

The Antichrist (2 Thess. 2:1–12)



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *2 Thess. 2:1–12, Matt. 24:1–14, Zech. 3:1, Dan. 8:8–11, Acts 2:22.*

Memory Text: “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” (*2 Thessalonians 2:3, ESV*).

Key Thought: In correcting the Thessalonians' false theology of last-day events, Paul reveals truth about end-time deceptions.

In the midst of all Paul's words of encouragement as well as exhortation, he wrote about end-time events, including the greatest end-time event of all, the second coming of Jesus.

In this week's passage, though Paul talks about the end, his emphasis is a bit different from that which came before. For one thing, he already told the Thessalonians the details while he was with them. For another, his goal in this text is pastoral, to calm them and persuade them to be more patient regarding end-time events and to warn them about the false teachings being circulated on that topic.

The opening of this week's passage (*2 Thess. 2:1, 2*) contains several Greek words that point back to *1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11*, such as the coming of our Lord (*1 Thess. 4:15*), the gathering (*1 Thess. 4:17*), and the day of the Lord (*1 Thess. 5:2*). To some extent, this week's passage is a clarification of what Paul said earlier. In it he reveals truths that we need to understand today.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 22.*

The Problem (2 Thess. 2:1–3)

What is the topic addressed by Paul in the second chapter of 2 Thessalonians? How are these words relevant to us today? In what way do we face similar challenges within our church regarding end-time events (date-setting, conspiracy theories, and the like), however different our context may be? What similar principle do we find here that we also constantly confront? *2 Thess. 2:1–3.*

There is no clear evidence in this passage that the church was asking questions about the second coming of Jesus. Paul himself perceives a problem and addresses it. The concept of “gathering to him” recalls that which Paul wrote in the previous letter (*1 Thess. 4:15–17*).

In this passage, Paul’s words recall the warning that Jesus Himself had given (*Matt. 24:1–13*). The Thessalonians had been “quickly” destabilized by conflicting information that they had received in the short time since Paul had written his first letter.

Paul doesn’t identify the specific source of their confusion. Perhaps it hadn’t even been revealed to him. By “spirit” (*2 Thess. 2:2*) he likely refers to a prophetic teaching, either that of a false prophet or a misunderstanding of Paul’s first letter. The second possible source is the spoken word, a teaching passed from mouth to mouth among the members. When he mentions a letter “supposed to have come from us” (*NIV*), Paul is either referring to a letter forged in his name or a misuse of one of his genuine letters.

No matter how carefully a pastor may watch over a church, there are multiple ways in which false ideas can take root. It is sometimes easier for members to accept a report or rumor than to examine the Scriptures carefully for themselves. Sometimes the new ideas may even be biblical to a point but are promoted out of balance with complementary Bible teachings.

The latter seems to have been the problem in Thessalonica. The Thessalonians knew many correct things about the second coming of Jesus and the events preceding it. But they tended to emphasize one extreme or another of the teaching without its balancing perspectives. They had failed to heed Jesus’ warning about chasing after signs of His return (*Matt. 24:4–8*). As a result, in 1 Thessalonians they lamented the delay of Jesus’ return (*1 Thess. 4:13–15*). In this chapter they seem to have drawn the conclusion that they are already in the midst of final events.

Paul’s Short Answer (2 Thess. 2:3, 4)

In the short interval between 1 and 2 Thessalonians, the Thessalonian church members became confused about the meaning of what Paul wrote in the first letter. They drew the conclusion that the Second Coming was either at hand or had already come in some secret way (2 Thess. 2:2). Paul’s short answer to this problem? “That can’t possibly be true. There are too many things that haven’t happened yet.”

The confusion in Thessalonica caused Paul to write his most extensive outline of final events. Had he not done so, it would not have been preserved for us.

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:3, 4. What does Paul tell us about “the man of sin” (NKJV) in these verses? What principles do we find here that help us to understand what Paul is discussing?

Verses 3 and 4 are an incomplete sentence in the original. “That day will not come” is missing in the Greek and is supplied in most translations. Paul lists the things that have to happen before Jesus can come. There will be a “falling away” (the Greek word *apostasia* for “apostasy”), and then “the man of lawlessness” will be revealed. That revelation is described in 2 Thessalonians 2:8–10 as the working of Satan just before Jesus comes (which we will examine more closely in Wednesday’s lesson). But before that revelation of wickedness, there is a period of “mystery” and restraint (2 Thess. 2:6, 7).

Verse 4 is a description of the man of sin (or “lawlessness”), who operates under cover for a time and is then revealed at the end. He opposes God, exalts himself above God, sits in the temple, and proclaims that he is God. This verse is filled with allusions to Old and New Testament texts. The “opposer” recalls Satan in Zechariah 3:1. Exalting himself above God and usurping God’s place in the heavenly temple recalls the little horn of Daniel 8. Showing himself to be God recalls Satan in Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28; it also points to the blaspheming power of Daniel 11:36–39. So, the description of the man of sin contains elements pointing to both Satan himself and a wicked agent of Satan in the course of Christian history.

In what subtle ways is each of us susceptible to having the same kind of attitude as we see revealed here in this “man of sin”?

The Restrainer (2 Thess. 2:5–7)

According to Paul, what two things characterized the world situation at the time he wrote? How do we see the great controversy revealed in these verses? *2 Thess. 2:6, 7.*

Combining these verses with the previous ones, we can see that Paul is outlining three stages of history from *his* time until the end. The final stage begins at the Second Coming. Before this stage is the revelation of the man of sin (*2 Thess. 2:3*), also known as the lawless one (*2 Thess. 2:8*). And before that stage is a time of mystery and restraint (*2 Thess 2:6, 7*).

While we would like very much to fully understand Paul’s meaning here, there are a number of uncertainties in these verses. The restraining power is neuter (a thing) in verse 6 and masculine (a person) in verse 7. The lawless one (masculine, *vs. 8*) is neuter in verse 7 (“mystery of lawlessness”); neither is it clear (*vs. 7*) whether the restraining power is taken out of the way or has the authority to remove itself (the *ESV* translates correctly—“until he is out of the way”).

Who is the restrainer, or power of restraint, in these verses? It is present in Paul’s day; it is upholding the law (a power that restrains lawlessness, *vs. 7*); it is on a divine time mission; and it is powerful enough to restrain the working of Satan (*vs. 9*).

According to other New Testament passages, what is holding back the Second Coming? *Matt. 24:14; Mark 13:10; Rev. 14:6, 7.*

In much of the New Testament the events leading up to the Second Coming follow from the final proclamation of the gospel (*Matt. 24:14; Mark 13:10; Rev. 14:6, 7*). In this case, then, it’s possible that God Himself is the Restrainer described by Paul, holding the final events back until everyone has had a chance to hear the gospel.

How much restraint do you need in your life? That is, when tempted, how can you learn to claim the power of God to restrain you from doing what you know is wrong?

The Antichrist Revealed (2 Thess. 2:8–10)

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:8–10. What’s especially important in all this about the phrase, “they received not the love of the truth”?

The man of sin was introduced in 2 Thessalonians 2:3, 4. Through much of Christian history he has operated to undermine God’s law (particularly the Sabbath) and to usurp powers that belong only to Christ. In passages such as Daniel 7:20–25 (the little horn) and Revelation 13:1–7 (the beast from the sea), this same power operates after the fall of the pagan Roman Empire, combining both religious and secular authority to persecute the saints of God. The only power in history that fits all the specifications of these prophecies is the papacy. Many interpreters from the Middle Ages, and even to this day, have designated this institution as the antichrist. (Only in the past century or two has the vast majority of Christians moved away from this interpretation, an interesting move in itself in light of our understanding of last-day events). This identification of the papacy fits the specifications of 2 Thessalonians 2 that the man of sin would be both masculine (a person) and neuter (a world power or institution).

In verse 7, “mystery of lawlessness” (*NKJV*) is an appropriate designation for his activity. But at the close of history, just before the Second Coming, there will be an even more worldwide, open defiance of God and His laws. The continuity of powers, both in this passage and elsewhere (*Daniel 7 and Revelation 13*), indicates that the papacy will play a major role at the end of time, as well.

What earlier work of God in the course of history will the final deception counterfeit? *Compare 2 Thess. 2:9 with Acts 2:22.*

Today’s passage draws back the curtain to reveal an even greater antichrist behind the one that has operated among the nations in the course of history. Satan himself is the author and finisher of the deceptions of the end time. As the return of Jesus approaches, events will force him into a final act of desperation. Through counterfeit miracles he will attempt to draw people’s attention away from the gospel (the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus) and even the Second Coming itself.

Dwell on this idea of “the love of the truth.” How do we “receive” it? Why is having this love so crucial for anyone who doesn’t want to get caught up in any spiritual deception, especially during the last days? How can we learn, even now, to “receive the love of the truth”?

Truth and Lies (2 Thess. 2:10–12)

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:10–12. Why does God allow so many to be deceived? According to this passage, what have the wicked rejected?

Verse 11 is a text that many people find extremely challenging. Paul states very directly, “God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie” (*2 Thess. 2:11, NIV*). The knee-jerk response to this text is something like, “How can a God of truth send deception? How can He act the same as Satan at the end?” (*Compare 2 Thess. 2:11 with 2 Thess. 2:9.*)

In today’s passage Paul draws back the curtain and gives us a glimpse of the great controversy between Christ and Satan, which involves much more than just the affairs of this earth and its history. Satan has accused God of being unreasonable, a bully, and a deceiver. In the final crisis of earth’s history, God “sends” a delusion upon the wicked, not because He lies but because He allows the wicked to choose lies over truth and, thus, expose the outworking of decisions that they have already made (*2 Thess. 2:12*). He simply allows them to bear the fruits of their wrong actions. The events of the end time clearly expose the mind and character of Satan and his followers for all to see.

The process of delusion begins when people reject the gospel of Jesus Christ. In verse 10 the wicked refuse to receive the love of the truth. The offer of salvation in the gospel is the subtext that lies behind the apocalyptic powers of 2 Thessalonians 2. Through its teachings and practices, the papacy has undermined the gospel. That work continues until it is exposed by the final events described in 2 Thessalonians 2:8–12. Thus, the final proclamation of the gospel (*Matt. 24:14; Rev. 14:6, 7*) sets the stage for both the final judgment and the delusions of the end time.

In the end, whatever the outward political and religious manifestations of the great controversy as it plays out here on earth, the gospel of Jesus Christ, not political events, has always been the crucial divide between good and evil throughout Christian history. Antichrist reveals its true character by usurping the life, death, and heavenly reign of Jesus. All other actors in the drama play subordinate roles.

Read carefully 2 Thessalonians 2:12. For what key reason do people not receive the truth? How have you experienced this principle in your own life? That is, how has the “pleasure” of unrighteousness, even subtly, kept your mind from being open to truth?

Further Study: “The apostle Paul warned the church not to look for the coming of Christ in his day. ‘That day shall not come,’ he says, ‘except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed.’ 2 Thessalonians 2:3. Not till after the great apostasy, and the long period of the reign of the ‘man of sin,’ can we look for the advent of our Lord. The ‘man of sin,’ which is also styled ‘the mystery of iniquity,’ ‘the son of perdition,’ and ‘that wicked,’ represents the papacy, which, as foretold in prophecy, was to maintain its supremacy for 1260 years.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 356.

“As the crowning act in the great drama of deception, Satan himself will personate Christ. . . . In gentle, compassionate tones he presents some of the same gracious, heavenly truths which the Saviour uttered; he heals the diseases of the people, and then, in his assumed character of Christ, he claims to have changed the Sabbath to Sunday, and commands all to hallow the day which he has blessed. . . . Only those who have been diligent students of the Scriptures and who have received the love of the truth will be shielded from the powerful delusion that takes the world captive.”—Pages 624, 625.

“In bearing the message, make no personal thrusts at other churches, not even the Roman Catholic Church. Angels of God see in the different denominations many who can be reached only by the greatest caution. Therefore let us be careful of our words. . . . Upon these themes silence is eloquence. Many are deceived. Speak the truth in tones and words of love.”—Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*, p. 576.

Discussion Questions:

- ① Today many believe that the papacy has changed, and in some ways it has. Yet, on the basic issues of salvation it still seeks to usurp all that Christ has done and is doing for us. It is still the power depicted in prophecy. How can we stand firm in our biblical position regarding Rome while doing so with Christian love, forbearance, and tact?
- ② As a church we are constantly being confronted with people who come up with new dates for final events, new charts, new conspiracy theories about this group or that. While we must remain open to new light, how should we deal with these challenges?

Summary: By correcting some of the Thessalonians’ wrong views about last-day events, Paul gave us precious truth on the topic. We must always remember, though, that the crucial issue of the last days is not the timing of events or even all the details, but on which side of the great controversy we choose to be.

A Passion for Sharing

My name is Christian, and I live in Denmark. My family has no real relationship with Christ, but when I was a child, my grandmother taught me to pray and to trust in God.

My faith in God wasn't popular with my classmates, and often they teased and tormented me. So when I was ready to enter high school, I didn't want to attend a public school. My parents helped me find a Christian school, and I was thrilled when I visited the Seventh-day Adventist boarding school in western Denmark. I didn't know anything about Seventh-day Adventists, but I knew I was in the right place.

I loved the worships, the singing, and the Bible study. At last I belonged. During a Week of Prayer, I answered God's call to surrender my life totally to Him and asked my mother for permission to be baptized. But she refused. I prayed earnestly about my decision, and in time Mother gave her permission.

After high school graduation, I joined a program called "One Year for the Lord" and worked in a café church in the city. There I started a teen club where kids could eat, talk, and listen to music or just do homework. One of my friends came, and I invited him to come back on Sabbath afternoon. He came and started asking questions about God. I was thrilled when people from the café meetings started using a prayer room I'd created. I was feeling the joy of serving God.

In high school I had worked with a kids' club, and I wanted to start something similar while in university. Some friends joined me, and we organized a program and advertised it across town. Since then, we've averaged 35 kids at a time. We do fun activities and talk about serious topics relevant to them, such as bullying. Parents often tell us that this club is something that their kids need. The city leaders support us too and refer families to our club, in which we focus on teaching respect.

I work with our church plant team in my town, too. And we have several other special interest ministries, including a Christian motorcycle club.

I'm still in school, but I'm teaching in a kindergarten. I have a passion to share God's love with kids. I want to be there to help kids make important life decisions and let them know that Jesus is the answer to questions in their lives.

God has shown me that He wants to use me—and every Christian—to spread this love to others.

CHRISTIAN GJESTHEDE *shares God's love in Jutland, Denmark.*