

1 and 2 Thessalonians

The Antichrist (2 Thess. 2:1-12)

Lesson #12 for September 22, 2012

Scriptures: 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12; Matthew 24:1-14; Zechariah 3:1; Daniel 8:8-11; Acts 2:22; Revelation 7:1-3.

1. This lesson is very challenging for serious Bible students. It is Paul's clearest explanation of what he believed will happen at the end of this earth's history. Unfortunately, he referred back to what he taught the Thessalonians while he was with them. We do not have that information. In effect, we are listening to one side of a telephone conversation.
2. Read 2 Thessalonians 2:1,2. There are several phrases or words in those two verses that remind us of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11. They speak about "the coming of our Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:15), "the gathering" (1 Thessalonians 4:17), and "the day of the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 5:2). It is these connections which lead many scholars to believe that 2 Thessalonians was written primarily as a correction to misunderstandings that the Thessalonians had developed following Paul's first letter.
3. So, what was it that the Thessalonians were believing? It looks like they were believing one or both of two mistaken ideas: 1) That the coming of Christ had already taken place in some hidden or mysterious way—a kind of spiritual coming; and/or 2) That the coming of Christ would take place during Paul's lifetime. The best evidence we can put together would suggest that Paul was around 50 to 55 years of age at that time. Because there were so many deaths from infection and other causes, especially among children, life expectancy in those days was no more than about 45 years. Thus, the Thessalonians were looking for a second coming in the very near future.
4. Notice that 2 Thessalonians 2:2 says that this misunderstanding may have come about because of something Paul said while prophesying or preaching or perhaps even what he wrote in a letter. Later, we will see that Paul suggested that there were counterfeit letters being circulated. Does that imply that Paul himself had written previous letters to them?
5. It is also possible that rumors or ideas were started among the Thessalonians themselves that others were accepting as truth. Such ideas happen frequently even in today's church. A person may come up with a new idea which may be at least partially based on Scripture but focuses on a certain point out of balance with the rest of Scripture. That person may believe that s/he has discovered some great new truth! But, we must keep all of Scripture in mind and keep things in balance.
6. What is the only safety against false teachings or teachings which are out of balance? It is for us to have such a clear picture of the teachings of all of Scripture that we recognize any falsehood being preached. Why are there so many denominations with different teachings? People tend to collect their favorite texts that support the ideas they like.
7. Clearly, the Thessalonians believed that the second coming had already taken place or that they were in the final events and final days leading up to it. Paul's response was, "Not so fast!" Then, he spelled out in some detail things which must happen before the second coming can take place.
8. Read 2 Thessalonians 2:3,4. Paul talked a little bit about the chronology of final events, but he wrote it in reverse order. Indeed, there will be a second coming of Jesus Christ. But, before that happens, "the man of lawlessness" or "the final rebellion" must take place. But, for the time being, the wicked one is restrained. Why do so many people believe that the Devil does

not exist? Are you glad that the Thessalonians had this misunderstanding so that Paul wrote this second letter to us with more details?

9. Beginning in the middle of verse 3 until the end of verse 4, there is an incomplete sentence. To make it complete, translators usually add something like “that day will not come. . .” at the beginning of the sentence. And what does the rest of the verse say? There must be an apostasy first. It is described as a revelation of “the man of lawlessness,” sometimes called “the son of destruction.” What does this man of lawlessness do? “He will oppose every so-called god or object of worship and will put himself above them all. He will even go in and sit down in God’s Temple and claim to be God.” (*GNB*) Is this talking about a real person?
10. Where do all these expressions come from? And, who is this person opposing God? The name *Shetan* in Hebrew or *Satan* in English means “the adversary” or “opponent” and is used specifically in Zechariah 3:1 to refer to Satan. The little horn of Daniel 8 tried to exalt himself above God and take God’s place in the heavenly temple. Satan himself has tried to claim a position among the gods, even rising above God Himself in Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28. A parallel passage is found in Daniel 11:36-39. So, Paul’s description of what this lawless man is going to do comes straight out of the Old Testament.
11. Read 2 Thessalonians 2:5. Clearly, Paul had discussed this issue with the Thessalonians earlier. He had hoped to make it clear at that time. But, they had been misunderstanding and misinterpreting his words.
12. Read 2 Thessalonians 2:6,7. What is holding back the second coming of Jesus Christ? He believed that the Thessalonians knew what it was. The wicked one must appear, but he had—and has—not appeared yet. The “Mysterious Wickedness is already at work, but what is going to happen will not happen until the one who holds it back is taken out of the way,” or perhaps, takes Himself out of the way voluntarily. (*GNB*) So, what was Paul telling us? Most assuredly, the second coming will arrive. But, before that happens, “the man of lawlessness” (verse 3) must be revealed. Apparently, this is also parallel to “the mystery of lawlessness.” (2 Thessalonians 2:7) But, before even that happens, there must be a time of mystery and restraint.
13. What is holding back the second coming? Why don’t we see those events proceeding rapidly to their termination? In 2 Thessalonians 2:6,7, we notice something very interesting. There are parallel sets of people and things described beginning with a “restraining power” which is parallel to “a restraining person” in verse 7. “The lawless one” (verse 8) as a person seems to be parallel with the “mystery of lawlessness” in verse 7.
14. How do you explain 2 Thessalonians 2:8? When is it that Jesus will “kill him [the Wicked One] with the breath from his mouth and destroy him with his dazzling presence”? The rest of the passage seems to be talking primarily about the second coming. However, we who know about the millennium (Revelation 20) believe that the wicked will not be destroyed until the third coming. Did Paul know anything about the millennium and the third coming?
15. So, who is the restrainer or power of restraint in these verses? Notice that whatever it was or whoever it was, it was present back in Paul’s day. Apparently, it is on God’s side, upholding the law because it is restraining lawlessness. Whoever or whatever it is, it is powerful enough to restrain the works of Satan. (2 Thessalonians 2:9)
16. So, what is causing the delay of the second coming? The easy answer is found in Matthew 24:14; Mark 13:10; and Revelation 14:6,7. God is waiting for the gospel to be spread across the entire world so everyone has an opportunity to hear and make a decision before He shows up in the clouds of heaven.

17. But, the plot thickens as we turn through the writings of Ellen White. See *Evangelism* pp. 694-697. In 1868, Ellen White said that there had already been long delay. By 1883, she said that we should have been in the kingdom of heaven before that date.
18. Does that suggest that God is waiting for us? Or, are we waiting for Him? Does God have a date marked on His calendar when He is going to come, and that is it? How do we explain Revelation 7:1-3 (compare Ezekiel 9) and 2 Peter 3:9-12? Do we have any part in preparing the world for the second coming? Are we delaying Christ's second coming? (*4BC* 1161.6)
19. On Satan's side we notice certain things about "the man of sin" or "lawlessness." The little horn in Daniel 7:20-25 was speaking blasphemies against God and trying to take over God's place. The beast from the sea in Revelation 13:1-7 seems to continue to operate after the fall of pagan Rome. If we do our best to put all these passages together, is there a certain power or authority that fits the total picture? Many scholars and Bible interpreters up until the days of the Industrial Revolution believed that there was only one institution that could be represented as the Antichrist. That institution can only refer to the papacy. In the last two centuries, many Christians have moved away from that interpretation. Why do you think that is? Does that fit with our understanding of what is supposed to happen just before the second coming of Christ?
20. Read 2 Thessalonians 2:9. What is it that the wicked one will do to try to prove that he is God? He will perform all kinds of false miracles and wonders and use every kind of wicked deceit on those who will perish. (2 Thessalonians 2:9,10, *GNB*) Notice that this behavior perfectly parallels what Jesus did. (Acts 2:22) Just as the beast in Revelation 13 receives its power from the Dragon who is operating behind the scenes, this antichrist seems to get his power from Satan himself. And how do we avoid being caught up in this greatest "evangelistic" campaign of all time? Revelation 13:3,4,7,8 suggests that almost the entire population of the world will follow after Satan. And the only way we can avoid that fate is to become "lovers of the truth." What is a "lover of the truth"? Read 2 Thessalonians 2:10-12. Do we love to study our Bibles and pray more than we love watching television or movies or being entertained? It is interesting that the opposite of "lovers of truth" is those who take "pleasure in sin." What does that imply?
21. Read 2 Thessalonians 2:11,12. Does God really try to deceive people at the end of time, leading them into error? Does God ever want people to believe what is false? Or, is this a subtle way of describing God's wrath which is His turning away in loving disappointment from those who do not want Him anyway—thus leaving them to the inevitable and awful consequences of their own rebellious choices? How will God behave at the end of this world's history? When Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane and on Calvary, God actually withdrew from Him—withdrew His beams of light and love, thus separating from Him. (*DA* 693.2) Christ felt forsaken. Might God do that same thing to our world at the end?
22. Satan has always claimed that if God would step back and let him take control, he could run a better universe! At the end of this earth's history, might God basically give Satan the opportunity to try that? As the history of our world is wrapped up, what Satan would like to do most of all would be for the righteous to either join his side or be taken out of the way. Then, he and his forces would be left to take control of this earth as their domain. Of course, God says: "Nothing doing! I'm going to bring the New Jerusalem back here to this earth and make this little blue marble my headquarters for the rest of eternity!"
23. Notice some very significant words from Ellen White about what is going to happen near the end. She talked about it using our passage for this week.

The apostle Paul warned the church not to look for the coming of Christ in his

day. "That day shall not come," he says, "except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed." 2 Thessalonians 2:3. Not till after the great apostasy, and the long period of the reign of the "man of sin," can we look for the advent of our Lord. The "man of sin," which is also styled "the mystery of iniquity," "the son of perdition," and "that wicked," represents the papacy, which, as foretold in prophecy, was to maintain its supremacy for 1260 years. This period ended in 1798. The coming of Christ could not take place before that time. Paul covers with his caution the whole of the Christian dispensation down to the year 1798. It is this side of that time that the message of Christ's second coming is to be proclaimed.—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 356.

As the crowning act in the great drama of deception, Satan himself will personate Christ. . . . In gentle, compassionate tones he presents some of the same gracious, heavenly truths which the Saviour uttered; he heals the diseases of the people, and then, in his assumed character of Christ, he claims to have changed the Sabbath to Sunday, and commands all to hallow the day which he has blessed. . . . Only those who have been diligent students of the Scriptures and who have received the love of the truth [2 Thessalonians 2:11,12] will be shielded from the powerful delusion that takes the world captive."—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 624,625.

In bearing the message, make no personal thrusts at other churches, not even the Roman Catholic Church. Angels of God see in the different denominations many who can be reached only by the greatest caution. Therefore let us be careful of our words. . . . Upon these themes silence is eloquence. Many are deceived. Speak the truth in tones and words of love."—Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*, p. 576.

24. How good are we at loving Catholics but at the same time bearing witness against the Roman Catholic institution? Can we do that with Christian love, forbearance, and tact?
25. Do you find these verses in Paul's writings about the second coming confusing? Or, helpful?
26. The Jews in Jesus' day read the Old Testament very carefully and believed that there would only be one coming of the Messiah. They believed that the passages that we now apply to the second and third comings would all take place at the first coming. All of the apostles except John—in Revelation—in the New Testament apparently believed that the final end of all things—except for the new earth—would take place at the second coming.
27. It was not until the apostle John wrote in Revelation 20 that there is any hint of the 1000 year period that we call the millennium and then the third coming. Did Paul know anything about the millennium and the third coming? Does God always reveal all the truth there is to know to every prophet and every apostle with whom He works? Of course not! Why did God wait until the very end of John's life to reveal any information about the millennium and the third coming? Have we understood all the information and put it together correctly? Or, could we also be deceived? Or, is our picture incomplete? How careful have we been studying?
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