

## 2 Thessalonians 2: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 00 ]     2 Thessalonians chapter 2 Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.

Let no one deceive you in any way, for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.

Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things, and you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time? But the mystery of lawlessness is already at work.

Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way, and then 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.

The coming of the lawless one 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.

[ 1 : 17 ]     Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness. But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.

To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then brothers, stand firm, and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word, or by our letter.

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

In 2 Thessalonians chapter 2, we discover that some people in Thessalonica are already claiming that the day of the Lord has come, or that it has begun in some way. This event might be referring to the final coming of Christ, but could also refer to a coming of Christ of epoch-changing character, such as AD 70 represented.

AD 70 involved a great tribulation, a coming of Christ, and a gathering of the people of the Lord, described in Matthew chapter 24, verses 29 to 31. Immediately after the tribulation of those days, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

[ 2 : 46 ]     Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.

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. They should not be deceived, because Christ would not return without a widespread falling away or apostasy from the faith first.

Prior to the advent of Christ, there must also be the revelation of the man of lawlessness. This statement is developed from Daniel chapter 11 verses 31 and 36 by way of the Olivet Discourse.

Daniel chapter 11 verse 31, And in verse 36 of that chapter, And the king shall do as he wills.

He shall exalt himself and magnify himself above every god, and shall speak astonishing things against the god of gods. He shall prosper till the indignation is accomplished, for what is decreed shall be done.

[ 3 : 57 ] Paul also picks up the language of Theodosian's Greek translation of Daniel chapter 12 verses 10 to 11, with its reference to the end-time tribulation as one during which the lawless ones will do lawlessness, and none of the lawless ones will understand.

In Daniel, this lawlessness is connected to the establishment of the abomination of desolation, and the end of regular temple sacrifice. It's an event focused upon the temple in Jerusalem, and Jesus takes this up in the Olivet Discourse.

Mark chapter 13 verses 14 to 19 and 24 to 27 speak of the abomination of desolation and the tribulation, followed by the coming of the Son of Man and the gathering of the elect to Christ.

But when you see the abomination of desolation, standing where he ought not to be, let the reader understand, then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let the one who is on the housetop not go down, nor enter his house, to take anything out, and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak.

And alas for women who are pregnant, and for those who are nursing infants in those days, pray that it may not happen in winter, for in those days there will be such tribulation, as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, and never will be.

[ 5 : 13 ] But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory, and then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

In Daniel there is a figure who persecutes, brings about the desecration of the temple, and leads astray, who challenges the people of God, who exalts himself, and will end up being overcome by God.

Paul argues that this will take place before Christ is revealed. Yet even before the specific man of lawlessness is revealed, a principle of lawlessness is already at work in the world.

Jesus speaks of this, presumably alluding to Daniel, in Matthew chapter 24 verse 12. And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. Jesus refers here, as John refers in Revelation, to a tribulation that has already begun in the first century AD, a tribulation drawn from the prophecy of Daniel.

These prophecies of great tribulation in Daniel have begun fulfilment in Christ and in Israel. Even before that, they looked forward to the persecution under Antiochus Epiphanes. The tribulation arrives in progressive stages, perhaps like ascending Russian dolls.

[ 6 : 34 ] At each stage, we should know the pattern to expect. Alternatively, we could see it as a telescoping effect, as a series of closely related events that stand at a great distance in time, that can be collapsed into a single concentric structure of expectation.

It is a single reality that is awaited, but a reality that arrives in progressive stages. Paul wants to assure the Thessalonians that the day of the Lord has not already begun, or arrived, even if they may have received unsettling communications or messages purporting to be from Paul and his fellow missionaries that it had.

The Thessalonians were rightly expecting an epoch-changing day of the Lord on the very near horizon. Jesus had taught that that generation would not pass away until the events prophesied in the Olivet Discourse occurred, and that some people standing hearing him teach would not die before they saw the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.

This event was not necessarily the end of the physical cosmos, but it was the end of a world, the end of an epoch. Paul wants them to understand that the day of the Lord, whether the day of the Lord on the near horizon, or the day of the Lord on the final horizon, will not arrive until the man of lawlessness is revealed.

Jesus, in his teaching in the Olivet Discourse, had described the way that false teachers and false messiahs and confusing messages would come along, leading people to wonder whether he had already returned.

[ 7 : 58 ] However, the day of the Lord would not arrive before a large-scale apostasy of Christians had occurred. A principle of lawlessness would be growing, tribulation would be gathering pace, and many would fall away.

Matthew chapter 24, verses 10 to 12 writes, And 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. Before the day itself comes, the man of lawlessness must be revealed, someone described as the son of destruction.

It's perhaps interesting to note that there is one other figure in the New Testament who is called the son of destruction. That is Judas Iscariot, in John chapter 17, verse 12. While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me.

I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the scripture might be fulfilled. This might help us to recognize a further way in which the sufferings of Christ anticipated and played out in miniature the reality of the end times themselves.

[ 9 : 03 ] Tribulation, betrayal, Satan being given a free reign, revelation of the son of destruction, widespread falling away, deliverance to death, etc. All of these things occur in the events surrounding the crucifixion of Christ.

The man of lawlessness that Paul describes is closely connected to the temple, where he is elevated, setting himself up as if he were God. Paul and his fellow missionaries had already instructed the Thessalonians concerning this when they were with them.

The principle of lawlessness is already operative at that time. John speaks in a similar way in 1 John chapter 2, verse 18. Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that Antichrist is coming, so now many Antichrists have come.

Therefore we know that it is the last hour. For the time being, however, there were forces holding the principle of lawlessness back. Perhaps this is the restraining work of the Holy Spirit exercised through the ministry of the church.

When this was removed, however, all hell would break loose. My suspicion is that this, on the nearest horizon of the first century, referred to the church in Jerusalem in the run-up to AD 70, where the leader of the church, James, the brother of Jesus, was martyred, and then the rest of the church later fled the city, leaving lawlessness to run rampant and unchecked, without any righteous remnant to arrest it.

[ 10 : 26 ] We might also compare this to the destruction of Sodom. When Lot's family was delivered from the city, the city was no longer preserved. The man of lawlessness most likely refers to a high priest setting himself up in the temple, as if it were his own palace, rather than the palace of the Lord.

James Jordan suggests that it is Ananias. Others have argued that it might be John of Giscala, a leader of the Jewish revolt, or Pharias, the last high priest, who is described as follows by Josephus.

The zealots undertook to dispose of the high priesthood by casting lots for it, whereas, as we have said already, it was to descend by succession in the family. The pretense they made for this strange attempt was an ancient practice, while they said that of old it was determined by Lot, but in truth it was no better than a dissolution of an undeniable law and a cunning contrivance to seize upon the government, derived from those that presumed to appoint governors as they themselves pleased.

Hereupon they sent for one of the pontifical tribes, which is called Inaiacin, and cast lots, which of it should be the high priest. By fortune the lot so fell as to demonstrate their iniquity after the plainest manner, for it fell upon one whose name was Pharias, the son of Samuel, of the village Apha.

He was a man not only unworthy of the high priesthood, but that did not know well what the high priesthood was. Such a mere rustic was he. Yet did they hail this man without his own consent out of the country, as if they were acting a play upon the stage, and adorned him with a counterfeit face.

[ 11 : 59 ] They also put upon him the sacred garments, and upon every occasion instructed him what he was to do. This horrid piece of wickedness was sport and pastime with them, but occasioned the other priests, who at a distance saw their law made a jest of, to shed tears and sorely lament the dissolution of such a sacred dignity.

The Lord Jesus would then kill the man of lawlessness with the fiery breath of his mouth in his coming. This, I believe, refers to the destruction of Jerusalem, its temple, and its leaders in AD 70.

The behaviour of the man of lawlessness, the son of destruction, is in accord with the activity of Satan. This period would be one of satanic possession and activity, just as the period of Christ's sufferings and passion was the time of Satan, where Satan was released to do his greatest damage and to wreak havoc.

So the expected day of the Lord will be preceded by another such unleashing of Satan. Just as Satan entered into Judas, so Satan's shadowy agency will be apparent surrounding the man of lawlessness.

There will be false signs and wonders, strong deception and delusion, and people will be brought to their own destruction. This could be compared to the story of the Exodus, where there are false signs and wonders done by the Egyptian magicians and Pharaoh's heart is hardened to the point of near insanity.

[ 13 : 16 ] God himself will bring delusion to them, so that they are led to their own destruction. The destruction is something that they bring upon themselves, though. We might think of 1 Kings 22, 19-23 here.

And Micaiah said, Therefore hear the word of the Lord. I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him, on his right hand and on his left. And the Lord said, Who will entice Ahab that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-Gilead?

And one said one thing, and another said another. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the Lord, saying, I will entice him. And the Lord said to him, By what means? And he said, I will go out and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.

And he said, You are to entice him and you shall succeed. Go out and do so. Now therefore behold, the Lord has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets.

The Lord has declared disaster for you. The fascinating thing in the case of Micaiah is that he is directly telling Ahab that God has sent him delusion. Surely if God is trying to trap Ahab, then this is precisely the wrong way to go about it.

[ 14 : 27 ] Yet the fact is that Ahab loves the delusion. The wicked do not believe the truth, not because the truth isn't presented to them, or even that the truth is not in any way apparent to them, but because they refuse to love the truth.

When it comes down to it, they want to believe the lie, and God gives them what they want. Even when he gives it to them with flashing warning signs, they still swallow it whole because they hate the truth.

When we see unbelief in our day, this is so often what it comes down to. Some Christians get drawn into futile debates about the truth of certain teachings, failing to recognise that some people simply hate the truth and will swallow even obvious lies that present themselves as alternatives to it.

The problem often isn't that scripture isn't clear enough on certain matters, but that people refuse to love the truth. Before we can receive the truth, we need to be lovers of the truth, people who seek the truth where it can be found and who will go where it leads.

The Thessalonian believers, however, contrast with all of this. Once again, Paul declares their sense of duty as the missionaries to give thanks for what God is doing and has done among the Thessalonians.

[ 15 : 37 ] They have been chosen for salvation. This salvation will be accomplished as they are set apart by and conformed to God's righteous judgment by the work of the Spirit and as they believe in the truth.

We don't reflect enough upon the strangeness of belief in the truth in a fallen race that loves and wants to believe the lie. The Thessalonians, having been chosen for salvation in such a manner, were called to it through the gospel declaration and summons of the missionaries to the end that they might participate in the glory of the reigning Lord Jesus the Messiah.

They must not be swayed by rumours and false reports then, but must stand firm in the teachings that they had been given by Paul and the missionaries. Paul concludes the chapter by praying that the Lord Jesus Christ and God the Father, who by grace gave the entire gospel reality, will settle their troubled hearts and establish them firmly in the truth against the day when all who are not grounded in a love for every good word and every good work will be uprooted in that time of testing.

A question to consider. What are some ways in which we grow in our love of the truth so that our hearts are guarded against the appeal of the lie?