

XIV. The Man of Lawlessness

April 20/21, 2011

2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

Aim: To understand that while Satan will try to counterfeit the *parousia* and *apocalypse* of Christ, all efforts to deceive the nations will end in destruction at the true Coming of Christ.

This is one of the most obscure and difficult passages in Paul's writings. Augustine (AD 354-430) famously said of the 'restrainer' (2:6-7), 'I frankly confess I do not know what Paul means.' In part the difficulty arises from the fact that we do not know what Paul assumes his readers know. He is not introducing new information here, but reminding the Thessalonians of what he taught them while with them (2:5). A further difficulty is that he is, to some extent at least, using apocalyptic language. This is language that uses many metaphors (cp. 2:8), although there is nevertheless a reality behind the metaphors. The difficulty consists of the fact that in some cases we do not know the nature of the metaphor, or else we cannot always be sure whether a literal or metaphorical reference is intended.

All this means that we must live with a measure of uncertainty. As exciting as it might be to know the identity of Paul's 'man of lawlessness' and the time of his revelation, we cannot pinpoint these. Nor was it Paul's intention that his original readers should, either. His purpose was to correct enthusiasts and encourage the fearful. His words still do that effectively today. Despite the difficulties over many of the details, Paul's central point is clear. He is responding to some who said that the Second Coming had already occurred. He says in effect, 'No, it is not true that the Second Coming has already occurred. At the very least, the "man of lawlessness" and the "apostasy" need to be revealed first. Don't you remember that I told you so?'

A. Deification (2 Th. 2:1-4)

1. Do Not Be Shaken (2:1-2)

a) *The Subject of Concern (2:1a)*

Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him...

In the opening chapter (1:7-10), the apostle had been writing about the revelation or the unveiling of the Lord Jesus, in connection with punishing those who were persecuting the Thessalonians. Paul again discusses the subject of the Second Coming in a twofold way: the 'coming' (*παρουσίας, parousias*) of the Lord Jesus and the 'gathering together' (*ἐπισυναγωγής, episynagōgēs*) of His people to Him (cp. 1 Th. 4:17). While this apparently refers to the same event, it is looked at from a different angle. Paul is thinking here not so much of the revelation of the Lord as the Judge of the wicked, but of His coming as the Savior of His people. This is the sixth mention in these two letters of Christ's 'coming' (cp. 1 Th. 1:10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23).

With the association of these two words (*parousia* and *episynagōgē*), it is difficult to suppose that the 'day of the Lord' in this section (v. 2) belongs to a different time from that in view in 1 Th. 4:13-18, as it held by dispensationalists. The Day of the Lord is always to be associated with God's people being gathered to Him. The prophets pointed to the day when the Lord would

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assemble His scattered people in their own land (Is. 52:12; Zech. 2:6). Paul sees this being fulfilled in the final gathering of His people with the Messiah at the *parousia*. One facet of the joy of the Second Coming will be the corporate aspect of our being ‘gathered together.’ It is then that God will come and dwell with His people forever, and they will enter into the full blessing of their calling.

b) The Source of Confusion (2:1b-2)

...we ask you, not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us as though the day of Christ had come.

In spite of all Paul had taught them about the second coming, they were being tossed about like waves in the wind and in danger of losing their moorings. He humbly used the gentle term *erōtōmen* (*ερωτώμεν*, ‘request’ or ‘ask’), a verb that means ‘to plead,’ ‘implore,’ or even ‘to beg.’

‘Quickly’ or ‘soon’ (*ταχέως*, *tacheōs*) implies undue haste in reaching a conclusion and a potentially wrong decision. Anxiety and its resulting confusion was the pastoral problem he needed to resolve. The balance of this passage (vs. 2-12) is presented primarily so that the Thessalonians (and we) should ‘not be quickly shaken in mind, nor alarmed.’ ‘Shaken’ translates *σαλευθέναι* (*saleuthenai*), which describes a reed blown about in the wind (Mt. 11:7), the shaking of the powers of heaven in the end times (Mt. 24:29), the shaking of the building when the Holy Spirit came (Acts 4:31), the shaking of the prison at Philippi during the earthquake (Acts 16:26), and the agitating of the crowds at Berea by unbelieving Jews (Acts 17:13). *Noos* (*νοός*) literally means ‘mind’ but may also be translated as ‘composure,’ while *throēisthai* (*θροείσθαι* ‘troubled’ or ‘disturbed’) is translated ‘frightened’ (cp. Mt. 24:6; Mk. 13:7). The young believers had been shaken loose from their mental moorings and were adrift on a tossing sea of anxiety and fear, their faith, hope, and joy devastated by deception.

News had somehow reached the Thessalonians that Paul was teaching the immediate nearness of the return of the Lord Jesus. The claim was being made that the day of the Lord had already come. *Enestēken* (*ἐνέστηκεν*), when in the perfect tense, can only mean ‘has arrived.’ It was being said on Paul’s authority that it had begun to come to pass. Clearly, the return of the Lord Jesus was immediately at hand.

Naturally news of this sort would create a stir, especially among those who feared they were not ready to meet the Lord. This problem was of special concern to Paul because of its supposed source. Paul was not exactly sure of the source from which the Thessalonians had received the erroneous teaching about the Second Coming. It evidently grew out of some prophecy, report, or letter alleged to have come from the apostles and his helpers.

How could anyone jump to the conclusion that the day of the Lord had already taken place and they had somehow managed to miss it? The false teachers who were circulating the idea that Jesus had already returned obviously understood that this teaching would seem much more plausible if they could lay it all at Paul’s door. It was all deliberately vague. Instead of any concrete explanation, three different suggestions had been put forward. Firstly, it had come in ‘spirit’ (*πνεύματος*, *pneumatōs*) – in other words, a revelation or false prophecy. Secondly, it was a verbal message or series of sermons or lectures by false teachers (a ‘word’ – *λόγου*, *logou*) going the rounds. Finally, Paul suspected a ‘letter’ (*ἐπιστολής*, *epistolēs*) may have been forged in his name and was circulating among the churches. Taken together, these words indicate the careful and extensive way that this false teaching was presented; it had all the marks of authenticity—divine revelation, proclamation, and the authority of apostolic writing.

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If the reference were to an authentic epistle, we should have to think of a misunderstanding of 1 Thessalonians 1:5-11. It is conceivable that, not long after their reception of 1 Thessalonians, something happened to make some members of the church conclude that the great Day had actually arrived. On the other hand, the writers may have suspected that a letter falsely claiming to come from them had actually led the Thessalonians astray; this might explain the care taken in 3:17 to draw attention to Paul's signature as a token of authenticity.

These false teachers wanted to minimize the glory of Christ's coming for believers and destroy their hope and joy as well as to build distrust in God's love, grace, and goodness to His saints. Forgeries and counterfeit apostolic documents (pseudepigrapha) continued in existence early in the life of the church, crafted and used to deceive many in the following centuries. Accordingly, Paul took special care to verify this letter's apostolic authenticity by closing it with his own distinctive handwriting (3:17; cp. Gal. 6:11).

Paul, however, tells his readers they are not to let themselves be tossed about by such reports; they must not let anyone deceive them in this matter (see v. 3). Instead, Paul's message was that the Christians in Thessalonica could put their minds to rest.

2. Do Not Be Deceived (2:3-4)

Paul and his colleagues, who knew more about their converts' problem than the exegete of today can know, judged that it would help them to be told something about the sequence of events leading up to the Day of the Lord.

a) *The Apostasy (2:3a)*

3 Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first...

The compound verb *exapatēsē* (ἐξαπατήσῃ, 'deceive'), a strengthened form of the verb *apataō* (απαταω), means 'to deceive completely,' or 'to delude.' There was really no excuse for the Thessalonians to have been so gullible, despite the seemingly convincing forged letter. They should have realized that Paul would not abruptly contradict in a letter what he had so recently taught them in person and in his first epistle.

How can Paul be so sure that the day of the Lord has not come? Paul tells us that two related events must occur before the day of the Lord comes, which will serve as a dramatic warning to the Lord's people. Both of these events happen 'first,' that is both come before that Day. However, the order in which they occur and the time relationship between these two is not defined. It is probably best to take them as one unit, more or less happening at the same time.

The first is the 'falling away'. The basic meaning of *apostasia* (ἀποστασία, 'apostasy') is 'revolt' or 'rebellion.' It denotes either political rebellion (as in Josephus of the Jewish revolt against Rome, or religious defection—in its only other New Testament appearance it refers to forsaking the Law of Moses (Acts 21:21). The Septuagint uses it three times to express rebellion against God (Josh. 22:22; 2 Chr. 29:19; Jer. 2:19). Thus, the word marks a deliberate defection from a formerly held religious position. Since the reference here is to a world-wide rebellion against divine authority at the end of the age, the ideas of political revolt and religious apostasy are combined. It appears probably from context that a general abandonment of the basis of civil order is envisaged. This is not only rebellion against the law of Moses; it is a large-scale revolt against public order.

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The fact that Paul does not further qualify this apostasy indicates that his readers already know about it. They had almost certainly heard of Jesus' teaching about conditions in the end times (cp. Mt. 24:12; Mk. 13:7, 9-13, 22). Paul's use of the definite article indicates a specific, identifiable act of apostasy. 'The apostasy' will be a blasphemous act of unprecedented magnitude. There will be a final, great 'apostasy' that will have its seeds in the visible church, but will then set itself up in opposition to that church. At that time many, both from without and within the visible church will turn to this 'antichurch' and the 'man of lawlessness.'

b) *The Antichrist (2:3b-4)*

(1) His Identity (2:3b)

...and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition...

The second event that must come to pass before the return of the Lord is the revelation of the 'man of lawlessness' (*άνθρωπος τής άνομίας, anthrōpos tēs anomias*) (some manuscripts the 'man of sin') who presides over the great apostasy.

The aorist tense of the verb translated 'revealed' (*άποκαλυφθή, apokaluphthē*) points to a definite time when this man will appear; his act of apostasy will unveil his true evil identity. This verb implies that the 'man of lawlessness,' like the Lord Jesus (cp. 1:7), is to have his *άποκαλυψις (apokalupsis)*, called his *παρουσία (parousia)* in verse 9. The 'man of lawlessness' is presented as the coming evil antithesis of Christ. Both have a 'coming' (*parousia*, 2:1, 8, 9); both have an ally (God the Father or Satan, 2:9, 11); both are objects of worship (Christ is called 'Lord'; cp. 2:4); both have power (2:8, 9); both make claims concerning the truth (2:9-12). This suggests that he is in some sense a rival Messiah, the *άντιχριστος (antichristos)* of 1 John 2:18. *Antichristos* is a compound Greek word, made up of the preposition *anti* and the noun *Christos*. *Anti* can mean both 'against' and 'in the place of.' Both meanings are appropriate, for the Antichrist will both oppose the true Christ, and seek to usurp His place. Anyone who opposes the Person and work of Christ manifests the Antichrist's spirit (cp. 1 Jn. 2:22; 4:3; 2 Jn. 7).

This is the only reference Paul makes in his writings to such a figure. He is the apostle's equivalent to John's antichrist (1 Jn. 2:18; 4:3). How are we to recognize him when he comes? Paul builds up a composite picture of him, layer by layer.

He is called here the 'man of lawlessness' (or 'man of sin') because of his complete opposition to God, which is evidence of his contempt for all that is holy. He is the one who embodies in its highest form man's rebellion against God. *Anomia (άνομία, 'lawlessness')* literally means 'without law' (cp. 1 Jn. 3:4). This person will be the consummate lawless one; a blasphemous sinner, who will live in open defiance of God's law.

'Lawlessness' refers to defying God's laws, not simply being ignorant of them. He rejects not only the Old Testament law, but all that claims to belong to God and be God. He wants to claim divine rights for himself (v. 4). He rejects morality and denies the validity of any kind of ethical restraint whatever. The phrase 'man of sin' is a typically Hebrew way of indicating that this man is evil to the core. Although a man, and not Satan or some superhuman being, he is nevertheless the arch-agent of the devil. The apostle says that this figure has yet to be revealed.

One more fact is stated about him. He is also described as 'the man doomed to destruction' or 'son of perdition' (*υιός τής απωλείας, uios tēs apōleias*). 'Perdition' is nowadays a somewhat archaic term. It means 'lostness' and can also be translated as 'destruction.' The Greek term

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apōleia (ἀπωλεία) means ‘ruin’ rather than ‘annihilation.’ ‘Son of perdition’ refers to this man’s final destiny. Using the idiom ‘son of’ gives this description the feel of something uttered by a Hebrew prophet (cp. Jn. 8:44; 17:12; Acts 1:25; Rev. 17:11). It indicates a close association, or of the same kind, just as a son shares his father’s nature.

Only one other individual in Scripture shares the dubious distinction of being named ‘son of perdition’: Judas (Jn. 17:12). The title is thus reserved for the two vilest people in human history, controlled by Satan (Jn. 13:2; Rev. 13:2) and guilty of the two most heinous acts of apostasy.

Paul will have more to say about his final ruin (v. 8), but cannot resist labeling him from the outset as a doomed foe; eternal ruin lies in wait for him. He is fixed for punishment and judgment; he is human trash for the garbage dump of hell. His destiny is already fixed and is inescapably certain. Lawlessness is his nature, destruction is his destiny. Christians need not be intimidated by the thought of him.

(2) His Idolatry (2:4)

...who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God.

The central characteristic of the man of lawlessness is his total rejection of authority, and especially of all that claims to be God. Everything that belongs to God comes within the range of his malice. God Himself, the gospel, and the church are all the objects of his hate-filled campaign. Paul tells us that he ‘exalts himself.’ He is the great egotist. He covets nothing short of worship, usurping the throne of God in the very temple.

The militant character of his opposition is foremost in Paul’s mind here. This will presumably be expressed not only in a vehement rejection of all human religions, but also in the aggressive repression of every act of worship among people. His coming will mark an era of intensified persecution for all devout worshipers.

In addition, he will exalt himself over every confessed deity. He will put himself above any other religion god, or thing to be worshipped. He will be bent upon setting himself in a position above God. At heart he is an avowed opponent of all authority except his own. He will defy all existing law, be that moral, religious, or civil, in order to assume a place of unrivaled supremacy himself.

He will do this by taking to himself the honor due to God alone. For one thing, he will set himself up in God’s temple. This expression has given rise to much debate, whether a physical or metaphorical temple is implied. It is perhaps best to take the words in a metaphorical sense. Paul is using this phrase metaphorically to sum up in one terse image that unholy offense offered to the Holiest of Beings. It is not a phrase referring specifically to the location of the ‘man of lawlessness,’ but further describes his perverse view of his own deity. To set oneself up in the temple of God is to invade the dwelling place of God and assume the rights of God. What is clear is that the man of lawlessness will usurp the authority and homage due to God alone.

The picture here is of a material shrine. The sanctuary (‘temple’, ναός, *naos*) here is the holiest part of the temple complex, the dwelling place of the deity. The inner sanctuary of the Jerusalem temple, the Holy of Holies, was the throne room of the invisible presence of the God of Israel. But what sanctuary is actually meant here? It may be best to conclude that the Jerusalem

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sanctuary is meant here by Paul and his companions, but mean in a metaphorical sense. It is a graphic way of saying that the man of lawlessness plans to usurp the authority of God. The sacral associations of *ναός* (*naos*) imply that he demands not only the obedience but also the worship due to God alone.

Along with that, he will actually claim to be God. He will set himself up as the unrivaled object of homage and source of authority. Worship once devoted to other gods must now be directed to him. This will be the supreme act of his spiritual rebellion, the final revelation of the apostasy and blasphemy of the ages.

At this point, Paul echoes the prophecy of Daniel ('the abomination of desolation', Dan. 11:31; 12:11). His prediction came true, at least in part, in the year 169 BC. The Syrian king, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, captured Jerusalem and deliberately desecrated the temple by entering the Most Holy Place. The next year he added to his calculated insult against the Almighty by building an altar to the god Zeus on the altar of burnt offering and sacrificing a pig on it. It is hard to imagine anything more offensive to the religious sensitivities of the Jewish people. The language here is reminiscent of the description of Antiochus IV in Daniel 11:36-37: Antiochus, the willful king, is to 'exalt himself and magnify himself above every god.' It would seem likely that Paul is referring back to Daniel's prophecy and to this incident, suggesting that the Antichrist will deliberately defy the living God by asserting that he deserves the worship that belongs to God alone.

In modern English, the Greek prefix 'anti-' is employed to convey the idea of opposition. The Greek term, however, also includes the idea of substitution, one who takes the place of another, in this case for evil motives. Antichrist pretends to be Christ; he is a counterfeit Messiah. Arthur does not expect to see Antichrist arise from within some avowedly non-Christian movement, whether Communism, Islam, or any other such grouping. Instead, he believes that he will prove to be the arch fifth-columnist. He will masquerade as a Christian leader, perhaps even as Christ Himself. Arthur assumes that Paul has a person in mind, rather than an institution, organization, or movement. His language describes the attitude and behavior of a person. John wrote that 'many antichrists' have already come (1 Jn. 2:18). It is as though we can expect a succession of men who embody evil in themselves, with the worst and most terrible of them all making his appearance immediately before the end of all things.

In AD 40, the Emperor Gaius (nicknamed Caligula), annoyed because his Jewish subjects would not take his divinity seriously, ordered that his statue should be set up in the Jerusalem temple. This order was countermanded at the last moment, but the consternation of those days made a deep impression on the minds of Jews (including Jewish Christians) and supplied further details for the picture of the expected Antichrist. Behind the present description of the lawless one enthroning himself in the sanctuary of God and claiming divine honors lie Jesus' words about the 'abomination of desolation' and the memory of Gaius' threat to desecrate the temple. Gaius' madness was cut short by his assassination in AD 41. The forces of order were powerful enough to check his insane policy. But what had happened once could happen again, and the forces of order would not always be available to hold anarchy in check. One day those forces would be removed. The example of Gaius provided a foretaste of what the final Antichrist was expected to do.

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B. Destruction (2 Th. 2:5-8)

1. Remember (2:5)

Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things?

Apparently this description of the man of lawlessness was information Paul's readers should already have known. It would seem, given John's parallel mention of a coming antichrist (1 Jn. 2:18), that this was a standard element in the preaching of all the apostles and was common knowledge among the early Christians.

Because Paul had already told the Thessalonians about these aspects of the Second Coming, he is probably here only giving a brief summary of his teaching. Hence, our understanding of this passage is partially obscured. Of course, in God's providence, we have what we need to know.

2. Restrain (2:6-7)

a) The 'Mystery' of Restraint (2:6, 7b)

And now you know what is restraining, that he may be revealed in his own time... only He who now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way.

The secret power of lawlessness already at work in the world (v. 7) was being held back by a restraint that would remain until God's time for the revelation of the man of lawlessness. At that time the hindrance would be taken out of the way and its full power 'revealed' (*ἀποκαλυφθήναι, apokaluphthēnai*) openly. It is implied that there is a 'proper time' decreed for the revelation of Antichrist as well as for the epiphany of the true Christ.

Paul goes on to explain that the Antichrist is being held back; a restraining power is at work which prevents his being revealed. Likely, the 'man of lawlessness' is being restrained 'now' in the sense that he is not yet living, or has not been publicly manifested. The Greek verb translated 'restrains' (*κατέχων, katēchon*), which means 'to hold back,' 'to hold down,' or 'to suppress' appears in this text as a neuter participle. There is some ambiguity here because in verse 6 the word 'what' suggests that Paul was referring to a force, whereas in verse 7 the word 'he' suggests that he had a person in mind. What did Paul mean? The Thessalonians knew because they had been told; later readers are at a disadvantage compared with them, and have to guess.

We can only speculate about the identity of this restraining force or influence. Any one undertaking to identify the restraining agency must reckon with the fact that it may be viewed either personally (*ὁ κατέχων, o katechōn* - masculine) or impersonally (*τό κατέχων, to katechon* - neuter). Scholars have put forward many options throughout church history. Some suggest that the restraint is essentially an influence for good that may be embodied in either a person or principle. Those holding to this interpretation generally see the law and order associated with good government and just rulers as the restraint holding back the man of lawlessness. The neutral 'what' in verse 6 and the personal 'he' in verse 7 need not present a problem in this view, if we bear in mind the fact that states are often personified by reference to their rulers.

Others connect the restraint more directly with God Himself, and with His purpose that the gospel should be preached throughout the earth before the end comes (2 Pe. 3:9; Mt. 24:14). Until that purpose is fully accomplished, God, perhaps through the mediation of heavenly beings, restrains the development of lawlessness.

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However, it is not clear whether that which, or the one who, ‘restrains’ is godly (e.g., God the Father, the Holy Spirit, good Roman government, the preaching of the gospel, the activity of angels, Michael the archangel, the Jewish state, the mission to the Gentiles); or whether it is evil (e.g., generic evil, Satan, sin, bad Roman government); or even whether it is morally neutral (e.g., the rule of government in general terms).

The problem with most of these opinions is that they are human forces. Human power, ingenuity, and institutions cannot restrain the supernatural power of Satan that seeks to release Antichrist. If no human power restrains, that leaves only the power of God to hold back the purpose of Satan for his Antichrist. The change in gender from the neuter participle translated ‘what restrains’ in verse 6 to the masculine participle rendered ‘he who ... restrains’ is significant. The sovereign, divine force that currently restrains Antichrist is exerted by a person—the Holy Spirit. Only He has the supernatural power to hold Satan in check. The phrase ‘taken out of the way’ does not refer to the removal of the Holy Spirit from the world, but rather to the cessation of His restraining work.

Satan, of course, does not want to operate on God’s timetable. If he could, he would have revealed Antichrist long before now. But nothing—not even the purposes of hell—operates independently of God’s sovereign timetable. Therefore, the man of lawlessness will not appear until the ‘time’ predestined by God.

b) The Mystery of Lawlessness (2:7a)

...For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work...

The result of this restraining influence, whatever its nature, is that for the moment, lawlessness operates as a secret power. *Mustērion* (μυστήριον, ‘mystery’) describes something which has been kept secret for long ages past (Rom. 16:25) and is incapable of being known unless revealed by God, with special reference to the fulfillment of His purpose. The ‘mystery of lawlessness’ is the satanic counterpart of the mystery of God’s purpose. While not totally hidden, it nevertheless cannot flourish openly. It bubbles beneath the surface awaiting its time to erupt and envelop the earth in evil. That eruption will occur at God’s appointed time, when that which currently holds back its spread is taken out of the way.

Satan, the sponsor of the rebellion, cannot achieve all that he would like because, in spite of the damage caused by the Fall, the God-given instrument of law and order which still exist in human society, though in varying degrees in different parts of the world, hold him in check. The apostle, however, envisages a time when the rule of law is increasingly held in contempt, moral absolutes are derided, and the institutions that civilized nations have used to restrain the effects of the innate evil that lurks within the human heart can no longer perform their appointed task.

Paul does not write these things to stimulate the curiosity of the Thessalonians, nor, for that matter, ours. He is not providing a timetable of future events for end-time speculators but writing as a pastor to settle a disturbed flock. He wants his readers to know that certain future events must take place before the Lord returns. Lawlessness, culminating in the revelation of the man of lawlessness, must first of all increase. But even that, they must know, is also in the hand of God. Powerful though the coming one might be, the Lord Himself yet remains in supreme control.

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3. Reveal (2:8)

a) *The Apocalypse of the Lawless One (2:8a)*

And then the lawless one will be revealed...

For the third time the passive of ‘revealed’ (*ἀποκαλυφθήσεται, apokaluphthētai*) is used to denote the epiphany of the counterfeit Christ, lawlessness incarnate. But he is revealed only to be destroyed. Further details of this powerful figure and his activities remain tantalizingly obscure. The apostle does not want us to develop an absorbing fascination with him.

b) *The Parousia of the Lord (2:8b)*

...whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming.

What he does want us to know, along with the certainty of his appearance as a precursor to the day of the Lord, is that he will be utterly overthrown and destroyed by the Lord Jesus Christ. We have no idea how long he will be allowed to parade his arrogance before this will happen. But when it does, there will be no protracted conflict. The man of lawlessness will be rendered powerless, in a moment of divine triumph. The Lord Jesus will overthrow him with the ‘breath of His mouth’ (cp. Rev. 2:16; 19:15). The all-prevailing word of the Lord will forever silence the hollow claims of this arrogant blasphemer (v. 4), Paul here conflates two parallel phrases in Isaiah 11:4: ‘He will strike the earth with the rod *of his mouth*, and *with the breath* of His lips He *will kill* evil’ (cp. Is. 30:33). God’s mouth and words have power. Revelation uses the similar picture of a sword coming out of the Lord’s mouth to destroy His enemies (1:16; 2:16; 19:15, 21). The Scripture insists that Satan’s great captain will melt like snow in the fiery heat of the wrath of the coming Christ.

Katargēsei (*καταργήσει*, ‘destroy’ or ‘bring to an end’) literally means ‘to render inoperative,’ ‘to abolish,’ or ‘to render ineffective.’ Not only will the Lord ‘consume’ (destroy) Antichrist’s person, He will also ‘bring to an end’ his empire.

‘Appearance’ or ‘brightness’ (*ἐπιφανεία, epiphaneia*, related to the English word ‘epiphany’), and ‘coming’ (*παρουσία, parousia*) are two technical terms used by Paul to refer to the Second Coming. This is the only Bible verse where they occur together. Undoubtedly, the concept of *epiphaneia* is primarily related to the Old Testament appearances of God (‘theophanies’). *Epiphaneia* was used in the Greco-Roman world to refer to a deity’s power when he revealed himself; it can also mean ‘manifestation’ or ‘dawning.’ The bright dawn of Christ’s Parousia will consume the man of lawlessness; we may compare the ‘flaming fire’ of 1:7-8.

He will also be overwhelmed by the ‘splendor’ of Jesus’ coming. He will be no match at all for the splendid conqueror. Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Paul and John, all holy servants of the Lord, were unable to stand in the presence of God’s revealed majesty. How much less will the one who has defied God and usurped His prerogatives! The appearance of the Lord in the splendor of His heavenly glory will render his arch-adversary powerless.

Christ is here presented as our Divine Warrior. In the Old Testament, God and the Messiah are depicted as warriors (Ex. 15:3; Is. 11:1-4; 42:13; 66:15-16; Mal. 4:1). In the New Testament, Christ is portrayed as a Divine Warrior (Mt. 24:30; 2 Th. 1:7-8; 2:8; Rev. 19:11-16). Christ protects His people and destroys the wicked.

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On the surface, there appears to be a problem between 1 Th. 5:1-11 and 2 Th. 2:1-12. The former passage leads one to believe that Christ may return at any time, but the latter passage notes that certain events or signs must come first before the Second Coming. This apparent discrepancy is solved if the appearing of the Antichrist and Christ's battle with him essentially takes place at the same time, or if there is only a very brief time difference between them. The abruptness of the second half of verse 8 implies this. Hence, the appearing of the Antichrist and his defeat are considered to be a part of what is involved in Christ's Second Coming.

What stability and comfort these words supply! They warn against premature panic concerning the day of the Lord and assure of the ultimate triumph of Christ in the end. The man of lawlessness will have his day, but he will also meet his doom.

C. Deception (2 Th. 2:9-12)

Although Paul has already described the doom of the man of lawlessness in verse 8, he continues to describe the nature and consequences of his activity during the period of his power in verses 9-12. Verses 9-10 concerns some of his activities and the effect these will have on his followers. Verses 11-12 further expand upon the latter part of verse 10 by setting out God's actions with regard to the followers of the lawless one.

1. The Working of Satan (2:9-10)

Verse 9 points to the outward of the coming of the Antichrist, while verse 10 points to the inward results.

a) *Coming (2:9)*

(1) Counterfeit Savior (2:9a)

The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan...

The first thing Paul mentions about the coming of the lawless one is that it will be in accordance with the work of Satan. *Energian* (ἐνέργειαν, 'working' or 'activity'), the root of the English word 'energy,' describes power in action.

The Antichrist is shown here as a parody of Christ. Like the Lord Jesus, the man of lawlessness is said to have a coming, or *parousia* (παρουσία). Paul almost certainly wants his readers to recognize this parallel. He wants them to understand that Satan will attempt to deceive people at the end of the world with a blasphemous substitute for Jesus. The climax of God's saving plan is marked by the *parousia* of Jesus. The culmination of Satan's opposition to God will be the *parousia* of the man of lawlessness.

The coming of the lawless one will be Satan's attempt to counterfeit the appearing of the Lord Jesus Christ. His coming will be correspondingly impressive. Though a man, the lawless one will be empowered with superhuman abilities. He will come anointed with the might of his master. Just as Jesus will come in the glory of His Father, the antichrist will come in accordance with the work of Satan.

(2) Counterfeit Signs (2:9b)

...with all power, signs, and lying wonders...

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Satan's power will show itself in the great diversity of counterfeit miracles, signs, and wonders that his underling will work. 'Power' (*δυνάμει, dynamei*) refers to supernatural acts; 'signs' (*σημείοις, sēmeois*) points to the one who performs them; 'wonders' (*τέρασιν, terasin*) describes the astonishing results. *Pseudous* (*ψεύδους* 'lying' or 'false') modifies all three terms.

Miracles, signs, and wonders were the hallmark of Jesus' ministry on earth. They authenticated His claim to be the Son of God from heaven (cp. Mt. 24:24; Jn. 2:11; 4:48; Acts 2:43; 5:12; Rom. 15:19; 2 Cor. 12:12; Heb. 2:4). The man of lawlessness, at the instigation of Satan, will copy these works to make people worship him as God. It will be a kind of a ghastly parody of the coming of Christ (cp. Acts 2:22, where Peter uses these same three terms of Jesus). The Antichrist will appear in person and his appearance will be authenticated by the miraculous.

The miracles will be genuine in the sense that they will not be mere visual delusions or tricks. It is quite within Satan's power to make supernatural things happen. Their counterfeit character lies in their source and intention to deceive. They aim to make people think that God is at work, but in fact, their purpose is to make people believe that the one who performs them is God. Their intent is to point away from the true God and towards the 'lying' Antichrist and Satan. In that sense they are not genuine signs, but lies.

Deception lies at the root of Satan's design. He will stop at nothing to delude people. Every sort of evil that deceives will be the underlying motto of his actions. Deception is the grand result that he seeks.

b) Deception (2:10)

...and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved.

Not everyone will fall prey to these false signs, however, but only those people already on the path to eternal death. It will not affect true believers, but only those who were already on their way to 'being destroyed' (*ἀπολλυμένοις, apollumenois*). A proportion of mankind will be taken in by his deception; as a consequence, they will perish. While they will not entertain a miraculous Christ, they readily embrace the imposter. They discount the authentic signs and wonders recorded in the gospel, miracles intended to establish beyond doubt that Jesus Christ truly was all that He claimed to be, and they show a gullible, superstitious credulity in their uncritical acceptance of any display of supernatural power.

They are perishing because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Refusal of the truth lays one open to all kinds of error (cp. Rom. 1:21-28). These unbelievers will have no concern for truth and will easily be further deceived by the Antichrist when he comes. Apparently Paul is referring to people who have rejected the 'truth' of the gospel. They have heard the truth. However, they have willfully refused to receive it as the means of their salvation. People like that do not love the truth because they do love falsehood and wickedness. As a result, they are on the road to destruction. The Bible clearly teaches that those who go to hell do so because they reject the truth. They willfully choose to love their sin, believe Satan's lies, and hate the gospel and the Lord Jesus Christ.

2. The Will of God (2:11-12)

a) Delusion (2:11)

And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie...

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But there is more to their fall than the craft of this arch-deceiver. God, too, is active in this end-time process. He is in control of the whole process of false miracles and delusion, and He uses it for His own ends.

Specifically, He uses the deception of the man of lawlessness as a means of hardening those who have rejected the gospel. Paul says that God actually sends a powerful delusion or ‘working of error’ upon those who refuse to love the truth, so that they will believe the lie. By ‘the lie’ it is apparently meant the denial of the fundamental truth that God is God; it is the rejection of His self-revelation as Creator and Savior. They have rejected the truth, and because of this, God abandons them to the lie (cp. Rom. 1:18-32). If they will not have Him, He will let them go their way and reap the full consequences of their folly. Interestingly, God’s punishment for the sin of unbelief is to confirm men in the sin that they have already eagerly embraced.

In doing so, God is not the author of their sin. He removes restraints and sends delusions in ways that make men and women more disposed to sin themselves. To be misled by falsehood is the divine judgment inevitably incurred in a moral universe by those who close their eyes to the truth. But the true God is not the deliberate author of this infatuation; their actions are their own, and their judgment is deserved. God cannot be blamed for their acts or for their consequences.

God’s ‘working’ (*ἐνέργειαν, energeian*) is prominently contrasted with Satan’s working (*ἐνέργειαν, energeian*) in verse 9. Satan’s ‘working’ will be powerful and will result in the deception of many. But God’s working will be more powerful. In fact, God will righteously overcome Satan’s plan by using it for His own glory in judgment. In verses 9-11, the actions of Satan, the Antichrist, and unbelievers are all involved in the ‘secondary causes’ of unbelief and all bear responsibility for their sin. The ultimate cause, however, is God, who in a mysterious way is not morally responsible for their sin.

The story of Pharaoh is a grim reminder that God will judicially harden the hearts of those who persist in hardening their hearts against the truth. Because Pharaoh hardened his heart (Ex. 8:15, 32; 9:34; 1 Sam. 6:6), God hardened Pharaoh’s heart, fixing him in a path from which he could never return (Ex. 4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8).

The responsibility for all that follows rests squarely with the people concerned. Faced with a choice between God’s truth and Satan’s parody of it, they opted for deceit and sin rather than truth and goodness. The responsibility of the unbelievers is emphasized by the introductory clause, ‘and for this reason.’ God’s sending of a ‘strong delusion’ is merely His confirmation of them in their chosen course of action.

Nor must we imagine that in acting this way God is merely outsmarting Satan. Rather, He is using him. It is wrong to think of God and the devil locked in a conflict that God only just manages to win. He is totally in control of His adversary and is able to use him to accomplish His own plans at any point. Satan is merely the instrument used by the Almighty to accomplish His wider purposes. All of Satan’s activities, along with everything that ever comes to pass, fall within the scope of the sovereign purposes of God.

The crux of this is that God is pleased to honor the moral choices of individuals. Those who embrace a particular lifestyle will eventually find that God gives them over to the consequences of their choice (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28). Prefer lies to the truth of God and you will find yourself becoming hardened, increasingly willing to embrace a way of life which flaunts sin in its ugliest

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forms. One of the ways in which God punishes us for our sins is that He leaves us to wallow in them, allowing a dissipated lifestyle to take its inevitable toll upon us.

b) Condemnation (2:12)

...that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

In this particular case, God uses Satan and the man of lawlessness so that all who have not believed the truth but have enjoyed wickedness will be condemned or judged (*krinō*). They have rejected the truth not because it is beyond their comprehension or because it is illogical. They have done so because they have loved wickedness. And for that, they are justly punished. They would have been condemned anyway for their unbelief and sins, but by following the man of lawlessness they will be counted even more worthy of that sentence and reap the heavier punishment.

The process reaches its sickening conclusion when those who embrace error and moral evil are eventually condemned and perish. The human dupes of Antichrist will share the destiny of their figurehead. It is no trivial matter, then, to harden our hearts against the truth of God. It is much the wiser policy to love the truth and take pleasure in righteousness.

Scorning God's truth is a serious matter. In mercy and love He provides sinners with a gospel of reconciliation through Christ. If they receive it, they receive life. But if they reject it, there remains 'no sacrifice for sins' but only 'a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God' (Heb. 10:26-27). By implication, Paul is encouraging the Thessalonians, and us, to be those who do 'believe the truth' and not be those who '[take] pleasure in unrighteousness.'

For next time: Read 2 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5.