

A Study of 2 Thessalonians



The Man of Lawlessness 2:1-12 (Part 1)

The second chapter of 2 Thessalonians contains some of the most difficult New Testament passages to interpret outside of Revelation. Many ideas exist about the meaning and timing of events and characters found in 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12. Because of the difficulty and length of this passage we will divide our study into two parts.

To build a foundation on which to build our interpretation of this passage let's first agree that no part of Scripture can contradict any other part. Therefore what we learn in this chapter must be consistent (or at least not contrary) to any other Scripture. With this in mind we should always interpret difficult to understand passages in light of others which have a clearer meaning. Finally, Scripture must mean what it always meant. In other words, it still means today what it meant to the Christians in Thessalonica in the first century. The Bible does not change its meaning over time.

1. Are the rules above good guidelines to help with the interpretation of Scripture? Why or why not?

The words of this passage concerning the Second Coming of Christ should be viewed in light of what we have clearly learned in the previous chapters of 1 and 2 Thessalonians. First, the Lord's coming will be sudden and unexpected like a thief in the night. Second, the Lord's coming will be dramatic as it is accompanied by angels, trumpet calls, loud shouts, and the Lord coming in fire. No one can possibly miss the Lord's return.

We know from 2 Thessalonians 2 that someone or some group had come to the church in Thessalonica with false teaching concerning the Second Coming. It seems they were teaching that the Lord has already returned.

Paul did not know the origin of this false teaching. It could have been from a spirit or false prophet, a spoken word, or a falsified letter. It is hard to reconstruct the exact content of the teaching because we only have Paul's side of the conversation and are unable to know exactly what had been said or what he is confronting. We do know that someone or some group was claiming the day of the Lord has already arrived.¹

The false teaching that had come to the church had the potential to cause the young Christians to be "shaken in mind" or "alarmed." This was a threat to the spiritual well being of the Christians individually and the church as a whole. Paul says this teaching could "deceive" them.



¹ Some translations say at hand or near, but the word literally means "has already arrived."

2. What do the words and phrases “shaken in mind,” “alarmed,” and “deceived” tell us about to severity of the threat to the church posed by the false teaching?

3. How can a Christian gain protection from Spiritual deception?

There are a few places in Scripture (and this is one of them) where it is necessary for us to say that we cannot be absolutely certain how a passage should be interpreted. We will briefly look at some of the most common ways of understanding the passage and then in our next lesson we will develop our own interpretation and present some lessons we can take from for this teaching.

The day in verse 3 must be the day of Jesus’ Second Coming. After Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians and prior to Christ’s return a “rebellion” will take place and there will be a revealing of “the man of lawlessness” who is also known as the “son of destruction” or the “son of perdition.”

There are several key questions in this passage which we must tackle as we work to understand the passage correctly.

First, what is the rebellion spoken of in verse 3? The word translated as “rebellion” is the Greek word *apostasia* from which we get our word “apostasy.” This word means a falling away, a departure, a defection or a revolt against what one had previously believed. The word can also mean a rebellion as in a political uprising against an established government. Prior to the Lord’s coming Paul says there must be rebellion or apostasy.

Second, what is the identity of this man of lawlessness, the son of destruction?

Third, where is the temple of God? Is this to be understood literally or figuratively?

Fourth, who or what is restraining the man of lawlessness in verse 6?

Each of the questions above are closely related, so whatever interpretation one chooses will determine the answer to all the questions.

For us this passage may be obscure, but the Thessalonians understood what Paul was writing because he says they had been warned about these things² and that they know what is restraining the man of lawlessness.³

One of the most popular views through the centuries has been that the rebellion or apostasy of 2 Thessalonians 2 refers to Roman Catholicism which has greatly perverted the teaching of Scripture. If this view is correct then the man of lawlessness



² 2 Thess. 2:5

³ 2 Thess. 2:6

would be the Pope (or the papacy.) If this is correct, the temple is used metaphorically of the church.⁴ In this interpretation, the restraining force was the Roman government which kept the apostatised church in check until the fall of the Roman empire.

4. For what reason or reasons might the Catholic Church be called an apostate church?

5. Does the pope (or the papacy) fit the description of the man of lawlessness found in verse 4?

A second view found amongst pre-millennialists is that there will be a great apostasy (still in the future) just prior to the Second Coming. The Lord will rapture the church out of the world. This man of lawlessness will be a world dictator who will rule for seven years, no longer restrained by the Holy Spirit.

6. What if anything in this chapter would seem to indicate the man of lawlessness is not a political leader?



A third idea is that all of what Paul writes about in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 was fulfilled in the first century at the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.⁵ In this case the apostasy is a political rebellion and the man of lawlessness was a Roman leader perhaps the emperor. That which restrained was the high priest in Jerusalem, the priesthood, and the Jewish worship in the temple. This view sees Paul providing additional teaching about what is to take place surrounding the fall of Jerusalem.

A fourth idea is that the passage, in 2 Thessalonians 2, does not refer to a specific person, but a system that is opposed to Christ and his church. The rebellion or apostasy may be the Jewish rejection of the gospel and Paul is not writing that the Thessalonians should be watching for one particular man of lawlessness, but that lawlessness will be revealed for what it is at the Second Coming.

With most of these views, but not all, the man of sin is often assumed to be the same character as the Antichrist of 1 John 2 and 2 John 7.

7. Read 1 John 2:18-22 and 2 John 7. Does the antichrist sound similar to the man of lawlessness?

⁴ 1 Cor. 3:17; 2 Cor. 6:16; 1 Tim 3:15.

⁵ Jesus himself predicted the fall of Jerusalem in Matt. 24:15-22.

8. Does John indicate that there is only one antichrist?

In part one of this study, we have learned that there is great disagreement amongst Bible teachers and scholars about the questions we have posed earlier in this lesson. Many sincere believers differ on their interpretations of the person and work of the man of lawlessness. With so much disagreement amongst many Bible believers it is with humility that we will add our voice to the interpretation of this passage in the next lesson.

Let's briefly consider what we can learn just from our preliminary consideration of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12:

1. There are valid criteria that we need to use in Biblical interpretation. We need to ask questions like: 1) Who is speaking; 2) To whom was the passage written; 3) and What was happening in the church that this letter addresses? These along with our guidelines at the beginning of this lesson will help us gain understanding of any Scripture.
2. There are individuals, influenced by Satan (verse 9) who desire to deceive Christians and non-Christians. Some will set themselves up within the church claiming to be agents of God or even a god themselves.

9. What three possibilities does Paul list as the origin of the false teaching in Thessalonica? (verse 2)

10. What might be the motivation of this man of lawlessness?

3. Christians need to be vigilant because the desire of Satan and his minions is to lead men and woman away from Christ and to see them deceived. God allows those who succumb to false of teaching to be led by a strong delusion and to believe what is false. This leads to their condemnation.

11. What is the meaning of pleasure and what brought the pleasure in verse 12?⁶

4. No matter what false teaching arises, the Christian should be assured of the ultimate destruction of all false teaching and false teachers (vs. 8).

⁶ See also Hebrews 11:25