

Thessalonians, Part 15: The Man of Lawlessness

2 Thessalonians 2:1 ESV (Pg. 575) Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, **2** 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. **3** 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, **4** 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. **5** Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? **6** And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. **7** 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. **8** 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. **9** The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, **10** and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. **11** Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, **12** in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

- I. Paul dives into this chapter by clearing up remaining questions about the Christ's return. This is the 6th time in 2 letters he has addressed the time of the end.
 - A. **"Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him..."** He's refers to things he said in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. But in both letters, he is building on doctrines he shared during his time there. **"Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? (v. 5)**
 1. He talks about great mysteries, yet not in great detail. Why? He had spoken exhaustively of these things in Thessalonica. Only a reminder is necessary.
 2. This might seem frustrating. We want details those present in Thessalonica received! But through Paul, the Holy Spirit has put us on a "need to know" basis. We want to dig and discover new mysteries, instead being satisfied with what God has given us to know. All we "need to know" is laid out for us.
 - B. Paul presents the main point that we should know: **"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."**
 1. Anxiety persisted ("shaken in mind"; "alarmed") because Paul's teaching about Christ's return was distorted since his visit and the first letter came.
 - a) False teaching had come from people claiming spiritual authority or a gift ("a spirit" or a "spoken word" of teaching or prophecy).
 - b) He also mentions a "letter **seeming** to be from us". Had someone actually forged an epistle with false information, sending it in Paul's name? Most scholars believe that's exactly what had happened.
 2. The false teaching claimed that Christ had already come, and they had somehow missed it. So Paul reminds them of what he had previously said concerning what must take place before the coming of the Lord.
- II. **"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..."** Paul

points to 2 signs to show when the end has come upon the world. He mentions a rebellion occurring, and the appearance of a mysterious “man of lawlessness”.

- A. He says “the rebellion comes first”. As I said earlier, the text isn’t perfectly clear, but there are many clues to help us to understand what he might be saying.
 - 1. First, the word, “rebellion” is the Greek “apostasia”¹. It is used twice in the New Testament; once as “to forsake”, and once here as “a rebellion”. Some versions translate this word as “a falling away”². It is also where we get the word “apostasy” which means the act of abandoning or renouncing a once-held religious or political belief³.
 - 2. The word carries the idea of a soldier becoming derelict in his duty, abandoning his post, defying orders or forsaking his mission⁴.
- B. Paul tells Timothy about this time like this coming: **2 Timothy 3:1 ESV** But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. **2** For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, **3** heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, **4** treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, **5** *having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power*. Avoid such people. The coming apostasy is related to spiritual unfaithfulness from *within* the church.
- C. Paul also mentions a “man of lawlessness”. All through church history, this reference has caused much speculation and confusion on the part of believers.
 - 1. Many people see this figure as synonymous with the Anti-Christ, or the Beast of Revelation. Although Paul doesn’t call him those things here, the man clearly seems anti (opposed to) Christ, and a “beast” of a figure.
 - 2. By calling him “the” man of lawlessness, he would appear to be an individual, not just an ideal or characteristic of the culture in which he lives. We’re told that Jesus kills “him”, as though a specific person is envisioned.
- D. He is defined by several characteristics by Paul: He is put forward as one “**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**”.
 - 1. First, by “opposing” and exalting “himself against every so called god or object of worship”, Paul describes someone who is both anti-Christian, also anti-religion; and yet will present himself as the object of the world’s worship.
 - a) To many at that time, this may seem an act of unity and peace as we are universally told (or forced) to cast away our divisive truth claims and join in the world-wide, pseudo-harmonious worship of a new, single entity.
 - b) This casts a new light on those popular “co-exist” bumper stickers and t-shirts, doesn't it? If we sacrifice the things that make Christianity distinct, are we not conspiring with the spirit of antichrist? **“To pursue union at expense of truth is treason to the Lord Jesus.” -C.H. Spurgeon⁵**
 - 2. Paul says he will take “his seat in the temple of God”. What is the temple? Some believe this prophecy was fulfilled in AD 70 when Rome destroyed the temple in Jerusalem. Futurists believe it is a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. This is the centerpiece of all the future events they believe the Bible predicts⁶.

3. But in no other place in his letters does Paul make reference to the old or a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. On the contrary, he always refers to the church, and the individual members of it, as the temple under the New Covenant⁷.
 - a) Therefore, “the temple” is a reference to the church; meaning that antichrist will rise from spiritual, or christian-appearing circles; and will do so with endorsements of people you’d think and hope would know better.
 - b) Jesus even predicted this would be a part of the end: **Matthew 24:23 ESV** Then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘There he is!’ **do not believe it. 24 For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.** May we always be people who are not dazzled by mere miracles; especially if they aren’t rooted in the truths of Bible.
- E. At some point the mask will be taken off and this blasphemous little man will proclaim himself to be God as he demands universal worship.
 1. This will seal his fate. Paul calls him the “son of destruction”. This shows us his ultimate end. Nothing he does can succeed. He is bound for the pit.
 2. But this also is a hint of his connection to the church. The only other person in scripture called the son of destruction was Judas Iscariot. Though he was in Christ’s inner circle, he betrayed the Lord. In doing this, did he become the archetype for one who will come at the end to oppose God?
- III. Paul’s point is not that the mission of the church will ultimately be in jeopardy, or that God will somehow be relieved of sovereign control for a season. Quite the opposite is the case. **“And 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.”**
 - A. Again, this verse is confusing! Something (what) and someone (who) is restraining the man of lawlessness’ appearance. 3 possibilities:
 1. Some say that it is the angel of **Revelation 20:1 ESV** Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. **2** And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, **3** and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while.
 - a) Amillennialists believe that the 1,000 years refers to the days we are living in now, and that as the Kingdom advances throughout the whole earth, Satan is bound; not meaning he’s presently powerless, but that he cannot stop the effectiveness of the gospel wherever it is preached.
 - b) The time of his release represents a brief period at the end when he will seem to be free to deceive the nations once more (during the time of the man of lawlessness). But in actuality, God is setting him up to be judged⁸.
 2. Others have guessed that it is the present work of the Holy Spirit that is restraining him (he is Sovereign God!). The angel of Revelation 20 and the Holy Spirit are 2 possibilities to answer the question of “who” is restraining.

3. But as to the “what” that is restraining him, the chief possibility is the preaching of the gospel. It may be that combination of the end time apostasy, and the state-sponsored oppression of the church, results in the proclamation of the gospel being curbed for a short time at the very end, leaving the powers of darkness “unrestrained”.
- B. Seeing these things relegated to future may cause us to be apathetic and miss what is happening now. Paul says, “**the mystery of lawlessness is already at work**”. Did you know the word “antichrist” is only used 4 times in the Bible, and only by John in his first and second epistles. The context may also surprise you.
1. **1 John 2:18 ESV** 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. **19** They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us. **20** But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge. **21** I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the truth. **22** Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son.
 - a) John says antichrist is coming (future), and “now” (present), many antichrists “have come” (past). There has always been, and always will be types of antichrist working among God’s people. We don’t have to wait.
 - b) John says that the presence of “many antichrists” means that the last hour has arrived. By last hour, he obviously doesn’t mean the last few days or weeks, since he wrote this 2,000 years ago. He means the last chapter; the period when God is sewing up all of redemptive history.
 - c) John says, “They went out from us” meaning (once again) that antichrists of the present and past all originated from within the church.
 - d) An antichrist is known by what he denies: “This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son”. This doesn’t mean to merely deny they exist, but to deny everything that the scripture reveals about them. John expands on this later by adding that everyone who denies Christ came from God⁹, and that he came in the flesh is antichrist¹⁰.
 2. John’s words tell us history has always had antichrists: Pharaoh, Herod the Great, Nero and Domitian, the Popes, Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin, Bin Laden.
 - a) He also shows us that anti-christs can be among us, because the spirit of antichrist is a heretical denial of who the Bible says Jesus is, brazenly assaulting his deity and Lordship.
 - b) So the antichrist is seen in the greedy purveyors of the prosperity message, and the preachers and churches who excuse sin in order to appear loving, or those who deny key doctrines of the virgin birth and resurrection, let alone false religions that deny Christ and his salvation altogether. We can’t just “agree to disagree”. These things are antichrist.
 3. So “the man of lawlessness” may point to an end-time figure, but antichrists will always be with us until then; either on a grand political, state-sponsored scale, or as wolves in sheep’s clothing, spouting heresies to deceive others.

- C. But Jesus will never cede control of his creation, now, or in the future! **“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.”**
1. Jesus will deal with this person swiftly and conclusively. killing him by the breath of his mouth. “Breath” is the same word as “spirit” in the Greek¹¹. This is also a reference to his word. Jesus created galaxies by his word, surely he can destroy this pretender to his throne in the same way!
 2. Jesus will “bring him to nothing”. No remainder of his rebellion: (loyalists, insurgency)will survive; only complete and utter devastation.
- IV. We must remember that the antichrist isn’t just some mad scientist who is plotting to rule the world. **“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 refused to love the truth and so be saved”**. He will be a puppet with a satanic puppet-master. There are 2 defining elements of this reality:
- A. First, false signs and wonders are attributed to him. “false” doesn’t mean they won’t be real, but they won’t be valid, being exercised without God’s authority.
 1. Jesus said, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign...”¹² We have discovered that antichrist is a reality in all times, and there are still many sign-seekers who are deceived by present-day antichrists unaware.
 2. There’s certainly nothing wrong with the miraculous display of God’s power when he moves among us. But when we’re unsatisfied with what God said in his word, or done in history which we receive **by faith**, we want him to prove himself with something more.
 - B. Paul tells us that the signs and wonders of the man of lawlessness will be done “with all wicked deception”.
 1. The antichrist’s working in the world, as well as every type of antichrist until the final manifestation, is to deceive people away from God’s truth. His destruction, along with Satan¹³, will be the end of a war that began in Eden.
 2. But those who are deceived will be culpable, “they refused to love the truth and so be saved”. Though they had the the gospel, the witnesses of creation and conscience¹⁴, they still suppressed the truth in their unrighteousness.
- V. But they will not go to their condemnation without the working of God either, for Paul says, **“Therefore God *sends* them a strong delusion, *so that they may believe what is false...*”** choosing to ignore what is true, in judgement, God makes it so that they can do nothing else. First they would not repent, then they could not repent. **“Behind the great deception, there lay the great refusal”-John Stott¹⁵**
- A. For what purpose would God do such a thing? **“in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness”**.
 1. As I said last week, God will balance the books. No one is getting away with anything. All sin will be judged. Our only hope is to run to Jesus now, who took our well-deserved punishment on the cross. Soon it will be too late.
 2. Even now, time is ticking off the clock. As John says “the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming...now is in the world already”¹⁶. You don’t have to look far to find his activity. Today is the day to be saved¹⁷!
 - B. Let me sum up...I was taught as a child that antichrist was a primarily political figure that would appear at the end as a world dictator. This does not seem to

be the thrust of the Bible's teaching. Both John and Paul speak of what is happening now, not only in the future. ("the spirit of the antichrist...now is in the world already" and "the mystery of lawlessness is already at work").

1. There are also allusions to anti-Christ's who have already come, modeled after brutal, persecuting emperors like Nero. But John ties the activity of the antichrist to heresy and there are many references to his rising out of the church, or with the approval of people who claim to be Christians.
2. This doesn't mean that a final ultimate antichrist figure won't appear at the end, but we have no need to identify him. Every generation of believers have tried and failed to do so¹⁸. God will reveal him in time. We must fight against the present spirit of the antichrist by holy living and gospel proclamation.
3. The main thing we need to know is that Jesus will destroy all evil with the breath of his mouth, bringing it to nothing, and the antichrist will be cast into the lake of fire, with the devil and false prophet, forever judged.

1 Corinthians 11:23 ESV For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, **24** and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." **25** In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." **26** For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Benediction: "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace." (Numbers 6:24-26)

¹ *apostasia*; See: <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=G646&t=KJV>

² See 1 Thessalonians 2:3 in the King James Version and New King James Version. The New American Standard Bible translates *apostasia* as “apostasy”.

³ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/apostasy>

⁴ *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary: Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Thessalonians*; by Mark Howell; Pg. 223 © 2015 B&H Publishing Group, Nashville, TN

⁵ From “A Fragment Upon The Down-Grade Controversy” by C.H. Spurgeon, from November 1887 (http://archive.spurgeon.org/s_and_t/dg06.php)

⁶ A helpful book on the doctrine of the antichrist and the various views concerning the man of lawlessness is *The Man of Sin: Uncovering the Truth about the Antichrist*; by Kim Riddlebarger; © 2006 Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI. You can find a comparison of different interpretations of what “the temple” means on pg. 119.

⁷ See 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, 6:19; 2 Corinthians 6:14-16; Ephesians 2:17-22; see also 1 Peter 2:4-10

⁸ Revelation 20:7-10

⁹ 1 John 4:3

¹⁰ 2 John 7

¹¹ *pneuma*; see: <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=G4151&t=KJV>

¹² Matthew 16:4

¹³ Revelation 20:9-10

¹⁴ See Romans 1:18-32

¹⁵ Quoted from *The Gospel and the End*; by John Stott, Pg. 172 in *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary: Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Thessalonians*; by Mark Howell; Pg. 230 © 2015 B&H Publishing Group, Nashville, TN

¹⁶ 1 John 4:3

¹⁷ 2 Corinthians 6:2

¹⁸ *The Man of Sin: Uncovering the Truth about the Antichrist*; by Kim Riddlebarger; © 2006 Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI; especially chapter 7; *Know your enemy: The Antichrist in Church History*; pp. 135-165