



SIGNALS OF THE SECOND COMING

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2 Thessalonians 2:1-12
Second Message
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Our text today from Second Thessalonians is an extremely difficult passage to interpret. One commentator describes these verses as "the most obscure and difficult in all of Paul's writings." Although well-meaning Christians disagree about it, however, our different interpretations need not separate us.

In our last study we learned that a group of persecutors were disturbing the peace of the Thessalonian believers. Life had become hard for these new Christians, and they were struggling with the injustice of it all. Certain false teachers were in their midst as well, stirring up controversy with regard to the second coming of the Lord.

Before we get into the text, I will make a couple of preliminary comments. First, I want to reiterate that all authentic Christians believe that Jesus is coming again. I don't know of any real Christians who dispute that truth. Jesus said it. The angels confirmed it. The apostles wrote about it. In this passage, Paul describes the Lord's coming in very clear terms. At Jesus' ascension, the angels said, "This same Jesus who you have seen go will come in like manner." C. S. Lewis said, "The pages of the New Testament rustle with the rumor of hope." So this notion that Jesus is coming again is woven through the warp and woof of the Scriptures. I don't see how you can take the Bible seriously and fail to believe that one of these days, our Lord is coming back to set things right.

My second comment is this: The final manifestation of human history is going to be an extremely difficult time. Here is another thing that all Christians agree upon. Jesus described the consummation of history in terms of childbirth. As we get closer to the end of age, the contractions that bring about the end of history will increase in intensity and frequency. And the last great historical contraction will be unlike anything that has ever been seen before. The Scriptures describe this time as a period of great tribulation. Some would limit it to a finite number of years (seven, actually), while others hold that this seven-year period is a symbolic way of describing a completed portion of time. In other words, God in his sovereignty determines the amount of time that this final great convulsion, this spasm of evil will exist.

It seems that in the end, God simply takes his hand off of men and women and says, "All right. You can do what you please." All along he has been restraining evil, but now he will allow people to do what they have

been wanting to do. When that happens, everything that is in the hearts of men and women who do not love God will come out. And the Scriptures teach that all of that evil will be embodied in one person, an individual who is described in various places as "the man of sin," "the man of lawlessness," or "the antichrist."

As we come to our text now, we see that this is the person of whom the passage speaks. Second Thessalonians 2:1:

Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together to Him, that you may not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. (2 Thess 2:1-2, NASB)

The word Paul uses for "coming" here was used in that day of the appearance of a dignitary who put in an appearance. The apostle says that one of these days, our Lord will come; he will put in an appearance (*parousia*); and when he comes, he will gather Christians to himself. Now it is clear from this passage that this is the second coming, because later in the text, Paul describes our Lord meting out judgment to the man of sin. So this will be a visible, obvious coming of Christ; and at that point, we will be gathered together with him. This is the passage that has led many to believe in the improbability of a pretribulation rapture, i.e., that the church will be taken out of this time of trouble, either before or during this period.

The Thessalonians, however, thought that the Lord had already come, and they were already in this period of trouble. A letter, purportedly from the apostle Paul, was circulating, or some rumor of a prophetic utterance was being reported, saying that the Lord had already come. We don't know what the Thessalonians thought that coming was like; perhaps they thought it was like the first coming. But they were confused and shaken by it. That word "shaken" here means to be shaken from one's convictions or composure. It was used of ships being forced from their moorings by the pressure of a storm. Furthermore, the tense of the verb "to be disturbed" seems to imply a continuing state of anxiety.

The Thessalonians needed a word of instruction to help steady them from the effects of this rumor. That is why Paul says, "Let no one in any way deceive you." According to the apostle, that day, the coming of the

Lord Jesus, will not arrive until two other things have happened: a certain event must occur, and a certain person must appear. Verse 3:

Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God. (2:3-4)

If the church were to be raptured before this great tribulation, the simple answer to their dilemma would be, "No, this is not the day of the Lord. If it were, you would not be here; you would already be with the Lord." But Paul doesn't say that. Rather, he says there were certain signs they needed to be looking for that preface the coming of the Lord, certain indications that that event was imminent. Paul lists two of these signs: A great rebellion or apostasy (a general turning away from the truth); and the manifestation of the "man of lawlessness," as he is described here, the one who takes his seat in the temple.

A little background information will help us understand what Paul is saying. There is theme in the Scriptures, particularly in the Old Testament, that says that occasionally in history, the evil that is in the hearts of mankind becomes embodied in one individual. When that happens, we see ourselves for who we really are. At the climax of history, however, there will be one man who more than any other will epitomize the spirit of lawlessness that is resident within all of us, apart from God's activity. This person will be a visual aid of what everyone would be like if God did not restrain the evil in us.

Throughout history, there have been various personages whom we could call the "man of lawlessness." The prophet Daniel was in captivity in Babylon in 586 BC, during the time when the Babylonians destroyed the temple in Jerusalem, the edifice that was built by Solomon, in the 10th century BC. Daniel was deeply distressed by the desecration of the holy place, but God revealed to him that there would be a series of desecrations of the temple. Actually, there are four desecrations described in the Book of Daniel. The first was this Babylonian destruction of the temple.

The second was the destruction of the temple in the middle of the second century BC by the Syrian general, Antiochus Epiphanes. He called himself, Epiphanes ("God manifest"; he claimed to be God). The Jews, in a word-play on his name, called him "Antiochus Epimanes"—"Antiochus the madman." This man desecrated the temple by offering a pig on the altar. Daniel describes in great detail the character of this individual, referring to him in terms of the embodiment of evil. If you want to see what evil looks like, then picture this man, seated on the throne of God, claiming to be God himself.

The third destruction of the temple took place in AD 70, when the Roman armies burned it to the ground.

Now there is a fourth destruction that is yet future. It was future from the standpoint of Daniel, and it was future from the standpoint of Jesus. (Jesus actually refers to it in Matthew 24.) And this destruction is future from the time of Paul. This is the revelation of the man of lawlessness who takes his seat in the Temple of God, claiming to be God, as Paul describes. This is the final revelation of what mankind is really like, apart from the grace of God.

Apart from that grace, we would all consider ourselves to be God. That is our fundamental problem: We want to be God. We want to have everything revolve around us and everyone pay attention to us. We want to enthrone ourselves as God. All of this began back in the Garden of Eden. When you hear someone saying that we are "one with the earth," what they are actually saying is that man is God. We ought to hear the hiss in the background. This is the lie that was first voiced by the serpent when he slithered up to Eve and said, "You can be like God." That is the big lie that pervades the human race. And Paul says that in the end, that lie will be embodied, epitomized in one person, who will actually enthrone himself in the temple and claim to be God.

Howard Butt, in an article entitled "The Art of Being the Big Shot," puts man's pride in perspective when he says:

It is my pride that makes me think I can call my own shots. That feeling is my basic dishonesty. I can't go it alone. I can't rely on myself. I am dependent on God for my very next breath. It is dishonest of me to pretend that I am anything but a man, small, weak, limited. So living independent of God is self-delusion. It is not just a matter of pride being an unfortunate little trait and humility being an attractive little virtue. It is my inner psychological integrity that is at stake. When I am self-dependent, I am lying to myself about what I am. I am pretending to be God and not man. My independence is the idolatrous worship of myself, the national religion of hell.

Now I want to refer to two New Testament texts. First, the letter of 1 John. Chapter 2, verse 18:

Dear children, it is the last hour; [The world is getting old, John says. He is referring to the period in which we live, which began when Jesus came the first time and will close when Jesus comes the second time.] **and just as you heard that antichrist** [the one who personifies evil in the world] **is coming, even now many antichrists have arisen;** [This prefix "anti" in Greek can mean both "against" or "substitute for." This person who comes will be much like Jesus. We might expect him to be a dirty old man, but he is not manifested in that way; he is very much like the Messiah.] **from this we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not**

really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us [i.e., with the apostles]; but they went out, in order that it might be shown that they all are not of us. But you have an anointing from the Holy One, [You have the Spirit of Truth, who has spoken through the apostles; you have the word of God] and you all know. [You don't know everything about everything, but you know everything you need to know about God.] I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it, and because no lie is of the truth. Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son. (1 John 2:18-22)

Whenever you hear someone say that Jesus is not the Messiah, that Jesus is not God, that is the "spirit of the antichrist." It is not necessarily the antichrist, but it is this spirit of antichrist that pervades society today. People are saying that Jesus is not God, man is. That is the message we hear on all sides, the notion that we don't need God, we don't need a savior. Man is the measure of all things, we are told. We merely need the resources that are resident in ourselves.

What this is saying, of course, is that man is God. We hear that lie in the popular songs we hum, in the television shows we watch, in the movies we flock to see. It is the subtle lie that is insinuated into all of society. It gets through our defenses, and after awhile we start believing it. So John says, "Beware!" There will be many antichrists along the way. But then, there will be one who will embody this lie.

Now, a text from Revelation 13, verse 1:

And I saw a beast coming up out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads, and on his horns were ten diadems, and on his head were blasphemous names. (Rev 13:1)

The dragon in this passage (he is first mentioned in verse 2) is the evil one who is responsible for the evil that is going on now, and will go on in the future. John sees a beast coming out of the sea. This creature is usually identified with certain political entities. Certainly, it referred to the Roman Empire in Paul's day. But it also seems to refer to some latter-day manifestation, some political entity at the very end of history, just before our Lord comes back. Then, nationalism will be elevated to the level of idolatry, and people will worship the state. This is what people did in John's day. A cult of the emperor developed, which became a form of antichrist. Christians were commanded to substitute the words *kyrios kaisar* ("Caesar is Lord") for their Christian confession, *kyrios Jesus* ("Jesus is Lord"). Citizens of the Roman Empire had to bow down to the Caesar. If Christians refused to do this, they were taken to the arena.

In verse 11, John says he saw another beast coming out of the earth:

And I saw another beast, coming out of the earth; and he had two horns like a lamb, and he spoke as a dragon. (Rev 13:11)

This is a very significant statement. This beast looks gentle, benign. He seems a grandfatherly sort, thoughtful and kind. But he speaks like a dragon. In other words, what comes out of his mouth is the lie of the evil one, the lie that says, "Believe in man." He speaks like Satan. That has been the lie of the beast since the beginning. We all know people who hold this viewpoint. That is what makes the lie so seductive—because many who believe this seem to have their lives together. They seem to have wonderful families, to be caring people. And yet, when they speak to us, we hear the lie, "Believe in yourself."

John goes on to say, in verse 16, that those who follow this second beast receive on their forehead a mark:

And he causes all, the small and the great, and the rich and the poor, and the free men and the slaves, to be given a mark on their right hand, or on their forehead, and he provides that no one should be able to buy or to sell, except the one who has the mark, either the name of the beast or the number of his name. Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for the number is that of man; and his number is six hundred and sixty-six. (Rev 13:16-18)

We need to understand the symbolism here. I don't believe John is talking about a literal number which some will bear during this period of great tribulation. He is referring to something that is in the head (it's in the attitude), and on the hands (it's in the actions). And it has to do with man. John says "for the number is that of man." Six is the number of man; three appears to be the number for God in Scripture; and six tripled is man elevated to the level of God. It is secular humanism again.

In contrast, John describes the 144,000 in chapter 14 who have Jesus' name and the Father's name written on their foreheads. In other words, they have made the Lord the center of their lives, in contrast to those whom John describes as the "earth dwellers," those whose perspective goes no farther than what they can see, hear, touch and taste—those who center on themselves. John says that there are really only two kinds of people in the world: those who center on themselves and those who center on the Lord. But behind the philosophy of self-centeredness is the evil one, whose purpose is to destroy.

Getting back to Second Thessalonians now, Paul describes this process as "the mystery of lawlessness." Verse 5:

Do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things? [Here is another reason this passage is difficult to understand: We are not privy to "these things" that Paul is referring to.]

And you know what restrains him now, so that in his time he may be revealed. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way. (2:5-7)

This is the “mystery” that we have talking about: this notion that man is God. That is what causes lawlessness. Paul makes that clear in 2 Timothy, when he says that the trouble with the world is that people love themselves rather than God. That is what is at the root of all our struggles in our marriages and homes. That is why there is abuse and abortion and war—because we are centered on ourselves.

Paul says that this is a mystery, something we would never discover on our own. That is why good laws, good government and penal reform don’t work—because they don’t deal with the heart. The problem is far greater than ignorance, the environment or whatever. More education won’t solve it, because it goes clear to the heart. The problem is that we are self-centered. And that attitude is going to continue to pervade society until the very end, when the one who is now restraining it, as the apostle puts it, is “taken out of the way.” In other words, God will simply take his hands off us. Then we will see what we are really like, when everything that is in our hearts will come out. So Paul says, “Don’t be deceived.”

Next, Paul refers to the revelation of this “lawless one,” and his character. Verse 8:

And then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming; that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive

the love of the truth so as to be saved. (2:8-10)

Like Jesus, this one has a “coming” (the same word used for Jesus’ coming). He will work miracles and wonders, just like our Lord, but they will be counterfeit. And he will have disciples (“those who perish”). There is a supernatural power at work that gives him his authority. He looks so good that he is going to deceive virtually the whole world, except those who have the mark of the Lord Jesus. Those who perish, according to Paul, do so, *because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved.*

So Paul concludes this discussion of the “man of lawlessness,” in verse 11:

And for this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they might believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness. (2:11-12)

In Matthew 24, Jesus describes the coming of this individual. He says that he will sound so plausible that were it not for the intervention of God, even the elect would be deceived. That is the problem today, isn’t it? These appeals to be your own man, your own woman, sound so good. Live your own life, we are told, you have everything it takes. But we must be warned: We are easily deceived.

The text leaves us with the question: How can we avoid being deceived? How can we guard against being overwhelmed by the lie? Notice what Paul says. It is not that God wants everyone to be deceived, but when we choose to be deceived again and again, after awhile, God will let us believe the lie. He simply will take his hand off us. The only way to protect ourselves is to love the Scriptures. Read the Bible. Follow it and allow it to do its work. Paul has already said that the word of God is “at work in us who believe.” Here he says that the mystery of lawlessness is at work in the world. The lie is going out alongside the truth, and the only way to be kept from being deceived by it is to love the truth.

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