

2 Thessalonians – Lesson 16

The Man of Lawlessness – Part 2

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:5-12

- (a) Review 2 Thessalonians 2:1-4. How does Paul attempt to *comfort* the Thessalonian believers that the coming of the Lord had not yet occurred?

Paul assures the Thessalonian believers that the Lord had not yet come by pointing out certain *prerequisites* that must first appear, neither of which have yet been revealed. These prerequisites are 1) the rise of a great *rebellion*, and 2) the appearance of a “*man of lawlessness*.” Since these two things have not yet arisen, the Thessalonians, Paul says, can be confident that they have not “missed” the coming of Christ, nor have they been “left out” of the blessings he has in store for them in their faithfulness.

(b) From vv. 5-7, what “*things*” had Paul told the Thessalonians when he was with them? What is his *point* in this rhetorical question?

The “*things*” that Paul says he told them (v. 5) are, undoubtedly, the above truths: that the Day of the Lord will be preceded by a great rebellion led by a man of lawlessness. Additionally, based on the verses to follow, it appears that Paul had also given them much *further* instruction on what the rebellion would look like. His point is to *remind* them of what they had already been told, and *not to forget* his teachings in the face of those attempting to sow doubt or confusion.

- (a) What (or who) do *you* think is “*restraining*” the man of lawlessness (see v. 6)? *When* will this restraint be lifted, and *how*?

The “*what*” restraining the man of lawlessness can be none other than the Holy Spirit, or (because Paul does not use a *personal* pronoun in v. 6) the *power* of the Spirit of God (as seen by the personal pronoun for him in 7). Given that the man of lawlessness represents the power of evil in the world (either through a *specific* man or [more probably!] through the forces of evil that are inherent in the human race, rallied by the devil), another power would be necessary to restrain the *extent* of “*his*” actions. In other words, since the only power “*outside*” of the forces of evil inherent within the human condition is *God himself*, it is reasonable to conclude that Paul is making a (veiled) reference to the Holy Spirit. And, since all of this is centered around the return of *Jesus*, it is reasonable to conclude that it is *Christ himself*, through the Spirit that he has sent, that is restraining the rebellion until the day *he* decides it can be loosed, only to be overthrown by his return.

(b) How would you define the term “*the mystery of lawlessness*” in v. 7? What does Paul mean by it being “*already at work*?”

A “*mystery*” in the Bible is something *previously unknown*, but *now* revealed. In this case, the “*mystery of lawlessness*” is *probably* the sense of rebellion that now is *fully* visible, as it comes against the *specific agent* of God’s redemptive plan, Jesus Christ. In other words, rebellion against God was only a “*generalized*” sense of rejection and hatred against the Creator before the coming of Christ; once he came, the “*location*” of that rebellion now stands out fully. It is *Jesus*, the Son of God, that human beings hate, and that hatred is now “*focused*” squarely on him, as the representative of God on earth. It is “*already at work*” because the Incarnation of the Son has brought it forth, and the Thessalonian believers are being persecuted *simply because they are followers of this Jesus*, so hated by the world.

(c) According to v. 8, *when* will the “*lawless one*” be revealed? What will be his *fate*? How will his fate be *accomplished*, and by *whom*?

The “*lawless one*” will be revealed, Paul contends, as Christ returns; the fullness of “*who*” this is exactly will be made known. Up until then, the “*man of lawlessness*” lurks in the shadows, hiding “*his*” true intentions and purposes. But, as the approach of Christ nears, the rebellion will grow in even greater strength and the “*source*” of this rebellion will be fully revealed. If the “*man of lawlessness*” is a specific individual, then Christ will reveal him. However, if the “*son of perdition*” is more of an *amalgam* of men over time leading rebellion against Christ, then the revelation of “*him*” will be to make this form of evil *visible* amongst humanity, and in particular, the church. His fate will be that Christ will “*kill*” him (or destroy him) with “*the breath of his mouth*.” Again, if a specific individual, then executed by the very word of Christ, or, if a generalized leadership of that which is against Christ, then a *revelation of truth* that will slay the idea of evil, bringing all thinking patterns under the Lordship of Christ.

3. (a) Briefly *describe*, from vv. 9-10, the rebellion (as a description of the event introduced in v. 3). How are these things happening in our world today?

Paul gives some *details* of what the rebellion will look like in vv. 9-12: 1) it will be led by Satan; 2) it will be accompanied by great power in false signs and wonders; 3) it will deceive many with its wickedness; and 4) it will be fomented by God sending a “*strong delusion*” upon the perishing to believe what is false, particularly that which characterizes the signs and wonders. This appears, then, to be a great rebellion *by the vast swath of humanity* against God and, specifically, against Jesus Christ, the One from God. Such a rebellion is *clearly* in operation now: there is a tremendous *apostasy* away from Christ and his church in the West today, being led by campaigns attempting to “*wrest*” believers away from faith in Christ through deception and (even!) false signs and wonders being done by those who promote a “*false*” gospel (e.g., in prosperity theology). And, there is a *strong* sense in the world of those who “*refuse to love the truth,*” but would rather simmer in lies.

(b) *Who* is “*behind*” this rebellion? Why would the Lord Jesus *allow* this kind of rebellion to sweep the earth? How does it relate to the *mission* of the church, as he describes it in Matthew 16:18-19?

Ultimately, the rebellion is being led by Satan, who is attempting (still!) to destroy the creatures made in the image of God and being saved from God’s wrath by the Son sent from the throne of heaven. Christ, I believe, allows this rebellion because it is a part of the *justice* of God; to allow humanity to have *whatever it wants* (i.e., as a part of a fallen nature), and to suffer the just consequences for rebellion and wickedness. In other words, the fullness of both the *mercy* of God and the *justice* of God are revealed as wickedness rises up against redemption. The mission of the church, therefore, is to *prevail* against “*the gates of hell,*” to go forth into a world filled with rebellion, to preach the gospel to all men, and to see the power of the Spirit bring the elect from every tribe, tongue, and nation to saving faith, *in spite* of the power of Satan to prevent it. Satan is trying to stop it with evil, but Christ’s church overcomes those “*gates*” with the power of Christ himself.

4. Compare these verses to Matthew 24:15-31. Describe the days of “*tribulation*” that appear before the return of Christ. For *whose* sake are the days “*cut short?*” Why?

The days of tribulation that Christ describes, before his triumphant return, are characterized by great fear: a “flight” away from the “danger” that comes, and the sense in the reprobate of now *knowing* that the justice of God has “arrived.” Until this moment, men go about life thinking that they can “get away” with whatever evil they can dream up, but as the news of Christ’s return goes forth, the reprobate become more and more aware of their judgment, and they attempt to “flee” from it. If this “*great tribulation*” is some *specific* timeframe in the future, then the description is *specifically* about it. However, if this time of tribulation is understood to be *the entirety of the church age* (as I see it!), then the description is about how the gospel, going out into the world through the church makes the judgment of God more real *over time* to men as the church expands its influence in the world, bringing all nations under its moral authority. However, *in either case*, the days are “*cut short*” for the sake of the elect, so that we who belong to Christ (like the Thessalonians!) do not become *too deeply discouraged*.

5. (a) From vv. 10-11, what is the “*strong delusion*” that God sends upon the rebellious?

The “*strong delusion*” is, in my opinion, the “lifting” of the restraint of God over sin and evil, so that men begin to believe that Christ will *never* return, and (thus!) they can simply *ignore* him and his commandments. It is the same kind of thing as them “*suppressing*” the knowledge of God through unrighteousness (Romans 1:18): as the church age goes on and on, the reprobate simply *assume* that the gospel is false, the church is lying, and Christ will not (i.e., cannot) return to judge them. Thus, they believe the lie: they *think* that they can “get away” with whatever evil thoughts come to them *without retribution*. But, it is a *delusion*: humanity *knows* that judgment is *necessary* and *inevitable*, at their very core. God “gives them over” to this delusion about themselves and their future, and they believe the lie.

- (b) How is this delusion a part of the *justice* of God? How do you “square” this with the *nature* of God as being unable to lie (Hebrews 6:18)?

The judgment of God comes over men *as he gives them what they want*; since they desire to be “god” without the law of their Creator over them (i.e., establishing their own “righteousness”), God’s judgment is simply to give them that “freedom.” Their “freedom” then leads them to *further* rebellion against him, and they actually “seek out” a place where they can be “free” from God. This, of course, is a lie (a delusion) that comes over them; they hate God and, thus, are judged *righteously* by God for it. In other words, God’s justice is simply to allow humans the freedom to believe *whatever they want*, instead of restraining their *natural tendency* to believe a lie. Thus, God is just in punishing their wickedness, for there is nothing “redeemable” within them outside of his regenerating grace and mercy. God *does not lie*: he simply *allows* humanity to believe *whatever lie they wish to create for themselves*. He cannot be accused of “creating” the lie; that is the prevue of the wicked, who decide to believe *whatever they want*, especially as they seek to “flee” from God’s truth.

- (c) How does this delusion *add* to the condemnation of those who “*did not believe the truth*” (v. 12)?

The reprobate are actually *judged* by the fact that they *know the truth* within their nature as creatures created in the image of God; their nature *screams out* the reality of God, the nature of good vs. evil, the just condemnation of the wicked, etc. Thus, when God “turns them over” to the delusion they create for themselves, the delusion *itself* becomes a part of their own condemnation: the lies they form in wickedness become the *basis* for their spiritual destruction and the *reason* that God must cast them away from himself. In other words, once the hand of God is *fully* removed from the wicked *in hell*, the delusion becomes infinitely greater over them, and they then live in a world of utter “fantasy” about themselves and their fate, suffering under the “fire” of never-satisfied hopes and dreams.