

2 Thessalonians 2:1-12
Ezekiel 28:1-19
Psalm 49

“The Coming of Our Lord Jesus Christ”

September 2, 2018

Who is Ezekiel talking about here?

He says that this is a lamentation over the King of Tyre.

But then he says, in the next verse:

“You were in Eden, the garden of God.”

Some have said, “This can’t be the King of Tyre, so we must be talking about Satan.”

But then three verses later,

“In the abundance of your trade you were filled with violence in your midst,
and you sinned.”

I’m sorry, but how was Satan engaged in *trade*?

No, Ezekiel *is* talking about the King of Tyre.

How was the King of Tyre “in Eden, in the garden of God”?

Well, Hiram, King of Tyre, was the one

who helped David collect the materials for the temple.

He then helped Solomon with the building of the temple.

And what *was* the temple?

The temple was the place where God would meet with his people –
like he had met with him once before,
when he walked with Adam in the garden in Eden.

Hiram was like an “anointed guardian cherub” –

he had entered a treaty with David and Solomon –

promising to protect and defend the LORD’s anointed.

And for many years Tyre was faithful to its covenant –

“till unrighteousness was found in you.”

The apostasy of Tyre reminds us that nations rise and fall.

Governments come and go.

The United States has been under the same Constitution since 1789.

That’s pretty impressive.

France has had 14 different governments in that same period of time!

No government lives forever!

Our Psalm of response, Psalm 49,

applies the same principle to individuals!

Everyone dies – even the wise will perish.

Everyone will leave their wealth to others.

There is only *one* statement of hope in Psalm 49 –
“But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol,
for he will receive me.”

When God says that he will receive you,
there is *nothing* in all of creation – not even death – not even the grave –
that can get in the way of his love!

Sing Psalm 49
Read 2 Thessalonians 2

Last time we ended with Paul’s prayer in verses 11-12 of chapter 1:
*To this end we always pray for you,
that our God may make you worthy of his calling
and may fulfill every resolve for good
and every work of faith by his power,
so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him,
according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Paul recognizes that *we* do not make *ourselves* worthy!

Sometimes you may look around the room and feel as though *everyone else*
has it all together!
All these people love Jesus – and I am such a mess!

It reminds me of what you see in the Desert Fathers –
the ancient Egyptian monks who lived in the desert oasis of Scetis.

When a pilgrim would come and ask them, “How can I be perfect?”
Often a monk would reply, “Oh do not ask me, I am such a sinner –
go and ask Abba Sisoës! He is holier than me!”
And so they would go to Abba Sisoës with the same question:
“How can I be perfect?”
And he would reply,
“I am a wretched man.
If you would be perfect, go and talk with Abba John.”

If you weren’t careful, you could go running in circles around the desert!

But the Desert Fathers understood something very important!
We ought to think more highly of others than we do of ourselves.
They would praise the gifts and graces of others – not their own!

No one here has it all together!
At MCPC all we have are dysfunctional families and troubled marriages!

And if it appears to you as though “everyone else” has it all together –
that’s just because we are so glad to be together in the presence of our Savior –
that for a moment we forget our troubles and find joy and peace in Jesus!

When I was younger I used to think that there would come a day when I “arrived”
at a stable and mature way of life.

But now that I am well past halfway through my earthly sojourn –
and now that I have been intimately acquainted with the joys and sorrows
of more than 100 families as their pastor –

I can tell you with all confidence
that your pastors, your elders, your deacons – and *all of you*
are still a mess!

At the same time, I want to assure you that *there is a day* when you will *arrive*
at a stable and mature way of life!

And that is what Paul is driving at in his prayer at the end of chapter 1 –
and in his exhortation here in chapter 2!

Because at the end of chapter 1, Paul had said
that Jesus will come *on that day* to be glorified in his saints,
and to be marveled at among all who have believed...
and so Paul prays to that end –
Paul prays that our God may make you worthy of his calling
and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power,
so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him,
according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ!

But the fact that you won’t “arrive” until “that day” –
doesn’t mean that what you do now is irrelevant!

Far from it!

How you live now is based on how *that day* shapes your life!

Will you live a life of faith, hope, and love?

Or will you live a life of unbelief, despair, and fear?

Because that’s really Paul’s whole point in 2 Thessalonians!

That’s why Paul emphasizes the Day of the Lord –

and how the Day of the Lord shapes our life and conduct *today*.

And Paul starts off by correcting some misunderstandings that were flying around in his day:

Introduction: The Coming of Our Lord Jesus Christ – For Us to Be Gathered to Him (v1-2)

Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers,^[a] 2 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.

It appears that someone was saying that the Day of the Lord has come –
and perhaps even someone had forged a letter purporting to be from Paul –
or at least they were twisting Paul’s teaching on the Day of the Lord
to suggest that Christ had already come.

Paul’s basic approach, in reply, is to show that the claim is absurd
because certain events must happen *before* Christ returns –
and since those events have not happened,
therefore the Day of the Lord cannot have already come.

We don’t have a lot of detail about the false teaching in question.

But that is actually a good thing for us –
because it means that Paul’s exhortation
fits a lot of different situations that the church has faced ever since!
Because it seems as though every generation has its own eschatological fervor –
and there are always those claiming special insight or teaching
regarding the Day of the Lord.

There are two forms that we need to beware of in our day
(and either one may have been present in Thessalonica):

First, is the idea that because the Day of the Lord has come,
therefore we should abandon our daily labors –
after all, what is the point of our daily work
if Jesus is returning immediately?
(notice that in chapter 3, Paul will reject this quite explicitly!).
Every now and then you get some student of eschatology
who claims to have “figured out” the end times,
and urges people to particular action
based on their scheme of what is going to happen.
Paul says – *No* – that’s not the way to do things!
If Jesus is coming tomorrow, then plant a tree today.
Keep doing your ordinary labors –
and be faithful and diligent until our Lord returns.

But there is a second form of false teaching that may have been present.
After all, if some were saying that the Day of the Lord has come,
and Jesus *plainly* hasn’t returned *bodily* –
then what does that tell you about the false teaching?

In our day it gets called “full preterism” –
You’ll also hear it called “hyper-preterism” by its opponents –
but I prefer using the term “full preterism.”

Full preterism is the view that the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70
was the return of Christ –
and so everything that the Bible says about the end times
has already happened in A.D. 70.

Therefore, full preterists believe that there is no bodily resurrection –
and that we are already living in the New Creation.

That may well be something like what Paul is dealing with in 2 Thessalonians.

The resurrection of the body was difficult for Greeks to appreciate –
so a full preterist approach would appeal to them.

But Paul says that

And in response, Paul grounds us in certain objective facts:

And these are the three points in your bulletin:

First, must come the rebellion when the Man of Lawlessness is revealed.

Second, we need to remember that the *Mystery* of Lawlessness

will *always* be at work in every generation –

so don't get worked up by every bad thing that happens!

And finally, when the Lawless One is revealed,

our Lord Jesus will kill him with the breath of his mouth
when he comes in glory.

If those things haven't happened yet,
then the Day of the Lord has happened yet!

1. The Rebellion Comes Before the Day of the Lord: The Man of Lawlessness (v3-4)

³ *Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness^[b] is revealed, the son of destruction,^[c] ⁴ 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.*

There are two “comings” in 2 Thessalonians 2.

There is the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ –
and our being gathered to him.

But first is the coming of the man of lawlessness (v9) – and the coming of the rebellion.

The term used here for rebellion is “apostasy” –

Paul is not talking about general rebellion in society.

Paul is talking about apostasy and rebellion *in the church*.

There will be a great “falling away” *in the church*
before the coming of the Day of the Lord.

And this rebellion will be led by the Man of Lawlessness –
who also arises from within the church.

Who is the Man of Lawlessness?

Paul also calls him “the son of destruction” (v3),

which is the term that Jesus used of Judas in John 17:12

In other words, the Man of Lawlessness will remind you of Judas –
one of the Twelve who betrayed Jesus with a kiss!

And Paul says that he will oppose and exalt 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. (v4)

Some have taken this to mean that the Man of Lawlessness will be a Christian leader.
But the language used in verse 4, points more to a political leader than simply a pastor.
Verse 4 echoes the language of Daniel 11,
which spoke of the King of the North
who exalts himself above all the gods (Daniel 11:36),
and reminds us of Ezekiel 28's description of the King of Tyre.

The emperors of the ancient world regularly deified themselves –
declaring that they should be worshiped as a god.
The Man of Lawlessness will be a powerful ruler (perhaps professedly Christian)
who will take his seat in the temple of God –
claiming the place where only God may sit!

The temple of God would most naturally be understood to refer to the temple in Jerusalem –
but in light of Paul's discussion elsewhere about how *we* are the temple of the Holy Spirit
it is quite likely that he sees this as a Christian ruler
who will lead God's people astray –
and given the way that Roman emperors tended to deify themselves,
it would be easy to imagine that Paul is referring to an apostate Roman emperor.

And yes, Paul's "man of lawlessness" is the same as John's "Antichrist"
(1 John 2:18-22, 4:3, 2 John 1:7)
John also distinguishes between "Antichrist" and the "spirit of antichrist" –
While there is *one* Antichrist at the final day,
there are many antichrists who arise throughout history.

By the way, this is why many in the Middle Ages thought that the Pope was the Antichrist –
the Man of Lawlessness!

You may be surprised to hear that this was a common belief *in the Middle Ages* –
before the Reformation –
but the Popes had set themselves up for it:
somewhere in the 8th century someone had forged a document
called the "Donation of Constantine"
which alleged that when Constantine had moved to Constantinople
he had given all imperial power, glory, and honor
to the Bishop of Rome –
along with supremacy over all the churches of God.
So the medieval Popes *claimed* to be (in some sense) the heirs of the Roman emperor –
and then claimed to be the Vicar of Christ

with claims to the sort of infallibility that only God possessed.
And especially as the moral corruption and degradation of the papacy continued to spread
(no Roman Catholic historian tries to defend the morals of the late medieval popes!),
you can understand why many medieval Christians began to think
that the “rebellion” had begun –
and the Pope was the Man of Lawlessness
who sat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God!

I say this as one who loves medieval history –
and I will go so far as to say that there were *many* godly popes
during the middle ages.

I think that it’s safe to say (a thousand years later)
that the Pope was *not* the Man of Lawlessness –
but the medieval papacy as a whole partook of the *mystery* of lawlessness –
and the spirit of antichrist took root in Rome for hundreds of years.
It appears that in the last few generations
the Spirit of God *may* be beginning to stir again in Rome –
but I’m not sure whether it is the Spirit of God or the spirit of the age.
I would say this – watch carefully how they handle the sexual abuse issue –
if they continue to go the route of cover-ups,
and if they continue to promote a lifestyle that is contrary to the gospel –
then that is *not* the Spirit of God.

A man who causes one of these little ones to stumble
does not belong in the pastoral office!
And if the Spirit of God was at work in the Roman hierarchy
they would know that!

Now, let me make sure that I make a careful distinction here!
When I talk about *Rome* – I am not talking about all Roman Catholics.
The Roman Catholic church is still part of the visible church.
The corruption of the Pope and the upper echelons of the RC hierarchy
does not negate the faith of God’s people!!

I would say the same thing for many Protestant churches today!
The leaders of the churches have embraced the mystery of lawlessness.
They promote teachings that are destructive
of Christian faith and practice –
but that doesn’t mean that they have ceased to be churches.
It means that they have become corrupt –
whether this is finally the “rebellion” –
the “apostasy” that Paul speaks of here, I do not know.

Because that’s the point that Paul makes in verses 5-7:
how do you know the difference between “the mystery of lawlessness”

and the man of lawlessness?

You don't.

Paul had said in 1 Thessalonians 5

that the day of the Lord would come like a thief in the night.

You won't be able to tell between the mystery of lawlessness and the man of lawlessness.

And all through church history, Paul has been proved right!

In every generation, people thought that they had spotted the Man of Lawlessness.

But it turns out, all that they had seen was the *mystery* of lawlessness!

2. Until Then, the Mystery of Lawlessness Is at Work: The One Who Restrains (v5-7)

⁵ Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? ⁶ And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. 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.

The mystery of lawlessness!

What does that mean?

A "mystery" for Paul is something that was previously unknown,
but now, in the gospel has been revealed.

In that sense, the mystery of lawlessness is no longer mysterious!

We now understand exactly what is happening!

There is a power at work in this age that seeks to undermine and destroy the gospel.

(In Ephesians 6, Paul will speak of how our warfare is not against flesh and blood,
but against the principalities and powers –
against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places).

You might think, how can we fight against spiritual forces of evil?

We are so weak!

But in the resurrection of Christ, the powers have been disarmed.

This is what Paul is talking about when he speaks of "what is restraining"
the man of lawlessness now.

Who is this one who restrains? (v7)

Paul seems to think that this is an easy answer –

but scholars have puzzled their heads over it for centuries!

Some think it is the Roman Empire – or political power generally –

on the basis that Romans 13 says that magistrates are to restrain evil;

but that runs contrary to the whole NT attitude towards Rome –
including what we have seen here in chapter 2.

Others say that it is Paul himself – or the gospel – or the Holy Spirit –

since certainly it is true that the Gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit

are at work in restraining evil;
but the NT nowhere suggests that the Gospel or the Holy Spirit
will ever be withdrawn.

But again, Paul seems to think that this is an easy answer!
So the correct answer will be the one that is found in the rest of Scripture.
Where else does Scripture talk about this?

In Daniel, chapters 10-12, the one who restrains the mystery of lawlessness
is the archangel Michael.

And in Revelation 12:7, Michael and his angels fought against the dragon –
who is identified as Satan – and cast him out of heaven –
so that he might no longer accuse the brethren.

And in Revelation 20:1, an “angel” (unnamed, but possibly Michael)
comes down from heaven, lays hold of the dragon,
and binds him for a thousand years,
“that he should deceive the nations no more.”

After the thousand years, Satan will be released from his prison
and he will go out to deceive the nations.

Here in 2 Thessalonians, Paul says
that the “coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan.” (v9)
so if you want to know who is the one who restrains Satan –
the answer is *Michael*.

Right now, we are living in the era when the coming of the man of lawlessness is prevented
because Satan is restrained.

When Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father,
that was the signal (acc to Rev 12) for Michael and his angels to go into action.
They had been longing for the day when they could assail Satan!
Ever since the Serpent had deceived Adam and Eve,
Michael had been itching for a fight.
Sure, all through the OT ages, he had fought to protect God’s people –
but every time he came to the throne of the Most High to report,
there was the Accuser of the Brethren!

After all, in the OT, Satan can be found gathering with “the sons of God”
before God’s heavenly throne.

Think about the book of Job, where Satan shows up regularly to have a chat with God
and bring accusations against Job!

Satan had a ‘right’ to be there.

(I put ‘right’ in quotation marks because it was a *usurped* right –
God had given that right to Adam,
when he called Adam to have dominion over all the creatures –

but Adam had surrendered his rule and authority to Satan,
when he listened to the word of Satan, rather than the word of God.

So when the archangel Michael would show up at the heavenly throne
to report on the progress of his long war,
he would always find Satan there with a wicked grin on his face!

How can I protect my people –
when their Accuser can stand before the throne of God?!!

And so for all generations from Adam to Christ
Michael fights a losing battle – or at best a stalemate.
And you see the effect!
In all the history between Adam and Christ,
how far did the gospel get?
Only a handful of Gentiles ever believe –
and even the Jews don't really seem to believe very often!

Satan successfully deceived the nations!

But then Jesus came.

And when he triumphed at the cross over sin, death, and Satan –
and when he ascended on high as the Second Adam
who had overcome all his and our enemies,
then the signal was given:

Revelation 12:5 speaks of the woman who was with child,
“She gave birth to a male child,
one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron;
but her child was caught up to God and to his throne.”

Ah!

Now there is a Son of Adam – a Son of Man –
sitting the right hand of God!
Now there is one who has paid the price for man's sin!
Now there is one who can intercede for sinners against the Accuser!

That was the signal to Michael and his angels:
“Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon.
And the dragon and his angels fought back,
but he was defeated,
and there was no longer any place for them in heaven.” (12:7-8)

So Michael is the one who restrains.

He is the big gnarly dude who is sitting on the Devil
and not letting him out to deceive the nations!

Now, as Paul makes clear, the *mystery* of lawlessness is still at work –
but Satan is bound – he is restrained.

That’s why the Gospel has continued to make progress throughout the nations!

Compare OT and NT times!

In the nearly 2000 years from Abraham to Christ –

the Gospel barely survived in Israel –

and certainly didn’t get very far outside Israel!

But in the 2000 years from Christ to the present,

the Gospel has advanced to the ends of the earth –

so that today, there is *no nation* under heaven

where the good news has not been preached!

There is still lots of work to do –

there are still millions who have never heard –

and more and more that is true even in our own land!

But we are living in the era when the Man of Lawlessness is restrained.

Only the Mystery of Lawlessness is at work.

But the day will come, when Michael will release Satan one last time

3. And Then the Lord Jesus Will Kill Him with the Breath of His Mouth (v8)

⁸ 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 Lawless One will be the final – and probably the most heinous –
of all the apostates in human history.

If you combine Judas, and Nero, and Hitler, and all the worst Popes into one –
that will be the Lawless One!

But have no fear –

because the Lord Jesus will kill him with the breath of his mouth
and bring him to nothing by the appearance of his coming.

Michael may be a powerful angel who is able to restrain the Man of Lawlessness –
but only the Lord Jesus is able to kill him with the breath of his mouth
and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming!

There is a glorious picture of this in Revelation 19 –

The Beast and the kings of the earth gather to make war against the Lord Jesus.

You see the armies of heaven “arrayed in fine linen, white and pure”

(you would be excused for thinking that “fine linen”

would make for lousy armor!

They look like they are dressed for a banquet –

not for a battle!)

But then you see the general who leads them:
“From his mouth comes a sharp sword
with which to strike down the nations,
and he will rule^[c] them with a rod of iron.
He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty.
¹⁶ On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written,
King of kings and Lord of lords.” (19:15-16)

And then the battle starts –
and the sword that goes out from his mouth
destroys all those who oppose him.

What does his army do?
Sit there and look pretty!

Pretty?
No, *beautiful!*
Lovely!

“Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.”
¹⁰ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain,
and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God,
¹¹ having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper,
clear as crystal. (Rev 21:9-11)

Conclusion: The Coming of the Lawless One – For the Condemnation of Those Who Refused to Love the Truth (v9-12)

⁹ *The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, ¹⁰ and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. ¹¹ Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, ¹² in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.*

And in verses 9-12, Paul contrasts the coming of our Lord Jesus
with the coming of the lawless one.

Jesus came with signs and wonders –
the Lawless One will also come with signs and wonders!
But they are false signs and wonders!
Just because someone works miracles does not mean that they are speaking the truth!
Satan is able to do signs and wonders –
his wrath and power are great – and armed with cruel hate –
on earth is not his equal – as Martin Luther put it!
Satan’s power is revealed in false signs and wonders –
with all wicked deception for those who are perishing –
because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.

This is the key!

If you believe the truth – and love the truth –
then you will be saved.

If you refuse to believe the truth – and if your refuse to love the truth –
then you will be condemned –
and your condemnation will be just –
because you believed what was false.

And Paul calls this a “strong delusion.”
What does that mean?

Well, how often have you seen someone
(okay, fine, how often have you *been* that someone)
who was under a *strong delusion*?

This is simply another way of saying Sin Makes You Stupid!

Why do we ever take pleasure in unrighteousness?

Why do we ever enjoy sin?

Oh, sure, we get a moment of happiness –
and maybe we can even prolong that moment for a little while –
and get a good run of good feelings!

I knew a man once who cheated on his wife – then left her to marry the other gal –
I would say that he made a pretty good run –
he probably had at least 3-4 years where he was convinced
“It worked! I’m happy”

But then his second wife cheated on him – and ran off with the other guy.
What goes around comes around...

He wound up with child support payments all the way around –
a ruined reputation –
and an STD for good measure!

He was living under a strong delusion – so that he might believe what was false.
Because the *truth* is – that the pleasures of sin are fleeting –
and the punishments are severe –
both in this life and that which is to come.

The Larger Catechism says that

“The punishments of sin in this world are either inward,
as blindness of mind,
a reprobate sense,
strong delusions,
hardness of heart,
horror of conscience,

and vile affections;
or outward,
as the curse of God upon the creatures for our sakes,
and all other evils that befall us in our bodies,
names, estates, relations, and employments;
together with death itself.” (Q28)

If you insist on following the path of sin –
then you will experience blindness of mind and vile affections –
where you no longer see the problem with sin:
“if it feels good, do it” – who cares about the consequences!?

But Jesus calls you to repent of your sin and believe in his name!
As Paul goes on to say in verse 13 –
“But we ought always to give thanks to God for you,
brothers beloved by the Lord,
because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved,
through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.”

Notice the contrast between those who are perishing –
who refused to love the truth and so be saved –

and those whom God has chosen to be saved –
through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.

It is *God's doing!*

He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world!

But he chose us through a particular way:

“through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.