

**Week 24 2<sup>nd</sup> Epistle to the Thessalonians**  
**August 12<sup>th</sup> 2023**

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**Background:**

Two weeks ago we read and discussed the visit of Paul, Silas and Timothy's to Thessalonica in or around 50 - 51 a.d. It was Paul's only visit there. Last week Jim led us through Paul's 1<sup>st</sup> letter to the believers in there, possibly written 51 – 54 a.d. when in Corinth. It is widely held that this was the first written document of its type to be circulated and eventually accepted as part of the Canon of Scripture. This week we will consider his 2<sup>nd</sup> letter, probably written quite soon after the 1st. Many recent scholars consider this letter to be pseudepigraphal (written by another author pretending to be Paul – a relatively common practice in those days). For further information on this matter see under Resources. This matter need not detain us today.

**Scripture:**

**Lots of reading this week, so start early!**

**Please re-read Acts 17: 1 – 9; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 2 Thessalonians (preferably in at least two different translations)**

**Read John Stott's "*The dynamics of the rebellion*" supplied as an Appendix to these notes**

**... and finally, a very quick scan of Revelation 13, 14:14-20 and 19: 17-20:15**

**Questions for discussion:**

1. How do you think the Thessalonian believers reacted when they heard 2 Thess 2:1-12 having recently heard 1 Thess 4:13-18?
2. Read 2 Th 1:4 – 2:12 (about half the letter). It makes rather grim reading. How do you square this picture of God with the picture of God presented in John's gospel?
3. Read 2 Th 2:13-16; 3:3-4 and 16-17. Is this enough to "balance" 2 Th 1:4 – 2:12 in the minds of the hearers? What would you have written? What thoughts, suggestions, prayers etc. might you convey today (personal visit, email, texting, video-link etc.) to anyone you know who is seriously suffering - not for medical, financial, relationship matters etc. – but ***for their faith***?
4. What connection (if any) do you see between 2 Thess 2:1-12, Dan 12:1 and the closing chapters of Revelation? Read Stott pages 163-173.
5. 2 Th 2: 3, 11. Given the state of the world and the tumultuous proliferation of fake news, the global dominance of social media, the spread of AI etc. How can we always be certain we are not being deceived?
6. 2 Th 3:6-15. Nowadays most employees (church and secular, employed and self-employed) in the "western world" – and maybe elsewhere - will receive a pension when they retire. How much "church work" should such people do after retirement? Without naming specific names or churches what have we observed in reality?
7. 2 Th 1:3. Have you ever received this sort of commendation? Is it valuable? Have you ever given it?
8. If you had been a "believer" in Thessalonica how would you have reacted to hearing this pair of letters? As a 21st century believer, what has been your reaction to our study of 1 & 2 Thessalonians?

## Some notes and comments

- 2 Th 1:3-4 Paul gives thanks to God for faithful believers, he does not thank the believers themselves – but he does encourage them
- 2 Th 1:5-12 Suffering seems to be unavoidable for the Christian, but God will see that justice is carried out at the 2<sup>nd</sup> coming
- 2 Th 1: 10 God will be glorified – not like the star in a movie or a mirror but like a permanently glowing filament in each believer (see Stott, p149)
- 2 Th 2:2 Day of the Lord: the 2<sup>nd</sup> coming / return of Jesus to planet earth
- 2 Th 2:3-4 Lawless one: defiant of all law – moral (no moral absolutes), civil (total freedom leading to anarchy), total opposition to God. (see Stott p163-173) suggests trying to identify this being as a futile exercise. Attempts have been made for almost 2000 years, but **no-one** knows. End of discussion.  
Son of **perdition**: son of destruction; the one destined to be destroyed; the one who belongs to hell; son of hell
- 2 Th 2:8-9 Coming of the great (greatest?) Antichrist – a parody of the 2<sup>nd</sup> coming of Jesus. The lawless one will be revealed (*parousia*), then destroyed (instant annihilation – by breath of Jesus at the 2<sup>nd</sup> coming). Working of Satan – power, signs, wonders. (See Scott p.172)
- 2 Th 2:15-16 Paul is not panicking! Instead gives simple instruction: God chose you, so stand firm, hold fast to our teachings (those of the apostles, not of the later church) ... may Jesus & God father comfort your hearts and strengthen in every good work and word.
- 2 Th 2:16-17 Note 3 verbs (loved, comfort, strengthen) are all *singular* (Gk). Signifies that Jesus and God are One. C.f. John 10:30. Not obvious in 1:1-2.

## **Commentaries referred to:**

The Message of Thessalonians. Stott, J. Bible Speaks Today.

1 & 2 Thessalonians. M Mitchell in The Cambridge Companion to St Paul. Editor James Dunn.

1, 2 Thessalonians. R. Thomas in The Expositors Bible Commentary. Editor F Gaebelein.

Introducing the New Testament – Its Literature and Theology. Achtermeier, Green and Thompson.

## Appendix

The dynamics of rebellion in “The Message of the Thessalonians”, pages 171-173. John Stott. Bible Speaks Today. Editor (NT) John Stott. Inter-varsity Press, Leicester. 1984.

### **The Message of Thessalonians**

*Preparing for the coming King*

**John Stott**

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**Inter-Varsity Press**

of 'a truth once hidden but now revealed', since it is still secret and is contrasted with the coming 'revelation' of the man of lawlessness. Before he is revealed openly, however, the lawlessness he embodies is operating secretly. His anti-social, anti-law, anti-God movement is at present largely underground. We detect its subversive influence around us today – in the atheistic stance of secular humanism, in the totalitarian tendencies of extreme left-wing and right-wing ideologies, in the materialism of the consumer society which puts things in the place of God, in those so-called 'theologies' which proclaim the death of God and the end of moral absolutes, and in the social permissiveness which cheapens the sanctity of human life, sex, marriage and family, all of which God created or instituted.

Were it not for some remaining restraints (which preserve a measure of justice, freedom, order and decency) these things would break out much more virulently. And one day they will. For when the restraint is removed, then secret subversion will become open rebellion under the unscrupulous leadership of *the lawless one who will be revealed* (8a). Then we can expect a period (mercifully short) of political, social and moral chaos, in which both God and Law are impudently flouted, until suddenly *the Lord Jesus* will come and *overthrow him with the breath of his mouth and destroy him by the splendour of his coming* (8). 'There is no long battle', writes Ernest Best, 'victory comes at once.'<sup>48</sup>

### c. *The dynamics of the rebellion (2:9-12)*

The rebellion will take place, according to Paul, publicly and visibly on the stage of history. It will be seen in a world-wide breakdown of the rule of law, of the administration of justice and of the practice of true religion. But Paul also introduces us to its invisible dynamics, to what is going on behind the scenes. He writes of the two major protagonists – Satan (9) and God (11), and uses the word *energeia* ('working', 'operation') in relation to both. Both God and Satan are at work in relation to the coming of Antichrist.

Paul begins with the devil, asserting that *The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work [energeia]*

<sup>48</sup> Best, p. 304.

## THE REBELLION OF ANTICHRIST

of *Satan* (9a). It would be an exaggeration to say that Antichrist will be an incarnation of Satan, as Christ is the incarnation of God. It would be more accurate to think of the coming of Antichrist as a deliberate and unscrupulous parody of the second coming of Christ. Paul shows this by using the same vocabulary of both. 'The systematic and . . . calculated adoption by Antichrist of the attributes of Christ is the most appalling feature in the whole presentation.'<sup>49</sup> Thus, in verses 1 and 8 (as in 1 Thes. 4:15) we read of the *parousia*, the personal and official coming of Jesus Christ; but at the beginning of verse 9 we read of the *parousia* of the lawless one, in direct juxtaposition to Christ's *parousia* at the end of the previous verse. Next, in 1:7 the Lord Jesus is going to be 'revealed' from heaven, whereas three times in chapter 2 (verses 3, 6 and 8) it is the lawless one who is going to be 'revealed' (it is not stated from where). Again, Christ is coming in power and glory (1:7), and in *splendour* (2:8), while the coming of the man of lawlessness will be accompanied by *all kinds of counterfeit miracles* [*en pasē dynamei*, 'in all power'], *signs and wonders* (9). Just as the ministry of Jesus was accredited by 'miracles, wonders and signs',<sup>50</sup> and also the ministry of the apostle Paul,<sup>51</sup> so the ministry of Antichrist will be accompanied by (though not authenticated by) miracles. For his will be *counterfeit miracles*, probably not in the sense that they will be fakes, but in the sense that they will deceive rather than enlighten. Thus both comings, of Antichrist and of Christ, will be personal (a *parousia*), visible (an *apokalypsis* or revelation) and powerful (with miracles). And tragically the coming of Antichrist will be such a clever parody of the coming of Christ that many will be taken in by the satanic deception. The reason for their being deceived is that *they refused to love the truth and so be saved* (10). Love of the truth (it is implied) was offered to them, but they rejected it. Behind the great deception there lay the great refusal.

*For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie* (11). This 'lie' is 'the denial of the fundamental truth that God is God',<sup>52</sup> together with the blatant assertion by Antichrist that he is God. God will 'give them over' to their own wilful blindness.<sup>53</sup> And as a result

<sup>49</sup> Findlay, *Greek*, p. 181.      <sup>50</sup> Acts 2:22.

<sup>51</sup> Rom. 15:18-19; 2 Cor. 12:12.

<sup>52</sup> Bruce, p. 174.      <sup>53</sup> Rom. 1:24-25.

they *all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness* (12). It is of great importance to observe that the opposite of 'believing the truth' is 'delighting in wickedness'. This is because the truth has moral implications and makes moral demands. Evil, not error, is the root problem. The whole process is grimly logical. First, they delight in wickedness, or 'make sinfulness their deliberate choice' (NEB). Secondly, they refuse to believe and love the truth (because it is impossible to love evil and truth simultaneously). Thirdly, Satan gets in and deceives them. Fourthly, God himself 'sends' them a strong delusion, giving them over to the lie they have chosen. Fifthly, they are condemned and perish. This is extremely solemn teaching. It tells us that the downward slippery path begins with a love for evil, and then leads successively to a rejection of truth, the deception of the devil, a judicial hardening by God, and final condemnation. The only way to be protected from being deceived is to love goodness and truth. These, then, are the dynamics (devilish and divine) which lie behind the final rebellion.

To sum up this whole paragraph, Paul has unfolded the historical process (present and future) in three stages. Now is the time of *restraint*, in which the secret power of lawlessness is being held in check. Next will come the time of *rebellion*, in which the control of law will be removed and the lawless one will be revealed. Finally will come the time of *retribution*, in which the Lord Christ will defeat and destroy the Antichrist, and those who have believed the Antichrist-lie will be condemned. This is God's programme. History is not a random series of meaningless events. It is rather a succession of periods and happenings which are under the sovereign rule of God, who is the God of history.