

2nd THESSALONIANS BIBLE STUDY

2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

Lesson #2

Introduction

Last week we covered chapter one of this second epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians. Just as a refresher, we recall that the first epistle was dealing primarily with the issues of escalating persecution, and then a false teaching that was growing up in the church that the tribulation period had already begun, and then with the issue that some of the members had apparently ceased to work and were living off the other members, and finally that there were some immoral behaviors of a sexual nature that might have been taking place among some of the church members, and Paul wanted to specifically deal with these issues.

Now, in this second epistle he's reinforcing and further supplementing, with addition clarifications, the things he told them in that first epistle. This second chapter, of his second epistle, is dealing primarily with the tribulation period that he had told them about when he was present with them the first time, but subsequently someone had misunderstood, and twisted the meaning and the time line of those events. So Paul is giving them some additional information to serve as a clarification of the sequence of events, and by doing so, dispelling the false teachings and misunderstandings that were circulating within the church. Because, the nature of these errors was seriously harmful to the faith of the young believers. When he was there with them, Paul had specifically taught them that they were not destined, not appointed by the predetermination of God, to suffer through His period of wrath, which is coming on the whole world in the last years before His bodily return. (1Th 5:1-9) Paul had clearly told them that they would be caught up off of this earth into the air to be with the Lord Jesus forevermore before this tribulation period began. (1Th 4:13-18)

This being the case, then what was the logical conclusion that the new believers would make if they were told that the tribulation period had already begun? Obviously that they had not been counted worthy by the Lord of being caught up and gathered together with Him and the other saints. That they had missed this event. What could be a more damaging error to the saints than this, in the face of serious persecutions and hardships? If this were actually true then either they weren't really genuine believers, or the gospel wasn't true, one or the other was necessary. We can see why Paul was so concerned, and took the time to give such detailed clarification on this matter. So, we want to make sure that we understand this clearly ourselves and not fall into that same trap of Satan. Now lets read exactly what Paul told them about this, as it's recorded in the scriptures:

The Man of Lawlessness

1 Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to Him: we ask you, brothers, 2 not to be easily upset in mind or troubled, either by a spirit or by a message or by a letter as if 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 son of destruction. 4 He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he sits in God's sanctuary, publicizing that he himself is God.

5 Don't you remember that when I was still with you I told 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 with the brightness of His coming. 9 The coming [of the lawless one] is based on Satan's working, with all kinds of false miracles, signs, and wonders, 10 and with every unrighteous deception among those who are perishing. [They perish] because they did not accept the love of the truth in order to be saved. 11 For this reason God sends them a strong delusion so that they will believe what is false, 12 so that all will be condemned—those who did not believe the truth but enjoyed unrighteousness.

2 Thess 2:1-12 (HCSB)

Verses 1-2:

1 Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to Him: we ask you, brothers, 2 not to be easily upset in mind or troubled, either by a spirit or by a message or by a letter as if from us, alleging that the Day of the Lord has come.

Paul starts out by clearly defining the subject of his forthcoming teaching. He says it's concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to Him, and the allegations that this has already happened, and the day of the Lord's wrath, the tribulation, has already begun. This is typical of the kind of errors and misinterpretations that commonly plague the church when men substitute their own human reasonings, and speculations, for sound biblical exegesis. If one simply ponders the implications of this allegation, and thinks it through to its logical conclusion, then it's hard to understand how anyone could believe it. Nevertheless, it seems that many in the church were now uncertain as to exactly what Paul had taught them when he was there with them, and weren't sure if this teaching was true or false.

Furthermore, Paul's wording makes it pretty clear that there were certain ones who were going to great lengths to teach this, apparently even to the point of falsifying a letter from Paul. Now it isn't entirely clear what these false teachers had to gain, or what was their motivation, but the ramifications of their error were nothing less than momentous.

Before going any further, let's draw the connection, and define the distinction, between the two issues being discussed here. First, there is the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ to gather together his saints to himself. Then there is the issue of the subsequent series of events known as the Day of the Lord, or the tribulation. Paul had carefully taught them while he was there with them, and again in his first epistle, that these two events were directly connected. He had told them quite clearly that the gathering together preceded the period of wrath. And this is the very reason that they had this concern right now. Because, if the second of these two events was already happening, then according to Paul's teaching, the first event had to have already taken place also. And if the first event had already taken place, the catching away of the saints to be with the Lord into the air, then why were they all still there?

Do we see the dilemma that this poses? Strangely enough, even today, there are multitudes who are unclear as to the relationship between the catching away and the tribulation. There are those who insist that Paul didn't even teach this. But if Paul hadn't taught this, then this entire dilemma of the Thessalonians wouldn't even have existed. It is precisely because Paul **did** teach this to the Thessalonians that they had this troubling dilemma. It is precisely because Paul had taught them that the catching away preceded the tribulation that they were so disturbed, and Paul had to write these two letters to clear up the misunderstanding. This is the whole point of chapter two of this epistle, it deals with nothing else.

Some argue that the catching away is in the midst of the tribulation, and others at the end, but if either of these were what Paul had taught them, then there would have been rejoicing, not panic, at the thought that the tribulation had already started, because that would have meant that the catching away was imminent. This whole dilemma, and the whole ruckus, is precisely because *they all had understood* Paul's earlier teaching that the catching away *precedes* the tribulation.

If the catching away doesn't precede the tribulation then this entire second chapter of second Thessalonians makes absolutely no sense, because this whole chapter is speaking precisely to the clarifying of the *sequence of events*, and putting them in their proper order. This chapter is telling them that the tribulation cannot possibly have begun yet, and goes on to give them some recognizable signs, so that they will be certain that the catching away has not already happened, and they have not missed out, or been left behind. And neither is the catching away into the clouds just some kind of mystical gnostic concept of the mind, or allegorical principle. Paul goes on to further clarify this in his next verses:

Verses 3-4:

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 son of destruction. 4 He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he sits in God's sanctuary, publicizing that he himself is God.

Paul tells the Thessalonians not to let anyone deceive them in any way, because the day of the Lord's wrath, his tribulation period, must be preceded by a certain figure called "the man of lawlessness" and "the son of destruction." The apostle John also identifies this same man as the antichrist.

Now it's interesting to note what Paul uses for a recognizable sign. Why does he use the antichrist and not something else? Well for one thing, if he used the examples of God's wrath during the tribulation it would be very easy to believe that the tribulation had already begun under times of persecution, or famine, or war, or other naturally occurring cyclic events. As persecutions intensified it would be easy to think that the tribulation was already happening.

But the antichrist, and his workings, and his outright claims of deity, accompanied by false miracles and signs; this is less frequent and more distinct than other natural worldly occurrences. This man will be unique. There has been, and probably will be more, various tyrants who claim to be kings or gods, but this individual will distinguish himself as unique even amongst that group. He will have considerable power, and he will control much wealth, but his real passion, his ultimate driving motivation is to be worshiped and recognized by the entire world as God Almighty. And he will have no mercy on those who refuse. So, unless and until this man has come on the scene and taken his place, then the day of the Lord's wrath has not begun, even though it may seem like it has from the persecutions. But we must never confuse the persecutions inflicted by man with the wrath inflicted by God. These two are as different in source and purpose as they are in magnitude. Now, moving on to verses five through eight:

Verses 5-8a:

5 Don't you remember that when I was still with you I told 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....

Concerning these things we've been speaking about, Paul asks them if they don't remember his previous teaching when he was there with them. He had apparently told them all about these things when he was there, so now he's wondering why they're being so easily disturbed and tricked by these false teachers. He even says that they already know what restrains this man of lawlessness because he had told them.

As a famous preacher of our day says, it would have been nice if he had repeated it in his letter so we would also know for sure. Because speculation abounds. But it's meaningless to debate precisely who or what the restrainer is, since that has nothing to do with the point of concern. The point is that God has assigned a restrainer until a certain time has come to pass and then that man of sin will be revealed in his appointed time, and not a minute sooner. That's the point.

We may not know for certain who or what the restrainer is, but we do know why there is a restrainer holding him back for a certain time? We have very precise scripture to answer that question. In his second epistle, the Apostle Peter was speaking about the latter times when mockers of the gospel would be taunting the believers with questions about where is this mysterious Messiah, because ever since our fathers and grandfathers times, people have been speaking of His return, but there's been no sign of him yet, even after two thousand years?

Peter's answer is very astute, and goes right to the heart of that question. (2Pet 3:8-9) He replies that God isn't slow about His workings, at least not as they perceived slowness, but that he was not willing to return one moment before the full number of His predestined elect had been given the required and appointed time to come to saving faith. Peter says God is patient, not slow, because He has a plan of salvation for His particular elect, from which he will not deviate.

This is why verse five says that the man of lawlessness is restrained and will only "be revealed in his appointed time." In his letter to the Romans Paul wrote that the Jews were being kept in darkness by God regarding the gospel, until the full number of predestined gentiles has come to saving faith. (Rom 11:25) Then the church will be caught up into the air to be with the Lord (1Ths 4:13-18) and the restraining force will be removed so that the man of lawlessness can emerge and begin to do the workings which God has predestined him to do. Then sin will be allowed to consummate its purpose through this man of lawlessness, who is indwelt and empowered by Satan.

And all of this is in full accordance with, not contrary to, the divine, predetermined plan of God. There may be room for discussion as to exactly who the restrainer is, but there's absolutely no question as to why he's there, or what he's waiting for. God the Father, from before creation, has appointed a time for all things, and all things will happen precisely according to that appointed time. Not any sooner, and not any later. The prophet Isaiah wrote:

8 "Remember this, and be assured; Recall it to mind, you transgressors. 9 "Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, 10 Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things which have not [yet] been done, Saying, 'My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure';
Isaiah 46:8-10 (NASB)

Do we recall how many times Jesus said, concerning His death "My time has not yet come?" Neither Satan, nor his demons, nor man, is either thwarting, or inhibiting, or delaying, God's eternal plan and God's eternal time table. As I've said in earlier lessons, we've all but lost the vision of an almighty and omnipotent God as depicted in the holy scriptures. We now have a god of our own making, fashioned from our own carnal minds, and far removed from the sovereign and holy God of the scriptures. Our 20th century god is wholly dependent on man to make the first moves and voluntarily contribute to the completion of God's plans. We're certain that if He is really omnipotent, then he's intentionally limited himself, and all his workings, so that He doesn't intrude on man's free will. The fact is, that if He didn't first act upon man's will, then mankind would freely will himself into destruction, every single one of us without exception. (Rom 3:10-18) And I say these things to further reinforce the biblical principle of God's predetermined timetable.

In verse 7 Paul says that the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. What might he mean by that? Well, for one thing, that sin isn't dormant, it's not waiting for the release of the antichrist. It's already doing its preliminary workings, and making the preparations for his emergence. It's already doing the damage to the souls of men that God told Adam and Eve that it would do. Its meting out death and destruction to the son's of Adam, and teaching humanity the lesson for which God intended, which is - that the wages of sin is death. (Rom 6:23) Sin is death, lawlessness is sinning against God by disobedience to his law, and death is the inescapable consequence pronounced by God.

There's no living with it, or compromising with its workings, whereby man may escape the sentence of death. And this fact is already proving itself every day in the lives of all mankind. This mystery of lawlessness is already at work in the world. By the knowledge of God's perfect law comes the consequences of sin, brought about by man's inevitable disobedience. And this is the great mystery - that knowing full well the consequences in advance, why in the world does man still choose to sin? I'm sure we would all agree that it's totally illogical to do something that you know in advance will kill you, but yet we all still do. This does indeed appear to be a mystery, unless we understand that we've been damaged at our very basest level of being, and we harbor within our flesh, a love for sin that's overwhelmingly tempting beyond our good and reasonable senses.

John 3:19 says that the light (meaning the truth) came into the world, speaking of Jesus, but that men loved the darkness, meaning ignorance, rather than the light because their deeds were evil. Paul tells the Thessalonians that the judgement of God comes on those that did not believe the truth of the gospel because they loved their unrighteous sin too much to accept it. He didn't say they didn't understand it, but that they loved their sin too much to accept it. (2Ths 2:10-12)

And this is also obvious today as well, and we see it displayed when highly intelligent men claim to believe that the creation is simply a random sequence of mutations over millions of years, when they know full well the absolute absurdity of such a position. But they love their freedom to sin too much to acknowledge the truth of the gospel, so they cling to a preposterous and idiotic lie, solely to preserve and justify their unrighteous behaviors. All they ultimately accomplish is to prove that the word of God is true, that the wages of sin is death, and the heart of man is desperately sick with wickedness (Jer 17:9) Yes indeed, the mystery of lawlessness is surely already at work, and we can see it all around us, as well as within ourselves. (v.7) The groundwork is surely being laid, and the preparations are well underway for the emergence and universal acceptance of this notorious figure, but his days have been established and limited in advance by the true and living God. Paul finishes verse eight with these words:

The Lord Jesus will destroy him with the breath of His mouth and will bring him to nothing with the brightness of His coming

The whole thing, the whole antichrist empire and kingdom, will come crashing down at nothing but a word from the mouth of Jesus Christ the Lord. All of his weapons and all of his armies will be powerless to save this man of sin from the avenging justice of Jesus Christ when He returns with His bride and His army of angels.

Verses 9-12:

9 The coming [of the lawless one] is based on Satan's working, with all kinds of false miracles, signs, and wonders, 10 and with every unrighteous deception among those who are perishing. [They perish] because they did not accept the love of the truth in order to be saved. 11 For this reason God sends them a strong delusion so that they will believe what is false, 12 so that all will be condemned—those who did not believe the truth but enjoyed unrighteousness

We're told that this coming man of lawlessness is based on Satan's working, and it will be accompanied with false miracles, and signs, and wonders. Does this mean that those apparent miracles will be simply elaborate magic tricks, or does it mean they are supernatural but done under a false authority? Truly, I don't know for sure what Paul means by false miracles. If it's false then it isn't really a miracle, it's just a trick. Is this what he means, maybe it is, or maybe Satan does have the power to do things that we consider miraculous, but are false in the sense that they are not of God and not done for the sake of righteousness. I can't rule out either one, but it doesn't really matter how he does them but the result he achieves from them.

The result he achieves is to give credibility to his endorsement of lawlessness and unrighteousness, to open sin run rampant. By these signs and wonders he convinces the world that everything God has told humanity is a lie, and only he has the real truth. He will endorse and approve every kind of perverse immorality, and dishonesty, and deception. He will convince the world that everything their evil heart's desire is actually good, and those who disagree are the true evil ones. He will tolerate anything and everything that mankind wants to do, with only one exception, he will not tolerate anyone who disagrees and holds to the principles of God's commandments. This will be a capital offense and will earn one the title of "hater" which will not be tolerated. Either you'll love and approve of sin, or you simply won't fit in. Do we remember the words of Isaiah the prophet when he was speaking of just such a time:

*20 Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; Who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness; Who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! 21 Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes And clever in their own sight! 22 Woe to those who are heroes in drinking wine And valiant men in mixing strong drink, 23 Who justify the wicked for a bribe, And take away the rights of the ones who are in the right!
24 Therefore, as a tongue of fire consumes stubble, And dry grass collapses into the flame, So their root will become like rot and their blossom [will] blow away as dust; For they have rejected the law of the Lord of hosts And despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.*

Isaiah 5:20-24 (NASB)

This verse truly says it all. Under the empire of this man of lawlessness, which means a man who rejects the laws of God, everything will be literally turned upside down and inside out. Everything that God has forbidden will be openly approved and freely practiced, and at the same time everything that God has commanded will be scorned and maligned. There will be absolutely no fear of God before the eyes of mankind, because they will have accepted this man of sin as their God. Because he approves of their sin and unrighteousness, they will offer him worship, and look to him for their eternal salvation. (Rom 3:18)

We might ask - how could the whole world possibly be so massively deceived? After all, mankind does still have at least a small vestige of morality and knowledge of decency within their consciences, don't they? Thankfully, at the present time yes we do, but in the book of Romans we're told what happens to men when they knowingly reject that innate knowledge of God for the sake of indulging their immoral desires. God himself eventually removes the innate restraints from their hearts, and hands them over to their own deepest depravity, to openly practice all those things that humiliate, defile, and destroy them, and all the while actively encourage others to join them. (Rom 1:18-32)

Now, it is with profound sadness that I have to say, that this is exactly what we see happening with our beloved country. We are systematically rejecting the true and living God every day. We are doing it little by little, step by step, piece by piece, but we know full well that we're doing it, and this is the plan. Nowhere will you see men of God represented as righteous, but only as deceptive hypocrites, and conversely, every form of previously acknowledged sin is now depicted as nothing more than normal, harmless, alternative styles of life, fully acceptable according to our own free choices. It would appear that the one and only sin that can be committed today is to openly call something a sin.

Our verse 10 says “they perish because they did not accept the love of the truth in order to be saved.” And then goes on to say “for this reason God sends them a strong delusion so that they will believe what is false.” Just like the verses in Romans chapter one, we’re told here as well, that persistent rejection of the truth will eventually be met with an active response from God. In this case He (God) will himself remove the innate restraints of conscience, and the common sense of logic, and hand them over to deception and depraved unquenchable immorality. They will believe the lie of the man of sin because that’s what they want to believe, and all of the normally built-in restraints on their folly will have been removed by God himself. God hands these who persistently, and intentionally, disobey His commandments, and encourage others to do the same, He hands them over to depraved, self-imposed, humiliating destruction.

It is this intentional and persistent disobedience to the commandments of God that brings the final consummation of sin on mankind, and they get a leader to lead them into that folly. That’s why one of his names is “the man of lawlessness” because he will reject the true God, and all of His laws, and establish his own system that opposes and rejects all that is truly godly. He’ll not only establish his own system of laws, but will go on to use this system to set himself up as God, and demand to be worshiped accordingly. He will be able to do this because the true and living God will have handed a disobedient mankind over to their own unrighteous, dishonest, and immoral desires, and will blind their minds to common sense and logic, and their consciences will be so seared with sin that they will actually be able to believe that this pathetic little Satan indwelt man is actually God, and that his system is righteous and good for them.

Verse 12 ends with a pronouncement of condemnation on a disobedient humanity. And so must every presentation of the gospel end with a warning of the consequences of open disobedience to the God of creation. This true God has offered a means of salvation, a means of redemption from the captivity of the human heart to the desires of sin; and rejection of that offer has the direst of consequences. For those who refuse to believe the truth because they enjoy their unrighteousness, there will be no escape and no reprieve, but only a sure and certain judgement at the appointed time set by God. God has determined that sin will get its day, and do its work, but in the end He will cast it, and all those who love it, into a place of fiery destruction, forever away from His kingdom, and from His glory, and from His children, who love Him and earnestly hunger and thirst for His holiness and His righteousness.

Conclusion:

Concerning chapter two of this epistle, it’s simply beyond debate that it deals with the saints being shaken in mind and troubled (v.2) by a false teaching that the Day of the Lord’s wrath, that is the tribulation, has already begun. As we’ve said, if Paul had taught them that they were going to be caught away after this started, then they would have been excited and full of joyful expectation, but they weren’t, they were troubled and upset. The reason they were troubled is that Paul had taught them that they would be caught up into the air to be with the Lord **before** this started. That is clearly and undebatably the issue being discussed here in this chapter by Paul. And he reassures them that this time of tribulation has not yet started, and consequently that they had neither missed, nor misunderstood, the bodily catching away event that he had plainly taught them before, and was now reaffirming.

Then this chapter goes on to teach us a great deal about the nature of the coming man of lawlessness and his coming world empire. This man is enabled with power by Satan, and strangely enough, also assisted by the intentional act of God to send a delusion on the minds of those who love sin and unrighteousness. He will do great things called false miracles and signs, and will convince the whole world, with some exceptions, to not only follow him, but to actually worship him as God. His attraction will be his endorsement of disobedience to all the eternal commandments of God, and complete tolerance of everything God forbids. He will invite the whole world to sin to their heart’s content, and he’ll call this good, and healthy, and loving, and tolerant. And any disagreement will be immediately labeled as criminally “hateful” and “bigoted,” and met with hostile restraining force. His kingdom of tolerance won’t tolerate any dissension.

Such a time as this has been appointed by God as a part of his creation plan, and it must come to pass at its appointed time. If indeed that time is near, then we are naive to think that it can be avoided, and that we can somehow prevent it from happening if we can just preach the gospel hard enough and with sufficient fervency.

Yes, we must preach the gospel forcefully and fervently, and it will save those for whom it is intended, every single one of them, but still nonetheless, that which is written will have its fulfillment. If that time really is near, then what we can expect is not a revival but a massive apostasy and falling away from the observance of God's commandments. We will see a trend of continued contempt for everything Godly and righteous, and a growing intolerance and hostility towards all those who still want to hold to those old principles.

For this scripture that we've just studied to ever be fulfilled, there will have to be an escalation in sin and disobedience far beyond even what we're seeing now. We're still in the stage where sin, immorality, and disobedience to the commandments of God are being publically and openly introduced as acceptable, and not really sinful at all, just harmless optional alternative lifestyles. And the world is without doubt accepting this. You can't see a single movie, or watch a television program today, that doesn't subtly endorse and normalize these behaviors. And it's working, the world is slowly changing its way of thinking, and its value system, to accommodate every behavior that's forbidden by God. And, at the same time, becoming less and less tolerant of those who disagree with these changes.

Presently, we who still believe in God, and acknowledge the authority of His commandments, are being grudgingly tolerated, but less and less every day. We're finding it harder and harder to publically present our viewpoint, even to the point of censorship. The opposition is growing more and more belligerent. The necessary groundwork for complete censorship has already been laid with the introduction of the heretofore unknown terminology of "hate crimes." It is going to eventually be a "hate crime" to believe in God and publically say that disobedience to His commandments is a sin. My friends, I fear that, that time isn't nearly as far away as we might think and hope.

All of the optimistic talk that I hear from these television evangelists about turning our country, and the world around, and seeing a great revival of godliness, sadly just isn't supported by the holy scriptures. If indeed the time for the revealing of this man of sin is actually near, and the scriptures are inspired by God and true, and inerrant, then by law of consequence, that which is written about that time is also near, and it isn't a time of great revival and godliness, but a time of unprecedented evil and unrighteousness.

Now please don't misunderstand me, and think that I'm a doomsayer, quite the contrary. At least not for the people of God. If the time of the revealing of that man of sin, that man of lawlessness is truly near, then by absolute necessity of scriptures, the time of our being caught up into the air to be with our Lord Jesus is even nearer, and our blessed hope of redemption is indeed very close at hand. For our God has not appointed us to this wrath, but to receive salvation from it through the Lord Jesus Christ, and therefore we are to be very much encouraged and comforted by this knowledge. (1Ths 5:9-10)

If we're really His children, if He is really our first love, and our hope is the gathering together to be with Him forevermore, then we aren't looking for an earthly revival, we're looking for a heavenly revelation. Where our treasure is, there our hearts will be also, said Jesus. (Mat 6:19-20) As the Lord himself also told us, when we see all these things coming together that signal His imminent return, then we who are His should look up to the heavens with great anticipation, because, our redemption draws very near. May His bride look to the heavens and cry - Come quickly Lord Jesus. Amen.

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