

The Man of Lawlessness

2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

By Andy Manning

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Today we are going to study one of the most difficult passages in Scripture: 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12.
2. The subject of this passage is the man of lawlessness (some manuscripts read “man of sin”); the man doomed to destruction (KJV, “son of perdition”).
3. Many believe this man is the antichrist, and if that is the case then this is the most extensive passage on the antichrist in the Bible.
4. Today our focus is eschatology, the study of the end times (aka Bible prophecy). Of the many types of theology – Bibliology, Christology, Pneumatology, Ecclesiology, Soteriology, etc. – eschatology is by far the most difficult.
5. As we study this passage, I want to point out that there is room for disagreement on this passage. When it comes to theology, there are three different types of doctrines in terms of importance. First-order doctrines are those that you must believe in order to be a Christian. Second-order doctrines are those that you must believe in order to be a member of this church. Third-order doctrines are those that Christians in the same church can disagree on. Most of eschatology falls under the category of third-order doctrines. There are few things about eschatology that we must agree on: The bodily return of Jesus Christ; the eternality of heaven and hell, etc. But other than that, we can agree to disagree. So, it is okay if you disagree with my humble interpretation of this passage. You don’t have to land where I land.

II. TEXT

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. 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. 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 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. 9 The coming of the lawless one is based on Satan's working, with every kind of miracle, both signs and wonders serving 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.

III. BACKGROUND

1. What makes this passage so difficult to understand?
 - i. Paul does not give the identity of the man of lawlessness.
 - ii. Paul does not give the identity of the restrainer.
 - iii. Paul does not use the term “antichrist” to describe the man of lawlessness, so we are unsure if they are one and the same.
 - iv. It is unclear if the man of lawlessness was a first-century figure who was destroyed by Christ in AD 70, when Christ destroyed the temple and the city of Jerusalem, or if he is an end-times character still in our future. In other words, should we look at this passage with a preterist understanding (past fulfillment), or a futurist understanding (future fulfillment)? Parts of the passage seem to support both of these views.

IV. TRAITS OF THE MAN OF LAWLESSNESS

1. He will appear just before the coming of Christ.

- i. **2 Thessalonians 2:1-2** “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.”
- ii. The church at Thessalonica was upset and troubled. Somehow (prophecy, message, or a letter supposedly from Paul), they heard a rumor that the day of the Lord had come and they had missed it.
- iii. What is the “day of the Lord”?
 1. Not every mention of the “day of the Lord” refers to the second coming of Christ.
 - a. In Zephaniah, the day of the Lord referred to the destruction of Israel by the Babylonians (1:7, 14).
 - b. In Isaiah, the day of the Lord referred to God punishing Babylon (Is 13:6).
 - c. **John Walvoord** “The Day of the Lord is an expression frequently used in both the OT and NT to describe any period of time during which God exercises direct judgment on human sin. The OT records a number of times when Israel endured a day of the Lord, lasting a few days or, in some cases, several years.”
 - d. The context determines the meaning.
 2. In this context it has to do with second coming of Christ.
 - a. Paul starts out by setting the topic (1-2): “Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to

- him: We ask you not to be easily upset or troubled [by a rumor], alleging that the day of the Lord has come.”
- b. Notice that he connects “day of the Lord” with the “coming” of Christ.
 - c. So, the day of the Lord is the day of Christ’s coming (that day, v. 3).
- iv. But that brings up a more difficult question: What does Paul mean by “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him”?
- 1. The two competing theories are 1) the second coming of Christ at the end of history, or 2) the coming of Christ in judgment against Israel when the Romans destroyed Israel, Jerusalem, and the temple.
 - 2. It is important to understand as you study your Bible that not every “coming” of Christ mentioned in the NT refers to the second coming of Christ at the end of history. Kenneth Gentry describes three different categories of Christ’s “coming” in the NT:
 - a. His spiritual coming. The NT mentions several different spiritual comings of Christ.
 - i. His spiritual coming when He comes to live inside each believer through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.
 - 1. John 14:18, 23 “18 I will not leave you as orphans; I am coming to you... 23 If anyone loves me, he will keep my word. My father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.”
 - ii. His spiritual coming when he comes to meet each believer at death and takes them to heaven.
 - 1. John 14:3 “If I go away and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am you may be also.”
 - iii. His spiritual coming when He was exalted, coming into the presence of God the Father at His ascension following His death and resurrection.
 - 1. John 17:11 “I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you.”
 - b. His metaphorical coming. This is Christ’s symbolic coming in wrath and judgment upon people at different times in history.
 - i. In Mt 24 Jesus prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem. His disciples asked Him to explain the sign of His coming and of the end of the age (24:3). This “coming” was not the second coming at the end of history, but His metaphorical coming in judgment on

Israel in AD 70, the end of the Jewish age. Christ went on to describe numerous events (signs) that would occur before AD 70.

- c. His literal coming at the end of history.
 - i. Acts 1:10-11 “10 While he was going, they were gazing into heaven, and suddenly two men in white clothes stood by them. 11 They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up into heaven? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come in the same way that you have seen him going into heaven.”

3. So, which “coming” is Paul referring to in 2 Thessalonians 2:1?

- a. There is good reason to believe that he is referring to the Christ’s literal second coming at the end of history.
- b. Once again, the context determines the meaning. In 2 Thessalonians 1, the verses immediately proceeding this passage, the topic is the second coming of Christ. Paul is encouraging the Thessalonian church as they suffer persecution. He writes that God will give them relief, and at the same time will punish with eternal destruction their persecutors. When will this happen?
 - i. 1 Thessalonians 1:10 “on that day when he comes to be glorified by his saints and to be marveled at by all those who have believed, because our testimony among you was believed.”
 - ii. Just a few verses later, in 2 Thessalonians 1, Paul says, (my paraphrase), “Now about this coming, let me explain more about it.”
- v. So, the Thessalonians had heard a rumor that the day of the Lord, or the second coming of Christ, had already occurred, and they missed it. Paul quells their fears by saying that two things have to happen before the second coming – the apostasy and the man of lawlessness. Then Christ will come and destroy Him.
- vi. So, the man of lawlessness will appear on the scene just before the second coming of Christ at the end of history.

2. He will appear before the rapture.

- i. **2 Thessalonians 2:1** “Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him”
- ii. What does Paul mean by “our being gathered to him”?
 - 1. Once again, we have to look at the context.

2. In verse 1, Paul puts these two events together – the coming of the Lord and our being gathered to Him. Since we have already established that the “coming of our Lord” refers to the second coming, then “our being gathered to him” must refer to the rapture which occurs at the same time.
- iii. What is the rapture?
1. The rapture is probably not what you have heard it is.
 2. According to the eschatological view Dispensationalism, the rapture is a secret coming of Christ in which He takes the church out of the world right before a seven-year period of great tribulation takes place on the earth. It is during this great tribulation that the man of lawlessness, or the antichrist, will be revealed, and he will execute two-thirds of the Jews. Then at the end of the seven years Christ will come back to earth physically with His church and will rule from Jerusalem on the earth for 1,000 literal years. So, Christ’s coming will occur in two phases. The rapture is Christ’s coming for His church; the second coming is Christ coming with His church. This view was created in the 1800s by an Englishman named John Nelson Darby who did some very creative interpretation to come up with it. The problem is that there is no verse or passage of the Bible that teaches this. You have to take a passage from one book, and a verse from another book, a verse from the Old Testament and jumble them together. The Bible does not teach a two-phased return of Christ, or a seven-year tribulation during which two-thirds of the Jews will be slaughtered by the antichrist. It’s just not there.
 3. But the Biblical teaching of the rapture is actually very easy to understand. The most extensive and clear NT passage on the rapture is in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.
 - a. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 “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.”

b. What does this passage teach about the rapture?

- i. Christ will descend visibly and bodily (with a shout, with the archangel’s voice, and with the trumpet of God).
 - ii. Dead Christians (the dead in Christ; those who have fallen asleep) will descend with Him, and will be given their resurrection bodies (rise first).
 - iii. Then living Christians will rise in the air to meet Christ and will receive our resurrection bodies, and will always be with the Lord.
 - iv. But it does not say that Christ will then turn around and go back to heaven seven years. The rapture occurs as Christ is coming and descending to the earth.
 - v. Hank Hanegraaff “Nowhere does the text say that when Christ comes down from heaven,... that Christ will hover with us in midair, suddenly change directions, and escort us to mansions in heaven while all hell breaks out on earth.”
 - vi. Dr. N.T. Wright “Paul conjures up images of an emperor visiting a colony or province. The citizens go out to meet him in open country and then escort him into the city. Paul’s image of the people ‘meeting the Lord in the air’ should be read with the assumption that the people will immediately turn around and lead the Lord back to the newly remade world.”
- iv. So, Paul says, concerning our being gathered to Him, or the rapture, this will not happen until the apostasy and the man of lawlessness come first.
 - v. Dispensationalists claim that the rapture can occur at any moment. However, this passage directly refutes that claim. Two things have to happen before the rapture and return of Christ: the apostasy and the man of lawlessness.

3. He will appear along with the apostasy.

- i. **2 Thessalonians 2:3** “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.”
- ii. This word “apostasy” can mean “falling away” or “rebellion.” It can be a spiritual falling away, or a political rebellion.
- iii. Most commentators agree that the context points to a spiritual “falling away.”

- iv. "Apostasy" is preceded by the definite article "the." This points to "the apostasy" being a final, worldwide, climactic apostasy just before Christ's return.
- v. The apostasy will include a large number of professing Christians turning away from Christ, probably to worship the man of lawlessness.
- vi. In every church there are two types of Christians: professing Christians, and authentic Christians. Claiming to be a Christian does not make you a Christian. Thinking you are a Christian does not make you one. Going to church does not make you a Christian. To be a Christian you must be born again. And the proof of the new birth is obedience.
- vii. **Matthew 7:21-23** "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. 22 On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, didn't we prophesy in your name, drive out demons in your name, and do many miracles in your name?' 23 Then I will announce to them, 'I never knew you. Depart from me, you lawbreakers!'"
- viii. Before Christ returns, and at the same time as the appearing of the man of lawlessness, a large number of professing Christians will abandon Christ.
- ix. **2 Timothy 4:3-4** may refer to the same thing. "3 For the time will come when people will not tolerate sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, will multiply teachers for themselves because they have an itch to hear what they want to hear. 4 They will turn away from hearing the truth and will turn aside to myths."
- x. From the text, it looks like the apostasy produces the man of lawlessness (he is one of those who falls away), and then he becomes a leader and makes the apostasy even worse.

4. He will claim to be God and demand to be worshiped.

- i. **2 Thessalonians 2:4** "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."
- ii. What does it mean that "he sits in God's temple, proclaiming that he himself is God"? There are three main theories:
 - 1. Dispensationalists believe that one day in the future the Jews will rebuild the temple and reestablish the sacrificial system, and that the man of lawlessness/antichrist will actually sit in the temple and proclaim himself to be God. There are some major problems with this view:
 - a. Nowhere does the NT promise a rebuilt temple.
 - b. At the time this was written, the temple was still standing. If Paul was talking about the actual temple, the Thessalonians

would have assumed he was talking about the current temple, not some future temple thousands of years in the future.

- c. Every time Paul uses the word “temple”, it refers to the new spiritual temple, the church, or to the people of God (for example, Eph 2:21-22 and 1 Cor 6:19). In Paul’s writings, the temple never refers to the physical temple of Jerusalem, but the church, or individual believers whose bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit.
 - d. Paul uses the term “God’s temple.” Ever since the death of Christ, the temple of God was no longer the Herodian temple in Jerusalem. When Jesus died, the temple curtain was torn in two, from top to bottom, because we no longer need the temple or the sacrificial system to meet with God (Mt 27:51). Now we have access to God through Jesus Christ. The book of Hebrews explains that Jesus is the true temple, priest, and sacrifice, and that those things were just shadows or symbols of Christ (Heb 7:11-10:22). So, if Paul was talking about an actual temple, it is unlikely he would have called the “God’s temple.”
- 2. Those who read this passage from a preterist understanding believe “God’s temple” refers to the first century temple, and that the man of lawlessness was a religious or political leader who actually sat in the temple, and he was destroyed with the temple in AD 70.
 - a. But we have already seen how it is unlikely that Paul would have referred to it as “God’s temple.”
 - b. As well, we have already seen how the context of this passage seems to point not to AD 70, but to the rapture and return of Christ at the end of history.
 - 3. The most likely view to me is that “God’s temple” refers to the church. Sitting in God’s temple means that the man of lawlessness will be a professing Christian, a Christian leader, who eventually abandons Christ and claims to be God.
- iii. The text shows that the man of lawlessness will be a monotheist, claiming that there is only one God, and that he is the one God.
 - iv. His opposition to all other so-called god or object worship likely means that he will force people to worship him, and persecute those who refuse.
 - v. This means that along with the apostasy and the appearing of the man of lawlessness, there will be a time of intense persecution against Christians just before the return of Christ.
- 5. He will appear when God stops retraining him.

- i. **2 Thessalonians 2:6-8** “6 And you know what currently restrains him, so that he will be revealed in his time. 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.”
- ii. There has been much debate over the identity of the “restrainer.” Sam Storms mentions a few:
 - 1. Civil government and its authority and power to resist as well as punish evildoers.
 - 2. The preaching of the gospel and the comprehensive good that comes in its wake.
 - 3. The ministry of an angel.
 - 4. The providential power of God expressed in terms of common grace wherein the Spirit restrains the expression of evil both in the hearts of the unregenerate in general and in the manifestation of the man of destruction in particular.
- iii. I think the last view makes the most sense. The restrainer is God, the Holy Spirit, overseeing history and world events, restraining Satan’s work through the man of lawlessness until the right time. When the time is right, God will allow the man of lawlessness to do his damage.
- iv. Why would God allow “the man of lawlessness” to exist and to do evil? God will allow the man of lawlessness to exist as a form of judgment on unbelievers.
- v. **2 Thessalonians 2:9-12** “9 The coming of the lawless one is based on Satan’s working, with every kind of miracle, both signs and wonders serving 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.”
- vi. Unbelievers and mere professing Christians who have rejected Christ will be deceived by the man of lawlessness, who will do miracles, signs, and wonders.
- vii. Are these real miracles or fake miracles? I’m not sure. Either way, do not be deceived by miracles, signs, and wonders. Instead, make sure any teacher you listen to sticks to God’s word, and make sure that his character lines up with God’s.

6. His movement has been at work since the first century.

- i. **2 Thessalonians 2:7** “For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work....”
- ii. Verse 9 says that the coming of the lawless one is based on Satan’s work. Satan was been working since the beginning of human history. That’s what this is referring to.

- iii. The “mystery of lawlessness” refers to the worldview, or ideology, or philosophy, or movement of lawlessness.
- iv. “Lawlessness” does not refer to anarchy, but rebellion against God. The movement of rebellion against God was already at work in the first century, and it is at work today, and it will come to a head with the man of lawlessness.

7. Christ will destroy Him when He comes back.

- i. **2 Thessalonians 2:8** “The Lord Jesus will destroy him with the breath of his mouth and will bring him to nothing at the appearance of his coming.”
- ii. And now for the good news.
 - 1. The man of lawlessness will be a human being, which means he won’t live very long, which means his time to persecute Christians will be brief.
 - 2. During his lifetime, Christ will return and destroy him.
- iii. When Jesus comes back, He will not rule on the earth for 1,000 years before carrying out the final judgment. The millennium, or Christ’s rule, is happening now, in the hearts of believers. When Jesus comes back, it will be the end of history. He will give believers their new glorified bodies, judge the living and the dead, cast Satan into the Lake of Fire, and create the new heavens and new earth, where we will be with the Lord forever.

V. CONCLUSION

- 1. So, who is the man of lawlessness? In my view he is an end-times antichrist figure who will appear just before the return of Christ. He will come out of the church and demand to be worshiped. He will deceive many with miracles. And he will be destroyed when Jesus returns.