

2 Thessalonians 2

M. W. Bassford, 12-19-10

Although we often don't think about it, there is a massive spiritual war going on all around us every second of every day. The battleground is the hearts of men, and the prize for victory is their souls. On the one hand, the devil seeks to tempt us and lead us astray, so that we become enslaved to him in this life and join him in torment in the life to come. On the other hand, God works to defend us and lead us on to righteousness, so we can live with Him.

In this battle, both sides make a great deal of use of human beings. We see, for example, that God has always used men to teach the gospel to others. Even though an angelic revelation or a passage of Scripture spelled out in the stars might seem more convincing to us, in His wisdom, God has chosen to make us the bearers of His light. On the other side of things, the devil also uses people who have chosen to give their lives over to him. Some of these servants simply create earthly misery and chaos, but others look to mislead men in spiritual matters. These false teachers can be responsible for the loss of hundreds, thousands, or even millions of souls. They are among the devil's deadliest weapons.

However, even though these immensely powerful good and evil forces are exerting their will to conquer us, one thing remains true. God has given us the gift of free will. He will not force us to obey Him. Likewise, even though Satan has no such scruples, God prevents him from compelling us to work evil. We are the ones who choose either good or evil, and whether God or the devil ultimately triumphs in our lives is entirely up to us.

It is precisely this struggle that Paul explores in the middle of 2 Thessalonians. He wants us to understand the works of God and the devil both, but finally that we decide our own fates. Let's look at this in 2 Thessalonians 2.

The Man of Lawlessness

Paul begins the chapter by encouraging some healthy **SKEPTICISM** in the Thessalonians. Let's read together 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2. Judging from his words here, apparently the Thessalonians were having a lot of trouble with people who wanted to jump the gun on the second coming. Some folks had gotten the idea that the Lord had already returned, but somehow the Thessalonians had missed it. Paul wants the Thessalonians to take that for what it's worth, which is not very much. Whether they heard the rumor from a so-called prophet or a letter purporting to be from Paul, it wasn't true.

Strangely enough, there are some modern-day brethren who believe that the day of the Lord has already come too. They teach that every single prophecy about the return of Jesus was fulfilled in metaphorical form during the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., that there isn't going to be a day of judgment, that the world is going to endure forever. Certainly, it is true that some prophecies about "the day of the Lord" do concern the fall of Jerusalem. That's apparent from their content and their context. However, it's equally apparent that some don't. When Paul says that God has selected a day when He will judge the world in righteousness, that points to a single day of judgment. When Peter says in 2 Peter 3 that the earth and its works will be burned up, there's no good reason to take that metaphorically. As Christians, we should still anticipate the time when the Lord will return in the clouds to take His people home.

From there, Paul moves to describe a sign that must precede the second coming—**THE MAN OF LAWLESSNESS**. We read the characteristics of this man in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-9. Like many prophetic passages, the meaning of this one is hotly debated. For example, many people read this as a reference to the Roman emperor Caligula. Among other things, Caligula thought he was a god on earth, and at one point, he schemed to set an idol of himself up in the Jewish temple in Jerusalem and make the Jews worship it, which seems to fit the language here about the man of lawlessness taking his seat in the temple. However, there's one big problem with the theory. Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians in about A.D. 51, and he presented the man of lawlessness as a future event. Caligula died in A.D. 41, ten years before.

However, it's still possible for us today to study the signs and determine the identity of the man of lawlessness. First, we read in v. 3 that this man is going to **COME WITH THE APOSTASY** or rebellion, a time when large numbers of Christians would fall away from the faith. We learn more about this same event from 1 Timothy 4:1-3. As a part of this apostasy, men would begin to forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods. Now, I don't like to call names, but it's pretty obvious what historical events this is describing. After the first century, the Lord's church became more and more centralized, and its leaders, who called themselves bishops, became more and more powerful. This process culminated in 608 A.D., when a man named Boniface declared himself the first universal bishop, or pope. From that point on, if not before, the church had completely departed from the truth.

Second, Paul warned that the man of lawlessness **WOULD EXALT HIMSELF** over every other god or object of worship. To this point, I offer a quotation from Pope Pius XI, who says, "The Roman Pontiff has, from on high, an authority which is supreme, above all others, and subject to none." This quotation speaks for itself. After all, once you declare yourself the supreme authority, it's impossible for you to exalt yourself any more than that. From that point, there's nowhere to go but down. For any man to claim such a thing is audacious and indeed blasphemous.

Third, Paul foretells that this man of lawlessness would **TAKE HIS SEAT IN THE TEMPLE**. On one level, this is confusing. The Jewish temple was destroyed in A.D. 70, and the Muslim Dome of the Rock sits on its location. The temple is never going to be rebuilt. However, “temple” in Scripture doesn’t only refer to that brick-and-mortar building. For instance, consider the language of Ephesians 2:20-22. Under the new covenant, God’s temple isn’t some physical structure. Instead, His temple now is the assembly of the faithful, the church, and a man might “take his seat” in that temple by declaring himself the ruler of the church. With that in mind, consider the following statement from Pope Leo VII. He says, “The supreme teacher in the Church is the Roman Pontiff. Union of minds, therefore, requires ... complete submission and obedience of will to the Church and to the Roman Pontiff, as to God Himself.” Clearly, the men who claim to sit in Peter’s chair believe not just that they have authority in the church equal to Peter’s, but to God’s.

Fourth, the man of lawlessness will **PROCLAIM HIMSELF AS GOD**. A single quotation will suffice to make the point here. According to *The New York Catechism*, “The pope. . . Is the infallible ruler, the founder of dogmas, the author of and the judge of councils, the universal ruler of truth, the arbiter of the world, the supreme judge of heaven and earth, the judge of all, being judged by no one, God Himself on earth.” Now, one might think that there would be some kind of internal sensor in whomever wrote *The New York Catechism*, that maybe declaring that a mortal human being is God is not the best idea, or that whichever bishop gave *The New York Catechism* the official seal of approval might have wanted to hold back a bit, but apparently not. Once again, this speaks for itself.

Finally, the man of lawlessness is going to be accompanied by **FALSE WONDERS**, things which appear to be miracles but are not. With this in mind, let’s consider the procedure the Catholic Church uses to declare someone a saint. For a dead man or woman to reach that point, someone has to pray to them, ask them for healing or some other miracle, receive that miracle, and have the miracle certified by the Church. Now, that all sounds very logical, except that it’s impossible. Look with me at John 14:6. According to this passage, there is one way to the Father. There is one mediator between God and man, and that One is Jesus. You can pray to Mary or Peter or whoever else you like, but that prayer is guaranteed not to make it to the Father. Any miracles that supposedly come from such a prayer must be false.

When we put all of this together, it becomes apparent that the man of lawlessness is not one particular man. Instead, it refers to an office, the office of pope. Among all of the great false teachers of history, I can think of none who have done more damage than the various popes have, and that’s going to continue until the return of Christ.

Our Spiritual Battle.

Of course, the only reason why any false teacher can have this kind of effect is because of the hearts of **THE WICKED**. Let’s pick our reading back up with 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12. In this passage, we see in a nutshell why any false teacher can have success—because there are those in his audience who do not love the truth. Many translations here talk about the wicked not “receiving a love of the truth”, and from that, we might get the idea that a love of the truth is something that God injects into us without our consent. However, that’s not really the implication of the Greek. Instead, “receive” here is more in the sense of a wide receiver in football, who has to actively do something to make a reception. The people who are under discussion here chose not to believe the truth and chose not to love it. As a result of that decision, God gave them over into the tender care of Satan and his array of false teachers, who told them lies they would believe. As a result of that decision, they will be condemned eternally, along with the devil and his angels.

This is a passage with many applications for us. First, sadly, we see all around us people who did not receive this love of the truth. Some of them are content to sit and listen to a false teacher every Sunday without examining the Scriptures to see if his teachings are correct. Others are indifferent to religion in general. Whatever their situation, as long as they continue in their apathy and unbelief, they will not be and cannot be saved. Second, this tells us how we must protect ourselves from false teachers—through the love of the truth that the wicked lack. We can show up here three times a week, but unless we have a genuine affection for the word, we’ll be easy prey for the first false doctrine to come along. We must never put our trust in ourselves or in any other man, but only in the inspired word of God.

Thankfully, things are much better for **THE RIGHTEOUS**. Paul explains this in 2 Thessalonians 2:13-15. For those who love Him and want to serve Him, God also makes a special provision. Before the foundation of the world, He decided that there would be a people for His own possession. The distinguishing marks of this people would be their faith in Him and their obedience to the will of the Holy Spirit. Anyone who wanted to be part of that chosen people could join it by heeding the call of the gospel, which would bring them to glory. If we want to remain part of God’s people, we do that by heeding the traditions. Obviously, this does not refer to human tradition, but instead to the apostolic traditions that are faithfully preserved for us in Scripture. We please God only as we obey Him.

Finally, we see the chapter concluding with **PAUL’S PRAYER**. It appears in 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17. As we well know, it’s not easy to be a Christian. It’s hard for us to do right, and it’s hard for us to maintain the determination to do right. Thankfully, God will be with us and bless us in our efforts. Just as He is with us in the overall scheme of redemption, He can be with us daily, helping us through each trial, and to receive this help, we only need to ask.