.e. the Lord, loves; and God the Holy Spirit sanctifies.

¹⁴ For this purpose he called you through our proclamation of the good news, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

2 Thessalonians 2:14

For this purpose, i.e. salvation, he called you through our proclamation of the good news, that is, the Gospel. What Paul is saying in vv.13-14 is very similar in meaning to: <<***For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified***>> (Romans 8:29-30). The similarity between these two passages suggests that Paul regularly used this message in his teaching. And the divine call was effectual, being actualised in history through Paul's teaching.

So that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Just as the Son glorifies the Father, so too the Father glorifies the Son: <<***I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in***>>

your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed>> (John 17:4-5), and since believers are united to Christ, they will be glorified in him: <<*The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me*>> (John 17:22-23).

The end result of all this is that they will come to share the glory of Jesus Christ himself. The glory which he has through his resurrection and exaltation: <<*But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself*>> (Philippians 3:20-21). Everything that a Christian does, from belief to baptism to holiness to hope, is held within the powerful framework of God's love and grace. That is why Paul can thank God for the church. All that has been accomplished in their lives is his gift, and all that will be accomplished is for his glory.

¹⁵ So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter.

2 Thessalonians 2:15

Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to hold on to the true traditions that were passed on to them by him. This verse contrasts with v.2, where Paul warns them not to be shaken by a false prophecy or teaching or by a forged letter attributed to the missionaries. Rather, they are to stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that were communicated directly to them by word of mouth during his ministry among them or later by 1 Thessalonians, referred to here as our letter. These are essentially the foundational truths of the Gospel message that Paul had proclaimed to them and everywhere else he went: <<*I appeal to you, then, be imitators of me. For this reason I sent you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ Jesus, as I teach them everywhere in every church*>> (1 Corinthians 4:16-17).

¹⁶ Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope,
¹⁷ comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word.

2 Thessalonians 2:16-17

Who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope. This is a definitive statement showing God's love for his created beings: <<*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life*>> (John 3:16).

Paul prays that the Thessalonians will be divinely comforted and strengthened; and established in every good work and word.

Tom Wright concludes: ‘Considering how brief these verses are, they offer a remarkably full summary statement both of Christian theology and of Christian practice. This letter is often squeezed to one side by people who study Paul, in favour of the more obvious texts such as Romans and Galatians. But if it was the only piece of Paul that we had, we would still have quite a substantial picture of his ministry, his prayer, his thinking, and his passion. Above all, we would still have picture of God: the God of justice and grace, who in Jesus Christ has put the world to rights, and is now at work to implement that action through the spirit-filled church. So: stand firm, hold on tight, and celebrate the greatness of God’.