

2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

Introduction

This is one of the most difficult passages in the New Testament. Paul is using terms and pictures which were familiar to him and his readers, but not to us. There are also allusions to his oral teaching, which is unknown to us (2 Thessalonians 2:5). So there may have been no problems for first readers, but there are many for us.

Recall the background to this letter – there was nervous hysteria waiting for the second coming among the Thessalonians. They had given up their jobs to wait. Paul had been misrepresented as saying the day of the Lord had come (2 Thessalonians 2:2). Paul explains there is much to happen before then. There will be an enormous rebellion against God, and a manifestation of evil which will be without precedent. Then evil will receive final defeat, and God's triumph will be sure.

Do not be troubled (v1,2)

Paul begins by referring to the shock they had received – being told that the day of the Lord was “at hand”, i.e. had already come. He was anxious that they must not be too troubled or upset, either by spirit, i.e. report that Paul had had a supernatural revelation, or by letter – either a misunderstanding of his first letter or a forgery.

Things to come before the day of the Lord

First of all there will be a great rebellion (v3). The A.V. translation “a falling away” is inadequate – it will be more than mere falling away. There will be an outstanding manifestation of the power of evil arrayed against God. Satan will throw all his forces into one last despairing effort.

This rebellion will be headed up by “the man of sin” (AV), or “the man of lawlessness”(NIV). He will assert evil against the law and the will of God. Who is he? There have been many who have done Satan's work throughout history. C.f. 1 John's reference to many anti-Christ's, therefore it is dangerous to try to identify him. Paul hints that this man will be the most famous of all, and will come in the last days. He is not Satan, but he is Satan's instrument and imbued with Satan's spirit. Paul describes him in v3 as the “son of perdition” (AV), i.e. **the man doomed to destruction** (NIV). He opposes God and exalts himself over everything to do with God (v4). He claims divine honours as he sits in the temple of God. Paul pictures him attempting to overthrow and dethrone God.

And now you know what is holding him back (2 Thessalonians 2:6). The Thessalonians may have known, but we don't. He is speaking of a restraining power at work, a power headed up by a person – therefore probably a reference to the Roman Empire led by the Emperor. But the Roman Empire has long since passed away. Therefore the restraining power referred to is more likely the principle of law and government, which was illustrated in the Roman Empire and is continuing in other states. N.B. Roman law is perpetuated in legal systems of the states which have

succeeded the Empire. Dispensationalists take the restrainer to be the Holy Spirit, since when the church is raptured (before the Tribulation), the Holy Spirit will be removed, and lawlessness will be unleashed. Others suggest this refers to the restraining effect of Paul's missionary work. But the best suggestion is the law and order of the Roman Empire.

So in this rebellion there will be a collapse of the rule of law and all political order. Lawlessness will be unrestrained. The last defences against the power of chaos will break down completely. Then the church will enter into a brief period of evil, which will end with the return of Christ. This evil power is already at work, but will not reach its consummation till the restraining power has been removed (v7).

Then Paul turns to the destruction of the man of lawlessness. There is an underlying note of God's unchallenged sovereignty. **The Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth** (2 Thessalonians 2:8), suggesting the ease with which the Lord will destroy the lawless one. He is also going to destroy him by the brightness and splendour of His coming. The very appearance of the Lord means destruction of the enemy.

Just as there will be the coming of Jesus, so there will be the coming of this evil power. Many commentators from earliest times have noted the parallels between the man of lawlessness and Christ. He is the counterfeit Christ. He works in the power of Satan, as Christ works in the power of God. He, like Christ, will perform miracles. The three Greek words used here to describe his miracles in v9, *δυναμει, δημειοις,* and *τερασιν*, are saturated with falsehood. Hence we must never be dazzled when a church or movement claims to be proved right by its miracles.

Deceit is the method of the lawless one (v10). The followers of the deceiver will perish because they do not welcome the truth. Verse 11 brings the assurance of God's sovereignty; His hand is there in all that happens. **God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie** (2 Thessalonians 2:11). The powers of evil are dependent on God. God makes the wrath of men to praise Him. His purposes are being worked out even in the evil that men do. He uses the evil consequences of sin as part of the punishment of the sinner. **God gave them up** (Romans 1:24,26,28) to the consequences of sin. God's hand is in the process whereby the sinner receives fitting recompense of his sin. Thus it is fitting that those who reject God come to believe a lie. Men who reject the Gospel end up by accepting evil as true. The result (v12) is they receive judgement. Rejecting God leads to believing a lie, and this leads to judgement.

The unbeliever has two counts against him, (1) that he does not believe the truth, and (2) that he takes pleasure in unrighteousness. He is not only enslaved and immersed in sin, but also taking delight in it. We are made to enjoy God, but our sin leads us to enjoy sin instead.

Permanent Truths

- (1) The Devil and his power are a dire reality, and it is folly to bury our heads in the sand to this fact.

- (2) We should not be surprised at events around us, for it may be the end times. If this is not the end times, then the end time will be like this, or worse.
- (3) God is in control over evil and chaos.
- (4) God will ultimately triumph. He will say "Thus far, and no further" to evil.