

“Missing the Forest . . .”

2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 ¹

As we arrive at Paul’s second letter to the church at Thessalonica, we have come to a short but interesting piece of correspondence. Written from Corinth just a few weeks after his first letter, 2 Thessalonians reads in large part like a newsy letter to friends; but plopped in the middle of this newsy letter are the most difficult verses Paul ever wrote.

Second Thessalonians 2:1-12 are widely regarded among scholars as the most obscure words we have from Paul’s pen, at least in their specifics. As I read these verses, I’m reminded of Peter’s comment that “[Paul’s] *letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction*” (2 Peter 3:16). To use a different metaphor, we sometimes speak of “the milk and meat of the Word,”² and I’m inclined to call this passage “the gristle.”

I’ve discovered that I’ve never preached on this text before, and I’ve wrestled with it all week. I think I’ve avoided it not just because of its obscurity, but because of its frequent use in a theological system known as “dispensationalism.” You may not be familiar with that term, but I’m pretty sure you’ve heard of one of its central tenets, which is something known as “the rapture.”

The concept of “the rapture” was invented in England by a preacher named John Nelson Darby in the 1820’s,³ and it was one of the anchoring concepts of his “dispensational” approach to human and theological history. Darby’s theological system made a great impression on Cyrus Scofield, a preacher from Michigan, who popularized Darby’s system in this country through his *Scofield Reference Bible*, published in 1909.

I’ll have to say that dispensationalists deserve credit for working very hard to “put all the pieces together” in biblical prophecy, especially as that prophecy relates to “the end times.” It is they who have constructed the intricate end-times charts you may have seen here and there. Dispensationalism is, as I’ve mentioned, a relatively new idea, and it has always been a minority view in global Christendom, though it has become quite popular in this country not only through Mr. Scofield’s Bible notes but also through Hal Lindsey’s best-selling book, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970) and Tim LaHaye’s *Left Behind* series of books and movies (1995 ff).

Dispensationalism isn’t our topic this morning, but I think it has largely been dispensationalism’s fascination with today’s text that has caused me to avoid it. Let me remind you as we begin that simply saying something long enough and loudly enough doesn’t make it true.

I suggest to you that dispensationalism and its “rapture” are ideas that many have come to believe because they’ve been repeated for rather a long time. I do not think that they’re accurate understandings of what the Bible teaches; but holding to those teachings is not a test of fellowship as far as I’m concerned. These are, for the most part, peripheral matters. We need to keep the Main Thing the Main Thing, which is what I hope to do this morning.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on August 23, 2020.

² This comes from the KJV rendering of 1 Corinthians 3:2 and Hebrews 5:11-14.

³ The nineteenth century was a season in which many spurious ideas took root in these United States. In 1823, Joseph Smith claimed to have a vision that resulted in the launching of the Latter Day Saints, or the Mormons. In 1879, Mary Baker Eddy founded a group that has come to be known as “Christian Science,” and Charles Taze Russell founded a group that has come to be known as “Jehovah’s Witnesses.”

As is always the case, you don't have to agree with me. I encourage you to study the Scripture for yourself. Read widely among scholars who have earned the right to have an opinion. Ponder and pray . . . and open your Bible to 2 Thessalonians chapter 2. Let's look at what Paul wrote.

You may remember from last week that one of the reasons Paul wrote his first letter to the Thessalonians was to address their concern about the fate of believers who had died prior to Jesus' return. They were afraid that those who had died would not be able to enter God's Eternal Kingdom. Here's Paul's response to that concern:

13 "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, concerning those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve like the rest, who have no hope. 14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, in the same way, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. 15 For we say this to you by a word from the Lord: We who are still alive at the Lord's coming will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the archangel's voice, and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are still alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. 18 Therefore encourage one another with these words" (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).⁴

Paul's response had apparently led to more confusion than to clarity among the folk in the congregation, as it does to this very day, and Paul is addressing that confusion as today's text begins

*1 Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him: We ask you, brothers and sisters, 2 not to be easily upset or troubled, either by a **prophecy** or by a **message** or by a **letter** supposedly from us, alleging that the day of the Lord has come. 5*

As is usually the case with Paul's letters, we are privy to only one side of the conversation, so we have to largely infer the questions to which he is responding, and Paul himself seems somewhat uncertain about the source of the misunderstanding.

Perhaps someone had given an ecstatic "prophetic word" that was misunderstood by those who interpreted it. As you'll remember, Paul had encouraged such sharing in his first letter, but he also warned that such messages needed to be carefully vetted by the congregation, and maybe they had failed to do that.

Paul even wonders about possible "identity theft," with someone having sent a letter to the congregation pretending to be Paul. In any event, things have gone from bad to worse. Now the Thessalonians are not only worried about their believing friends and family who have died; someone has apparently told them that Jesus' return had in fact already taken place, and they themselves have missed the boat entirely. Paul's first word in response to this is **"Don't you believe it!"**

⁴ This text is another favorite of dispensationalists. Charles Spurgeon, the famous London pastor, and an opponent of dispensationalism, wrote that "Discernment is most important not in separating truth from error but in separating what is true from what is almost true."

⁵ v. 1 - Matthew 24:31; Mark 13:27; 1 Thessalonians 1:10, 2:19, 4:15-17; 1 John 2:28; Revelation 11:8

v. 2 - Matthew 24:6, 25:13; Mark 13:7; Acts 2:20; 1 Corinthians 1:8; Philippians 1:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Thessalonians 3:17; 2 Timothy 2:18; 1 John 2:28, 4:1

Paul then goes on to remind the Thessalonians about what he taught them while he was recently with them. Remember that Paul had only been able to stay in Thessalonica for about a month, so their introduction to following Jesus had been very brief. They hadn't had a lot of time to ask questions. Most of them were not Jewish, so they didn't even have the Jewish Scriptures as a resource to help clear things up.

So, a few weeks later, Paul chides them gently in v. 5, asking, *Don't you remember that when I was still with you I used to tell you about this?* Paul expects them to remember what he had already told them, and he doesn't go over those things again . . . so we who come after don't know that to which he was making reference, and we have to guess.

Fortunately, Paul's basic teaching is clear enough. The Thessalonians were worried that they might have missed "the Day of the Lord," and Paul's response was, "No, you haven't missed it. Several things have to happen first, and they haven't happened, so the Lord has not yet returned." Our problem comes not with what Paul wrote, but with the knowledge he assumed without repeating it. Here's what he said next . . .

³ *Don't let anyone **deceive** you in any way. For **that day will not come unless the apostasy comes first and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction.** ⁴ He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he sits in God's temple, proclaiming that he himself is God. ⁶*

⁵ *Don't you remember that when I was still with you **I used to tell you about this?***

⁶ *And you know **what currently restrains him**, so that **he will be revealed** in his time. ⁷*

⁷ *For the **mystery of lawlessness** is already at work, but **the one now restraining** will do so until he is out of the way, ⁸ and **then the lawless one will be revealed.** The Lord **Jesus will destroy him** with the breath of his mouth and **will bring him to nothing** at the appearance of his coming. ⁸*

Again, Paul's essential message is clear: Jesus will not return until there has been a great rebellion, a great falling away, a great apostasy from faith. During the time of that apostasy, an evil leader will arise, whom Jesus will destroy at His return. That's the message: **Jesus hasn't come yet, but when He does, He'll put things right.**

Our problem comes in trying to discover what Paul meant by "apostasy," with what he meant by "the man of lawlessness," with what he meant by "what restrains the man of lawlessness," and with what he meant by "the mystery of lawlessness." And being curious as we are, we'd really like to know!

One thing about which scholars debate—and they debate pretty much everything in this text—is whether the things Paul mentions happen sequentially or more or less simultaneously; and there's very little agreement on that point. Let's briefly look at each of these four ideas.

⁶ v. 3 - Daniel 7:25, 8:25, 11:36; Matthew 23:15; John 17:12; Ephesians 5:6-8; 1 Timothy 4:1; Revelation 13:5-6

v. 4 - Isaiah 14:12-15; Ezekiel 28:2; Acts 17:23; 1 Corinthians 8:5

⁷ v. 6 - Luke 21:8

⁸ v. 7 - Matthew 13:41; 1 John 2:18, 4:3; Revelation 17:5, 7

v. 8 - Isaiah 11:4, 30:28; Daniel 7:10-11; 1 Timothy 6:14; 2 Timothy 1:10, 4:1, 8; Titus 2:13; Revelation 19:15

“the apostasy”

Paul doesn't give us much information about this falling away, this rebellion. It's not even clear whether the “man of lawlessness” will be revealed during this rebellion or whether the rebellion will be the result of his instigation.

There are a number of other passages in the New Testament that predict a similar time of falling away,⁹ a time in which the forces of evil are marshalled for one massive charge upon the City of Light.¹⁰ The paradigmatic assault, of course, is the famous “Battle of Armageddon” mentioned in Revelation 16:16. But if one looks for a description of this battle, there isn't one. If you'll look at Revelation 19:19-20, the same thing happens there that happens in this text: Jesus is victorious simply by showing up.

“the man of lawlessness”

Most of the interest in today's text has focused on the identity of “the man of lawlessness,” who is probably the same character as the “antichrist” mentioned in 1 & 2 John,¹¹ and may also be one of the beasts of John's Revelation.¹² This person would not be a “false Christ” who pretends to be Jesus prior to His actual Return, but rather an anti-Christ who stands over against and negates God's purposes at every point.¹³ As Paul put it, this “man of lawlessness” *“opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he sits in God's temple, proclaiming that he himself is God.”*

Paul may have been thinking about the Roman Emperor Caligula, who had tried unsuccessfully to have a statue of himself erected in the Temple in Jerusalem about ten years before; but persons have been nominated for the position of “antichrist” in virtually every generation since Paul wrote these words, and there are many nominees in our own time. Candidates have never been lacking.¹⁴

Scholars are unsure just what Paul meant when he wrote that this “man of lawlessness” would sit “in God's temple.” This could be a figure of speech, could refer to a heavenly temple,¹⁵ or it could refer to a rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem. This is the primary verse from which some in our own day think that the Temple in Jerusalem will eventually be rebuilt.

For all our questions, Paul's basic idea is clear: that the demonic opposition to God's rule, already present in our world in a restrained way, will ultimately become incarnate in an historical person who will lead a massive anti-Christ movement prior to Jesus' return.

“the restrainer”

Scholars are also uncertain what Paul was talking about when he spoke of the force that currently restrains this lawless one. In our text, Paul uses both neuter and masculine pronouns, so it's unclear whether he's talking about a person, such as an angel, or about an institution, such as a government.

⁹ Matthew 24: 6-14; Luke 8:13; 1 Timothy 4:1-5; 2 Timothy 3:1-9; Hebrews 3:12; Jude 1-19

¹⁰ The final assault upon the White City of Minas Tirith in *The Lord of the Rings* replicates this idea. That takes place at the end of the last book, *The Return of the King*, which also points to the return of our Eternal King.

¹¹ The term, “antichrist,” appears only in 1 John 2:18, 22, 4:3 and 2 John 7.

¹² Revelation 13, 16:13, 19:20, 20:10

¹³ Paul's description here is also clearly related to Daniel 11:36-37. See also Isaiah 14:13 ff. and Ezekiel 28:2 ff.

¹⁴ Matthew 24:5, 23-24; Mark 13:21-22; Luke 21:8; Revelation 13

¹⁵ Psalm 11:4, 18:6; Isaiah 66:1; Habakkuk 2:20

Scholars aren't even sure whether this restrainer is good or evil. While the restrainer could be a beneficent protector, the restrainer could also be a malevolent enemy holding back the flood until the moment when it will do the most damage.

It seems clear that Paul had a specific power in mind, and that he had told the Thessalonians what—or who—that was. But we don't know.

“the mystery of lawlessness”

It's also clear that Paul regarded “the mystery of lawlessness” as an evil force actively working as he wrote this letter. This is the kind of thing Paul was talking about when he told the Ephesians that “*our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this darkness, against evil, spiritual forces in the heavens*” (Ephesians 6:12); and I expect that you would agree that there is plenty of evidence of their activity in our own time.

By now you may be able to see why scholars describe these verses as the most difficult Paul ever wrote. With many others over the centuries, St. Augustine frankly admitted that he had no idea what Paul was talking about in this passage.

But again, the general idea is clear enough. The Good News is that “*The Lord Jesus will destroy [the man of lawlessness] with the breath of his mouth¹⁶ and will bring him to nothing at the appearance of his coming.*” Those words remind me of the disciples' awe-struck question after Jesus stilled the storm with “a word from his mouth”: “*Who IS this man, that even the wind and the sea obey him?!*” (Mark 4:41).

⁹ *The coming of **the lawless one** is based on Satan's working, with every kind of miracle, both signs and wonders **servicing the lie**,¹⁰ and with every wicked deception among those who are perishing. They perish because they did not accept the love of the truth and so be saved. ¹¹ For this reason God sends them **a strong delusion** so that they will believe the lie,¹² so that all will be **condemned** — those who did not believe the truth but **delighted in unrighteousness.**¹⁷*

Paul goes on to tell the Thessalonians that this “man of lawlessness” will be a cunning agent of Satan¹⁸ who will be able to perform “every kind of miracle, both signs and wonders *servicing the Lie.*” These signs and wonders will be real, and they will be impressive, but they will also be counterfeit.

Think for a moment about counterfeit money. The point of counterfeit money is to approximate the real thing so closely as to be virtually indistinguishable from it. We know that, since its first appearance in Eden, evil has been, and will ever be, deceptive.¹⁹ Satan is not very creative, but he is good at his game. He is able to masquerade “as an angel of light,”²⁰ and we are wise to “test the spirits,” as John told us to do.²¹

¹⁶ Exodus 15:8; 2 Samuel 22:16; Job 4:8-9; Psalm 33:6; Isaiah 11:4, 30:27-28; Revelation 19:21

¹⁷ v. 9- Matthew 24:24; Mark 13:22; John 4:48; Revelation 13:13-14

v. 10 - Acts 16:30; 1 Corinthians 1:18; Ephesians 2:8

v. 11 - 1 Kings 22:22; Ezekiel 14:9; Romans 1:25, 28; 1 Thessalonians 2:3; 1 Timothy 4:2;

Revelation 17:17

v. 12 - John 5:22-30, 6:64; Romans 1:32

¹⁸ See Revelation 20:2

¹⁹ Mark 13:22; John 8:44

²⁰ 2 Corinthians 11:14

²¹ 1 John 4:1

In verses 10-12, Paul talks about the “people of the Lie” who did not “*love the truth and so be saved.*” To put this in today’s language, when we lose the ability to tell “real news” from “fake news,” we are pretty easy to deceive.²²

Paul wrote about “loving the Truth,” and when we think about “loving the Truth,” we remember that Jesus told us, “*I am the Truth.*”²³ So what Paul is really saying is that our choosing to love—or not to love—Jesus determines our eternal destiny.

Paul described this same reality in the book of Romans when he wrote that when persons choose to exchange the Truth of God for a Lie and worship created things rather than the Creator, God reluctantly releases them—us—to the evil which we ourselves have chosen. Such is the terrible and awesome freedom that we enjoy.²⁴

To put all this in a few words, the man of lawlessness will be cunning, amazing . . . and short-lived, because Jesus will come suddenly, unexpectedly, and overwhelmingly to destroy him and bring all things to their appointed end. Did not Jesus Himself tell us that “*I will come when you least expect me?*”²⁵ And did He not warn us not to be deceived, for when He comes, He will split the sky like lightning, and all the earth will see Him?²⁶

Well, I need to tie a knot in all this, and so, at last, I come to the title for this message, which is, as you might have noticed, incomplete. The title is “Missing the Forest,” and the complete statement is “Missing the Forest for the Trees.” When you and I use this metaphor, we’re talking about getting so engrossed in secondary things that we miss the Main Thing; and *that’s my central point about today’s text from 2 Thessalonians.*

It is entirely—and frequently—possible for us to get so caught up with fairly minor points in biblical texts that we miss the Main Point. One of Satan’s most useful strategies is to get us so wound up in making our biblical charts about the foggy bookends of the Bible that we conveniently ignore the crystal clear teachings of our Lord that should be governing every moment of our days.

And so it is that our focus in our study of this passage is not on the “Man of Sin” but on the God-Man who is Jesus, our Lord. Our interest needs to be in Christ and not in antichrist.

Paul warned Timothy that a time would come “*when people will not tolerate sound doctrine [real news], but according to their own desires, will multiply teachers for themselves because they have an itch to hear what they want to hear. They will turn away from hearing the truth and will turn aside to myths [fake news]*” (2 Timothy 4:3-4). Those dangers apply to our time, too.

My friends, peace and assurance during a COVID-stained year do not come from having a complete map of God’s times and seasons but from having an intimate, personal, loving knowledge of our Father in Heaven who rules the times and the seasons. Would you have all of this in just four words?

FRET NOT. JESUS WINS.

²² And this is really the essence of “the unpardonable sin” (Mark 3:29).

²³ John 14:6; Ephesians 4:21

²⁴ John 3:16-20; Romans 1:21-28

²⁵ Matthew 24:44; Luke 12:40

²⁶ Matthew 24:27; Luke 17:24