

## Enduring Trials in Light of Jesus' Return: The Man of Lawlessness

2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

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*The Lord's Day Morning*  
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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to 2 Thessalonians chapter 2. We're going to be looking at verses 1 to 12. And as we said before the service, this is one of those passages that commentators on the apostle Paul mark as one of the most difficult, if not *the* most difficult, in all of the apostles to interpret. This is especially because of what Paul says in verse 3. He speaks of a "man of lawlessness" or a "man of sin," and no small amount of ink has been spilt over the last two thousand years by commentators attempting to explain and identify who Paul is speaking of.

And then again if you look down to verse 7, Paul speaks of "one who now restrains it," one who now restrains the mystery of lawlessness, the one who restrains the man of lawlessness coming into this world and commentators have probably spent more ink on that question than they have on the question that stems from verse 3. And so this passage has its challenges, but we believe that all Scripture is given by inspiration and is profitable for reproof, correction, and training in righteousness, and so we believe that even the hard passages, even the obscure passages, even the tricky passages in the Word of God where you have to be careful and humble and diligent in order to interpret them are meant to edify believers. And so we are going to attend to this passage knowing that God has something very important to tell us.

Now I think that one way to approach this passage to keep it from being so intimidating is looking at some anchor points that Paul gives you in this text so that you can remember the big picture, so that you can remember what it's about, and so that you can see the main points that Paul wants to make. So let's begin by identifying a few of those things before we even read the passage. First of all, what is this passage about? It's about the second coming of Christ and the gathering of His people to Him. Now you should say, "Ligon, where do you get that from?" Well, I get it from verse 1 — "concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and out being gathered to Him." So there is Paul's topic. He's got some questions being thrown at him about that. And in response to that, Paul gives you five anchor points in this passage to keep from losing your way. You

know, this is one of those passages that you can be reading along, tracking with Paul, and then suddenly it's like, "Squirrel!" And you're off on a tangent and you've lost the track of where he's going.

So how can you stay on track? Well look at these anchor points. First of all in verse 2 - "We ask you not to be shaken in mind." So Paul's coming right out saying, "In this discussion of the second coming of Christ and our being gathered to Him, here's one of my main agendas: I don't want you to be shaken in mind." So there's anchor point one. And then if you look on down at verse 3, anchor point two is, Paul doesn't want you to be deceived. He's got a pastoral concern that people won't be led astray. There's anchor point two. Then if you look at verse 5, he says, "Look, the key here is to remember what you've already been taught." There's anchor point three. So he doesn't want you to be unsettled, he doesn't want you to be deceived, and he wants you to remember what you've already been taught. And then if you look in verse 7, and I'll have to explain this a little bit when we get there, what Paul is saying — and really I'm summarizing what he says from verse 7 all the way down to verse 12 — is, "In all of this, you need to remember the sovereignty of God. God's in charge of all of this. Don't get scared that God is not in charge of this. God's in charge of everything." That's the fourth thing he says. And then when you get to verse 11, what he wants you to remember is what the delusion is that Satan and this man of sin wants to hoist upon you. He's going to tell you what Satan and the man of sin are going to try to trick you with. He tells you in verse 11, and we'll look at that. And those are the anchor points: don't be shaken, don't be deceived, remember what you've been taught, remember that God is sovereign, and remember what the delusion is that Satan and the man of sin are going to try to put over on you. If you'll keep those five things in mind, even the things that you're left fuzzy about after we've read and explained this passage, I think will make a little bit more sense to you.

Let's pray before we read God's Word.

*Heavenly Father, we do believe that all Scripture is given by inspiration and is profitable because it's Your Word. It's given to us that we might be equipped for every good work. So we ask that You would open our eyes to behold wonderful things through Your Word, that You would enable us to see that this Word is the truth of God and You would sanctify us by it. We pray that You would give us to diligent study of Scripture. We thank You for the man pastors and commentators that have poured themselves out giving detailed study of this passage. We thank You for their labors. And we pray that as we give attention to Your Word today, that You would not only enlighten us with facts that we haven't understood as fully before, but that You would press home the truth of Your Word deep into our hearts so that we believe You and trust You and we resist the lies of Satan. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.*

This is the Word of God. Hear it, beginning in 2 Thessalonians chapter 2 verse 1:

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to Him, we ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming. The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant Word. May He write its eternal truth upon all our hearts.

We have said several times as we have studied 1 and 2 Thessalonians, that in these letters Paul gives special attention to the coming of Jesus Christ. That's why we've titled our series on 1 Thessalonians as "Living Life in Light of Jesus' Return" and 2 Thessalonians, "Enduring Trials in Light of Jesus' Return." Paul, over and over, returns to the subject of Jesus' return and he explains to the Thessalonians how they're to live now and how they're to get through trials in light of the glorious truth that Jesus is coming again. But it's also very clear that this subject was confusing to the Thessalonians and that they struggled with it. They clearly had questions for Paul when he was there teaching them. He had to write them a first letter to clear up some questions and frankly some confusions that they had. And even here in the second letters he's having to write them again because they're confused.

Now you need to understand, these Thessalonians, they're predominately Gentiles, if not exclusively Gentile, and they already have in their minds certain presuppositions about how the end time is going to play out that they have believed since they were little children in this culture. If you were in the Greco-Roman culture in the days of the apostle Paul, you hadn't been exposed to the teachings of the Old Testament, the things that the Jewish people believed, you hadn't been exposed to the apostles' teaching before, you were just going off what you knew from the culture around you, your expectations about the afterlife

are going to be very different from what the Bible says. If you're going to believe, for instance, that at death, you enter into a shadowy, spiritual world that has no material substance to it; there's no bodily afterlife. And so when the apostle Paul comes to start teaching you about a bodily second coming of Jesus, you're kind of scratching your head because that's not part of what your culture teaches the afterlife is going to be.

And then he starts talking about a bodily resurrection of believers at the end, so that you're not just raised in your spirit, but your body is raised and glorified and united with your soul and you as a whole person exist eternally in fellowship with God. That's very strange teaching to you and it's not surprising that the Thessalonians would struggle with this. And in this context, Paul indicates that they've still got questions about the coming of Christ and the gathering of God's people to Him. And so in a pastoral response to the question that they're asking him, he speaks to them in this passage. And boy does he talk to them about some hard things. But the big picture is clear. So even as we respectfully and humble wrestle with the hard things, let's don't get lost in the forest for the trees. The big picture is clear here.

## **DO NOT BE SHAKEN IN MIND**

And so to keep that big picture clear in our minds, let's use those five anchor points. And the first one you're going to see in verse 2. Paul says in the midst of these questions that they have about the second coming and about our being gathered to Christ, he does not want them to be shaken in mind. Look at verse 2. "We ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed." Paul is concerned about some of the things that are troubling the Thessalonians. Some of them, we're told point blank here, some of them are afraid, look at the end of verse 2, some of them are afraid that the second coming has already happened. Some of these people are afraid that the day of the Lord has come and they've missed it and they're troubled! And Paul says, "I don't want you to be troubled about these things. It would not be good for you to be troubled about these things. I don't want your faith to be unsettled by these things." Paul is pastorally concerned that they would not be tripped up by this and so he speaks to them in this passage.

Now apparently there's a reason why they're troubled. It's not just that they've had a hard time understanding the apostle Paul in the first place; apparently they've been given some bad information. Look at the language he uses in verse 2 — "Either by a spirit or a spoken word or a letter seeming to be from us." Now has someone claimed to have a word of knowledge, a word from the Holy Spirit, a prophecy from the Spirit that contradicts or confuses them about what Paul has already taught? Or has someone been speaking a word, been teaching there amongst the Thessalonians who contradicted what Paul said or confused them about what Paul meant? And had somebody written them a letter claiming to be

Paul telling them something that, again, is contradictory to what Paul said or confuses them about what Paul said? They've been unsettled not because of the questions in their mind but because they've gotten hold of some bad teaching. And Paul says, "I'm concerned about that. It's not good for you to be unsettled about these things."

Now in this context of course, these things especially pertain to the second coming of Christ and to our bodily resurrection, but what Paul says here about not wanting them to be unsettled about those things really goes for all Biblical truth. You know, we believe in the infallibility, the inerrancy, and the final authority of Scripture here at First Presbyterian Church. We strongly believe in the truth of God and the truth of Scripture. That doesn't mean that we're afraid of people wrestling with questions. You know some churches just love questions. They want you to question everything and have no answers. That's not where we are either. We believe in truth, we believe in the truth of the Bible, but it's very important that you not wrestle with unsettled doubt and questions by yourself. Over the course of my life, I have been greatly helped by the people of God, both pastors and professors and by brothers and sisters in Christ who walked alongside of me when I was having great doubts. And Paul is concerned that the Thessalonians not quiver in their doubts without getting some help. We may not be able to answer everything but we can answer a lot of things together from God's Word and he doesn't want them to be unsettled. And we live in a day and age when many Christians are unsettled by that and so I want you to know that First Presbyterian Church is a place where you can come and you can talk to your pastors and it needs to be a place where you can talk to your brothers and sisters about hard questions where the truth is taken seriously but where you're not alone by yourself trying to wrestle through these hard questions.

Just over the last two or three weeks, Dr. Roger Parrott at Belhaven University has given me the privilege of speaking to the student body during the chapel about some hard questions. Why should we believe that God exists? Has Christian hypocrisy disproven Christianity? And other things like this that young folks are wrestling with today. We're not afraid of those kinds of hard questions but we also don't want to leave people unsettled in those doubts. We want them to come to understand the truth of God and the truth of His Word. And Paul pastorally is dealing with precisely that kind of situation here. People's faith has been unsettled. I mean you can imagine if you've thought, "The day of the Lord has already come and I've missed it!" That would be relatively unsettling! And Paul's saying, "I don't want you to be in that unsettled state."

## **LET NO ONE DECEIVE YOU**

Secondly, look at the second marker here. It's in verse 3. Paul says that he doesn't want you to be deceived — "Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first and the man of lawlessness is

revealed.” The apostle Paul is saying to the Thessalonians, “There is a definite way that you can know that you have not missed the day of the Lord and that definite way is this: Before the day of the Lord happens the rebellion will come and the man of lawlessness will be revealed.” Now just hold on, don't run too far; we're going to get there. But notice what Paul is doing first. He's saying, “You can know that you've not missed the day of the Lord because the rebellion, or it may be the apostasy, has not happened, and the man of lawlessness or the man of sin has not been revealed.” In other words, Paul is saying, “There is something that has to happen before the day of the Lord happens and since that hasn't happened, you don't need to worry that you've missed the day of the Lord.” That's what Paul is doing pastorally in this passage. He's explaining that there is a definite way that they know that they have not missed the day of the Lord.

Now that still leaves you with the question, “Well what is the rebellion or the apostasy and who is the man of lawlessness?” And I've got to tell you, for nineteen hundred years, Christians have worked very hard to identify their own contemporaries as the candidate, the leading candidate for the man of sin or the man of lawlessness. In that first centuries of the church, before Christianity was a legal religion in the Roman Empire, guess who got called the man of lawlessness all the time? The Roman Emperor! Nero was a pretty good candidate. Caligula, who set up a statute of himself in the temple in Jerusalem and demanded to be worshiped; Vespasian whose troops crushed the temple in Jerusalem and them worshiped him there to mock the Jewish people — do you think the early believers thought of the Roman Emperor as the man of sin? Oh yes they did! But then after Constantine converted to Christianity, the Roman Emperor wasn't so good a candidate for being the man of sin. The next people that came along that were good candidates were the vandals, the vandal invaders into North Africa and into Europe and into the old Roman Empire. And it was soon that it was Christians identifying the vandal rulers who eventually sacked Rome in 455. They were the man of sin or the man of lawlessness. And then they were Christianized.

And who was it next? Interestingly, when Islam began to spread throughout the old Roman world all the way up into Spain, across North Africa, into Europe through the Baltic, almost all the way to Vienna, guess who was named as the man of sin, the man of lawlessness? Mohammad! Then, in the high Middle Ages when the popes became very powerful, the Franciscans, a branch of Roman Catholic theologians and many of them monks, decided that the corrupt popes were the man of sin. And then in the Reformation, before the Reformation, Wycliffe and Huss and the Waldensians and then during the Reformation, Luther and Calvin and Zwingli and Knox and Cranmer, identified the papacy as the man of sin, the man of lawlessness. And then the Roman Catholics returned the favor by announcing that Martin Luther was the man of sin! It's gone on and on and on.

So what do we do with this? Well, we go right back to the Word of God. Just look at what Paul spells out for us. What are we to be looking for in the man of sin?

First, he is the “man of lawlessness.” He is against the law. He rebels against the law of God and the law of man. Secondly, he is a “son of destruction.” Just like Judas was a son of perdition, so the man of sin is a son of perdition. He has been ordained to be destroyed. This is one of the things that Paul's telling you in the passage that lets you know however terrifying these thoughts may be, God is still in control. This man of sin isn't going to mess up the plan of God because he's already been appointed for destruction by God. He will not win; he will lose. He's appointed for destruction. Third, verse 4, he “opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.” He sets himself up in place of God. He's against the law, he's appointed to destruction, and he puts himself in place of God. And, if you'll look down to verse 11, this is confirmed. “God sends them a strong delusion so that they may believe what is false.” Some of you, if you're looking at a King James Version or other translation that passage may read, “that they may believe the lie.” Now the lie of course refers to what Paul speaks of in Romans 1. What's the lie? Worshiping the creature rather than the Creator. So that fits perfectly with this idea that he puts himself in place of God. So Paul is saying, “One is coming who is going to be against the law, he's destined for destruction, and he puts himself in place of God. That's the identification of the man of sin.” And he's saying, “Don't be deceived. Don't be deceived. When he comes and he makes his claims, you don't be deceived; you be ready.” We'll come back to that in just a minute.

## **REMEMBER WHAT YOU HAVE BEEN TAUGHT**

Here's the third thing that we see in this passage though. How do we prepare ourselves not to be deceived? Well Paul tells you in verse 5. “Remember what you've been taught.” Now the best way to remember what to look out for and what to be on guard against in this spiritual deception, this mystery of lawlessness the man of sin is going to bring, is of course to go back to the Word of God. And the apostle Paul says, in verse 5, “Do you not remember that when I was still with you, I told you these things?” So Paul's saying, “I haven't left you unarmed. When I came to you, I taught you the Word of God.” And you remember back in 1 Thessalonians chapter 2, Paul congratulates the Thessalonians for receiving what he taught them not as the words of men but for what it really was, the Word of God. And he says, “You go back to the Word of God. That's how you're ready to be discerning when deception and delusion is hoisted on you.” That's one of the reasons you come to church every Sunday and you read your Bibles and you pray and you study it, so that you're not deceived, so that you're not taken in by the delusion. And the apostle Paul is saying you go back to the Word of God.

You know it's not surprising to me that the Thessalonians would struggle with what Paul was teaching about eschatology because their own culture had very, very different presuppositions about what the end was going to be like. I

understand that myself. I was born and reared in a Bible-believing, Presbyterian home. I grew up on the *Catechism*, I memorized it three times and forgot it twice, and yet the literature that I had read about the end times was all from a dispensational perspective. And so when I went to study Biblical theology with Dr. Palmer Robertson who grew up in this congregation, I can remember he's teach about eschatology and I'd say, "Yeah, but where is the European Union going to attack China and Russia in the Valley of Armageddon? When's that going to happen?" And he's say, "Um, it's not going to happen." And I'd go, "Okay, we'll explain that to me again." Why? Because I had these presuppositions wedged in my mind and I almost couldn't hear what he was saying to me. And of course what he was saying to me didn't sound nearly as exciting as the books that I had read!

Well I think something like that's happening with the Thessalonians and Paul's saying, "Look, look. You need to go back to what I taught you, you need to go back to the Word of God, and you need to make sure that what's anchoring, what's framing your thinking about all of this is the Bible, Scripture interpreting Scripture." And in fact, the good commentators on this passage take you back to Scripture and especially the book of Daniel to help you understand that language that Paul is using here, like man of sin, man of lawlessness, mystery of lawlessness, etc. In other words, they use Scripture to interpret Scripture.

## **REMEMBER GOD IS SOVEREIGN**

Fourth, in verse 7 especially, but really all the way from 7 to 10, Paul says, "As you're thinking through this all, remember that God is sovereign." Look at verse 7. "For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way." Now again, I told you that commentators wrestle with what that means. Who is, "he who restrains it"? B.B. Warfield thought it was the Jewish state. Most early commentators and commentators today, think that Paul may have had the Roman Empire in his mind. And William Hendrickson, one of my favorite commentators, says that it's speaking of the principle of government in general, which restrains evil, Paul says, in Romans 13. But if I could back away from the specific question of who is the instrument who is restraining evil that Paul is talking about in verse 7, it's very clear if you look at the big scope of verses 7 to 12 that it is God who is in control here. Whoever it is that is the restrainer of evil is simply the mediatory of God. He is God's instrument to restrain evil, the principle of lawlessness and the man of sin. It's God who is in charge here.

You can see this in such a clear way when you look at what is going to happen when the man of sin is revealed. Look at verse 8. The lawless one will be revealed and then what happens? The Lord Jesus will kill him with a breath of His mouth. Now you know, in fantasy stories there's a great build up until the end when the bad guy and the good guy have a final knockdown-drag out. And in

good fantasy stories, the bad guy almost wins and the good guy snatches victory from the jaws of defeat. He just barely pulls it off. Okay, this is not going to be anything like that. This is the biggest blowout in history. The man of lawlessness is revealed and then Jesus destroys him with a breath of His mouth. This is Godzilla versus Bambi! I mean, the man of lawlessness is revealed and then, “Boom!” Jesus destroys him.

There have been like thirty-five “Games of the Century” fought in college football in the last, you know, fifty years. One of them that I remember was in 1972 in the Orange Bowl when undefeated Nebraska, number one in the nation, was going to play Bear Bryant's Alabama Crimson Tide, number two in the nation. Do you remember that game? Some of you were alive then! That game, in the Orange Bowl, it had torrential rain — kind of like we have had in the last couple of days — torrential rain left a sheet of water on the Orange Bowl in Miami. And the lights of the stadium reflecting down on it made it look like the Orange Bowl was a lake. And there was a picture of Bear Bryant walking before the game on the stadium turf that made it look like he was walking on water. And this picture was shown all over the AP; it was shown everywhere. And so this build up to the game of the century between Nebraska and Alabama and Nebraska crushed them! It was 33-6 or something like that. It was never close from the beginning. They destroyed them! And that's what Paul's saying here. When the man of sin is revealed and Jesus comes — whew! It's gone! It's going to be 120 to nothing. You're going to have negative yardage total for the game because God's completely in control here. God is sovereign. So it's a terrible thing to face the mystery of lawlessness and the man of sin but God is sovereign; don't forget that!

## **REMEMBER WHAT THE DELUSION IS**

One last thing. In verse 11, Paul beckons us to remember what the delusion is, therefore God sends them a strong delusion so that they may believe what is false, or as I think a better rendering is, so that they may believe the lie. What's the lie? Well we mentioned it before. The lie is that you should worship the creature rather than the Creator. That's what Paul says in Romans 1. They did not honor Him as God but they worshiped the creature rather than the Creator. And Paul calls that in Romans 1, the lie. That fits perfectly with the man of sin because he's going to put himself in the place of God in the temple, worshiping the creature rather than the Creator.

It's very interesting to me that Richard Dawkins titled his book, designed to disprove the existence of God from his version of evolutionary biology, he called it, *The God Delusion*. And the apostle Paul, two thousand years before Richard Dawkins brought up that Satanic thought, it telling you, “Let me tell you what Satan's big lie is — worship the creature rather than the Creator. And what's the whole point of Dawkins' book? That we need to worship the creature rather than the Creator. It's not our delusion that needs to be burst, it's that lie that needs to

be burst. Do you see what Paul's doing here? Paul is reading to you from Satan's playbook. He's saying that Satan's "Watch on the Rhine," that Satan's "Battle of the Bulge," that Satan's last ditch effort to frustrate the plan of God is going to be to release the man of sin on the world. Do you notice what Paul says? "The coming of the lawless one," verse 9, "is by the activity of Satan." This is Satan's strategy and he thinks that he is going to thwart God's plan and he is going to frustrate God's rule and worship by the unleashing of this man of sin. And Paul's reading you from the playbook out loud, ahead of time.

You know, pardon the sports illustration, but offensive coordinators are neurotic about people reading their signs that they're trying to pass into their quarterbacks and teams to lead the offense. Have you noticed that? Because everything's one media today, you can be sitting in the stands watching the game while looking at your iPad and looking at the instant replay on that or on these jumbo-trons that they have in the stadiums now. And so offensive coordinators, they'll hold their play sheets up in the front of their mouths while they're talking to the guy up in the press box. Or a couple of weeks ago, I saw two managers on either side of the offensive coordinators holding up towels so that the stadium cameras couldn't pick them up calling the play into their quarterback. They're absolutely neurotic about someone intercepting their plays. They don't want the defense to know what they're doing ahead of time.

Paul's reading from Satan's playbook! He's saying, "Here's what he's going to do. Here's what he's going to do. He's going to try to deceive you with the lie. I'm telling you ahead of time. He's diving right! Put eleven guys right there! That's what he's going to do! You don't even need to cover the receivers! Put them all right there; he's diving right!" Why is Paul doing this? To prepare us for the deception of the evil one so that we will stand firm and so that we will not do — look at what ends up happening. People, because of this, end up, verse 12, "not believing the truth, verse 11, "believing what is false and taking pleasure in unrighteousness." And Paul says, "I don't want you to fall for that because unbelievers all over this world are going to fall for it. I don't want you to fall for it.

Now there are fifty questions that I haven't answered from this passage, but the big picture is clear. And isn't it kind of Paul, isn't it kind of the Lord, to tell us the plays that our enemy is going to run before he ever runs them so that we can be ready. It's very kind. Let's pray.

*Heavenly Father, thank You for Your Word. Grant that we would understand it and believe it and act on it, in Jesus' name, amen.*

Well let's sing that the Lord Jesus is the way and the truth and the life using number 154.

Receive now God's blessing. Grace, mercy, and peace to you, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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