

LESSON 10

The Man of Lawlessness (2 Thess. 2:1–17)

The Place of the Passage

Having comforted the church with the promise of King Jesus' return to judge their enemies, Paul continues to focus on the future. First, he must put to rest an unsettling rumor that the day of the Lord has already occurred (2 Thess. 2:1–2). In the process of refuting this false claim (2 Thess. 2:3–12), he highlights a coming event (“the rebellion”) and a coming person (“the man of lawlessness”), both of which must appear before that final day. Paul concludes the chapter with thanksgiving (2 Thess. 2:13–14), exhortation (2 Thess. 2:15), and prayer (2 Thess. 2:16–17).

The Big Picture

In 2 Thessalonians 2:1–17, Paul refutes a troubling claim that the day of the Lord has already come, and he summons the church to stand firm and cling to truth.

Reflection and Discussion

Read through the complete passage for this study, 2 Thessalonians 2:1–17. Then review the following questions on this section of 2 Thessalonians and record your notes and reflections.

The Man and the Mystery (2 Thess. 2:1–12)

Read Matthew 24 and identify several ways in which Paul's words here echo Jesus' own words there.

Some in Thessalonica had grown concerned that the day of the Lord had already come and that they had missed out. Such a fear may strike us as bizarre, but consider the nature of fear. How is it sometimes irrational? How is it sometimes contagious?

In 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12, Paul responds to the fear that the day of the Lord had come too quickly and that living Christians had missed out. How in his previous letter had he responded to the opposite fear—that the day of the Lord was not coming quickly enough and that deceased Christians had missed out?

2 Thessalonians 2:5, though easy to skim past, is profoundly important. In the process of refuting a false rumor, Paul appeals to his own authoritative teaching, which the congregation knew and had either forgotten or dismissed. Given that apostolic teaching is now permanently preserved for us in the New Testament, what might be a contemporary application of 2 Thessalonians 2:5 (see also 2 Thess. 2:15)?

Which verse in this passage indicates that it is wrong to conclude that the “man of lawlessness” is Satan himself?

The promise that Jesus will kill the lawless one “with the breath of his mouth” is an allusion to [Isaiah 11:4](#). He will destroy with his voice—that is, in accordance with his word (see [Rev. 19:15](#)). How else does the New Testament apply this messianic passage ([Isa. 11:1–5](#)) to Jesus? (See, for example, [Romans 15:12](#); [Revelation 5:5](#); and [Revelation 22:16](#).)

Do you think the man of lawlessness is the same figure as “the antichrist” described by John (see [1 John 2:18, 22](#); [4:3](#); [2 John 7](#))? Why or why not?

[2 Thessalonians 2:10](#) speaks of those who “refused to love the truth and so be saved.” Salvation, then, is impossible apart from (1) the truth and (2) love for the truth. What is the significance of the word “love” here? Why do you think Paul chose it instead of, say, “know” or “affirm”? Lastly, how does [2 Thessalonians 2:10](#) shed light on what it means to “believe the truth” ([2 Thess. 2:12](#))?

As we put [2 Thessalonians 2:10](#) and [2 Thessalonians 2:12](#) together, a vital truth begins to emerge: Behind an unconvinced mind lies a hard heart. People ultimately reject the gospel for moral, not intellectual, reasons. How do the following verses confirm this biblical picture: [Psalm 119:100–104](#); [Mark 6:52](#); [8:17](#); [John 3:18–19](#); [Romans 1:18](#); [Ephesians 4:17–18](#)?

In contrast to those who are “perishing” ([2 Thess. 2:10](#)) and “condemned” ([2 Thess. 2:12](#)), Paul tells the Thessalonians that God “chose” them to be saved ([2 Thess. 2:13](#)). Spend a few minutes pondering [Deuteronomy 7:7–8](#) and [Ephesians 1:4–5](#). Contrary to common assumption, how is the doctrine of election—which Paul introduced to the church at the outset of his first letter ([1 Thess. 1:4–5](#))—a love doctrine?

Stand Firm and Hold Tight ([2 Thess. 2:13–17](#))

Paul’s words of thanksgiving in [2 Thessalonians 2:13–14](#) are not the stuff of shallow religious jargon. Which persons of the Trinity does he mention, and what roles are they fulfilling? Also, where in these verses do you see the moment of justification? The process of sanctification? The promise of glorification?

God offers us comfort that is “eternal” and hope that is “good” ([2 Thess. 2:16](#)). What does this imply about the type of comfort and hope that the world offers? How have you experienced this contrast in your own life?

Read through the following three sections on Gospel Glimpses, Whole-Bible Connections, and Theological Soundings. Then take time to consider the Personal Implications these sections may have for you.

Definition: Messianic

Promises pertaining to Israel’s Messiah. “Messiah” or “Christ” means “anointed one” and refers to Israel’s long-awaited King who would accomplish salvation and establish justice on her behalf. The NT reveals that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Gospel Glimpses

DIVINE ELECTION. “God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved” (2 Thess. 2:13). Every Bible-believing Christian acknowledges the reality of “election” or “predestination,” since those are words found in the Bible. Debate centers not on the existence of divine election, then, but on its nature. Is God’s election “conditional” (based on a foreseen human condition, such as faith) or “unconditional” (not based on any foreseen condition, including faith). Scripture’s overwhelming witness is that God, out of sheer mercy and love, chooses or elects unconditionally—not based on any prior condition (such as faith or merit). Faith is the consequence of election, not the cause of it. In other words, we were not chosen because we would believe; we believed because we were chosen (note carefully the order in texts like John 10:26 and Acts 13:48). Moreover, we owe our regeneration to God’s will, not ours (John 1:12–13). Jesus himself testified to the sovereignty of the Father (John 6:44, 65), of the Son (Matt. 11:27; John 5:21; 15:16), and the Spirit (John 3:6) in human salvation. Little wonder, then, that the theme of election shines in many Trinitarian texts (e.g., 2 Thess. 2:13; see also 1 Thess. 1:4–5; Eph. 1:3–14; 1 Pet. 1:1–2). Unlike election, salvation is conditional. Yet even the necessary conditions—repentance (Acts 5:31; 11:18; 2 Tim. 2:25–26) and faith (Acts 18:27; Eph. 2:8; Phil. 1:29; 1 Tim. 1:14)—are gifts of God’s grace that can never be lost. Because of this, God gets all of the glory for our salvation. And far from hindering our need for prayer or evangelism, election is designed to empower it (see, e.g., Acts 18:9–10; 2 Tim. 2:10; Titus 1:1).

Definition: Sovereignty

Supreme power and authority. God is the only being in the universe who is in charge of everything (1 Tim. 6:15–16); indeed, his sovereignty is comprehensive (Ps. 115:3) and meticulous (Prov. 16:33). He directs all things to fulfill his purposes (Job 42:2; Rom. 8:28–29; Eph. 1:11).

Whole-Bible Connections

ABOMINATION OF DESOLATION. Although not mentioned explicitly, this abomination seems to be the relevant event in 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12. Daniel had prophesied about Antiochus Epiphanes IV, the blasphemous Syrian king who desecrated the temple by sacrificing a pig in the Most Holy Place in 164 BC (see Dan. 9:27; 11:36–37; 12:11). Referencing this event, Jesus explained what to do “when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place” (Matt. 24:15). Daniel’s prophecy, then, found initial fulfillment in the life of Antiochus Epiphanes IV and further fulfillment in the destruction of the temple (and accompanying acts of sacrilege) in AD 70. In 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12, Paul is likely speaking of a still-future moment in which the man of lawlessness will, in a concrete act of defiance, seek to deify himself in God’s temple (perhaps a reference to the new covenant church; see 1 Cor. 3:16–17; Eph. 2:21–22; 1 Pet. 2:5).

TEMPLE OF GOD. The man of lawlessness will exalt himself in “the temple of God” (2 Thess. 2:4). The temple is a major theme that develops throughout the storyline of Scripture. God’s temple is his sanctuary; the place on earth where his presence uniquely dwells. God installed Adam as a priest-king to rule and guard his original temple-sanctuary in Eden (Gen. 1:28; 2:15). Adam failed, however, and was exiled from his presence. God later chose and commissioned Israel to be a “kingdom of priests” (Ex. 19:6) who would meet with God first in the tabernacle and later in the Jerusalem temple. Like Adam, however, Israel failed and was exiled from his presence. With their temple in ruins, the banished nation’s hopes focused on a future end-time temple (Ezekiel 40–48). When the fullness of time had come, the eternal Word himself came and “tabernacled” among us (John 1:14). Jesus explicitly referred to himself as God’s temple (John 2:19–22) and, remarkably, succeeded where both Adam and Israel had failed. Today, all those united to Jesus by faith are God’s new temple—the place where his Spirit resides individually (1 Cor. 6:19) and, above all, corporately (1 Cor. 3:16; Eph. 2:21–22; 1 Pet. 2:5). And one day we will be ushered into God’s very presence, where he and the Lamb will be the temple (Rev. 21:22). In fact, the dimensions of the new Jerusalem are cubic, signifying that the entire city will be a Most Holy Place (see 1 Kings 6:20; Rev. 21:16)—a new creation filled with the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Theological Soundings

FALSE TEACHING. Energized by Satan, the “lawless” one will perform “false signs and wonders” (2 Thess. 2:9), resulting in widespread “deception” (2 Thess. 2:10). He will not be boring; he will be captivating, impressive, spectacular. And his forerunners—those embodying “the mystery of lawlessness” (2 Thess. 2:7)—will be all these things, as well. False teachers, after all, are not only dynamic people; they are often nice. It is little wonder, then, that the Old Testament repeatedly warns against false prophets and false shepherds (e.g., Jer. 23:16–17, 21–22; Ezek. 13:10; 34:1–7). Jesus calls such persons “wolves” (Matt. 7:15–20; 10:16; John 10:12–13), as does Paul (Acts 20:28–31). These imposters are masters of deceit; indeed, the only things more dangerous than wolves who look like wolves are wolves who look like sheep. Hence Paul warns of “false apostles” and “deceitful workmen” disguised as apostles of Christ (2 Cor. 11:13). Jesus promised that Satan’s mouthpieces would be numerous and successful: “Many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. . . . [They will] perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect” (Matt. 24:11, 24; see also 1 John 4:1). The Devil’s attacks are often doctrinal; he attacks the church by targeting her teaching: “The time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths” (2 Tim. 4:3–4; see also 1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Pet. 2:1; 1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7). Besides indwelling sin, there may be no greater threat to God’s people than false teaching (see, e.g., 1 Tim. 1:3–7; 6:3–5; 2 Pet. 2:1–22; Jude 3–19).

DIVINE COMFORT. “Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort . . . comfort your hearts” (2 Thess. 2:16–17). Ever since humanity’s revolt in Eden, evil and suffering have been near—painfully, hauntingly, inescapably near. We live and move and have our being in the valley of the shadow of death. Where, then, do we turn for relief, for assurance, for security, for calm? The Bible is clear: God alone is the only

reliable source of comfort amid the sadness of this life. Scripture’s most famous psalm rings with the assurance that “your rod and your staff, they comfort me” (Ps. 23:4). Such acknowledgments—and promises—of God’s comfort pervade the pages of God’s Word (e.g., Ps. 71:21; 86:17; 119:76; Isa. 51:3, 12; 52:9; 66:13; Jer. 31:13). As Jesus himself declared, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Matt. 5:4). The Christian is not immune from pain but intimately knows the “God of all comfort” (2 Cor. 1:3), who consoles the downcast (2 Cor. 1:4; 2 Cor. 7:6). It is striking that, out of all the words Jesus could have used to describe the Holy Spirit he would send, he chose *paraklētos*—“Helper” or “Comforter” (John 14:26; see also Acts 9:31). This designation assumes that life in this age will be filled to the brim with grief, but that the Christian will never be abandoned (Matt. 28:20; Heb. 13:15).

Personal Implications

Take time to reflect on the implications of 2 Thessalonians 2:1–17 for your own life today. Consider what you have learned that might lead you to praise God, repent of sin, and trust in his gracious promises. Note the personal applications for your walk with the Lord in light of the (1) Gospel Glimpses, (2) Whole-Bible Connections, (3) Theological Soundings, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses
2. Whole-Bible Connections
3. Theological Soundings
4. 2 Thessalonians 2:1–17

As You Finish This Unit . . .

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord’s blessing and help as you continue in this study of 2 Thessalonians. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study and reflect on some key lessons the Lord may be teaching you.
