

2 Thessalonians 2 consists of material added to information that Paul had already taught the Thessalonians when he was with them (2:5). Instead of repeating what he told them, he is filling in the gaps. Because it is impossible for us to recreate Paul's original teaching, we are left with a lot of ambiguity. For this reason, the following verses have numerous interpretations. We would be wise to be careful not to be overconfident in our interpretation.

2:1 Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him,

2:2 that you 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.

The return of Christ and the believers' gathering together with Him loomed large in the Thessalonians' minds. From 1 Thessalonians we learn that they looked forward to the coming of the Son from heaven (1 Thess. 1:10), they had concerns about the dead in Christ at His return (1 Thess. 4) and they feared that they might be unprepared for the day of the Lord (1 Thess. 5). In 2 Thessalonians 2 it appears that false teachers were disturbing the peace of the church by saying that the day of the Lord had come (2:2).

(See notes on 1 Thess. 5:2 for "the day of the Lord")

Paul tells the church "not to be quickly shaken" from their composure (2:2). "Quickly" has the force of "hastily" and when used with the aorist tense verb, points to a sudden action. The verb "to be shaken" was used of ships shaken from their moorings in a storm. In other words, Paul sensed that they lacked a secure anchorage and were being caught up in sudden excitement.

They were also disturbed. In Mark 13:7 "disturbed" is translated as "alarmed." This time the verb Paul uses is a present tense verb indicating a continuous state of nervous excitement.

Paul makes it clear that they shouldn't believe anyone who says that the day of the Lord has dawned and they were living in it (Morris, 217). It doesn't matter if that information comes by "a spirit" (a prophecy; Morris, 216; Stott; 157), or by a message, or in a written letter—even if the person claimed to be speaking on behalf of Paul (2:2b)! The day of the Lord will not happen until two matters take place—(1) "the apostasy" (a great rebellion) and (2) the revealing of "the man of lawlessness" (2:3ff.).

2:3 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,

2:4 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.

2:5 Do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things?

In verse 3 Paul clarifies the order of future events and encourages the Thessalonians to not be deceived. Before the day of the Lord comes the apostasy must occur (2:3a) and the man of lawlessness must be revealed (2:3b). Everything else in verses 4–12 amplify these two events.

The English word "apostasy" means the abandonment or renunciation of one's faith, but the term *apostasia* (ἀποστασία), in Greek, more properly signifies political, military, or religious rebellion. In the

Greek Bible the dominant usage is in relation to religious rebellion (1 Tim. 4:1; Heb. 3:12; Acts 21:21; Wanamaker, 244), that is, rebellion against God. “The characteristic thought of the Bible is that God rules. Thus the word is appropriate for a rebellion against His rule. . . It is not so much forsaking one’s first love and drifting into apathy that is meant, as setting oneself in opposition to God” (Morris, 218, 219). In other words, the term itself does not necessarily mean that professing believers abandon their faith, but that there will be a time of rebellion directed against God. Those who rebel are probably those in verses 10–12 who do not love the truth (contra Beale, 207).

The great rebellion against God will coincide with the man of lawlessness (the lawless one—v. 8) appearing on the stage of world history. The fact that Paul says he “is revealed” means that he will be present in the world before he emerges into public view.

“Lawlessness must be understood as a failure to conform to the law of God. . . It is the refusal to be ruled by God” (Morris, 220). The man of lawlessness embodies the spirit of rebellion against God’s law. This man who opposes God’s rule is likely the instigator of the rebellion. He gains his following by deceiving the perishing (2:10–12). This coincides with Jesus’ words in Matthew 24:10–13: “At that time *many will fall away* and will betray one another and hate one another. Many false prophets will arise and will mislead many. Because *lawlessness is increased*, most people’s love will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end, he will be saved.”

In 2:3b the man of lawlessness is also called the son of destruction. This is clearly a Hebraism (a Hebrew expression written in Greek). It denotes someone characterized by destruction (cf. Isa. 57:4); this could mean either that he is Satan’s agent for destruction (Wanamaker, 245), or that he is “the one destined for destruction,” “the doomed one” (Best, 284; Marshall, 190, Morris, 222). The same expression was used of Judas by Jesus (Jn. 17:12).

Many suggestions have been made as to this man’s identity. Some say it referred to the Roman emperors; some specifically say it was Nero. From the time of the Reformation people began to believe it was the papacy. Other suggestions have been offered as well, but they all break down by the fact that Paul is speaking of a future individual who appears at the end of the age; he will be present in the day of the Lord, and will be destroyed by Christ at His second coming. The man of lawlessness, therefore, is most likely the Antichrist.

“Antichrist,” in Greek, is made with the word “Christ” and the prefix “anti.” “Anti” with “Christ” can be used of someone “in opposition to Christ,” or someone who is “a substitute for Christ” (RWP). Antichrist will probably embody both. The word is used two ways in the Bible.

1) It is used of individuals who exhibit the spirit of antichrist.

- 1 John 2:18: Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, *even now many antichrists have appeared*; from this we know that it is the last hour.
- 1 John 2:22: 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 4:3: every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world.
- 2 John 1:7: For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist.

According to John, even before he had written his letter (around 90 AD), antichrists had come and gone. Until Jesus returns there will always be antichrists in this sense. Antichrists are a sign that it is the last hour (1 Jn. 2:18), so it should not surprise us that throughout history people will appear who remind us of the man of lawlessness (see Stott, 161–163 for a number of examples).

2) Secondly, “Antichrist” refers to a specific individual who opposes God and persecutes God’s people just prior to the return of Christ. Most likely, the same individual is spoken of in Revelation 11:7, 17:8, and 20:7.

The content of these verses echo the end-time passages in Daniel 9:27, 11:31, 36. The expression, “man of lawlessness” is also found in Daniel 12:10–11.

In verse 4 the description of the man of lawlessness continues: He **“opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship.”**

The first participle, “who opposes,” indicates that this individual is in opposition to God. The second participle, “who exalts,” stresses the high position he puts himself in. Both are present tense participles which indicate that his opposition to God and self-exalting desires are relentless. In sum, the man of lawlessness insists on having the supreme place of honor. He demands religious veneration and that no god or any other object of worship be placed above him. Ultimately, he seeks to replace God (2:4b), for he “takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God.”

Note the similar content of Daniel 11:36–37: “Then the king will do as he pleases, and he will exalt and magnify himself above every god and will speak monstrous things against the God of gods; and he will prosper until the indignation is finished, for that which is decreed will be done. He will show no regard for the gods of his fathers or for the desire of women, nor will he show regard for any other god; for he will magnify himself above them all.”

The word used for temple (ναός—naos) can refer to the temple in general, but it was often used of the inner sanctuary, the Holy of Holies, where the glory of God resided. This is no doubt what is meant here.

Commentators understand the meaning of “temple” in different ways.

1) Some think the temple is being used as a metaphor for the church. This would mean that the man of lawlessness infiltrates and establishes himself in the church and displays himself as being God. The church itself becomes his base of operation.

Evidence for this view:

- a. The other times Paul used the word “temple” he was never speaking of the literal temple, but to either Christ or the church.
- b. John spoke of “antichrists” in the church (1 Jn. 2:18–19). What is true of them is true of the Antichrist.
- c. National Israel as a chosen people and its temple have come to an end, so “temple” cannot be literal (Beale, 206–211).
- d. In order for people to apostatize they must be part of the covenant community. Jesus also predicted many will fall away from the faith.

However, this interpretation is flawed. First, when 2 Thessalonians was written, the actual temple in Jerusalem was still standing; without further explanation, it is hard to believe that the Thessalonians would understand Paul as speaking metaphorically of the church.

Secondly, in 1 John 2:19 John wrote, “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.” In other words, antichrists associated with the church externally, but they were never really believers. Local congregations are composed of “wheat and tares.” By contrast, the church is called the temple of God because true believers are the habitation of God. In 1 Corinthians 3:16 Paul wrote, “Do you not know that you (plural = believers) are God’s temple and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” In 2 Corinthians 6:16 Paul said, “. . . we are the temple of the living God; as God said, ‘I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.’” Therefore, the temple metaphor is not comparable to people gathered in a local assembly. Unbelievers may be present in Christian gatherings, but only those who have the Spirit of God comprise the temple of God. If “to take his seat in the temple” means “to be part of the temple of God (the church),” then Antichrist would have to be indwelt with the Holy Spirit. This is inconceivable.

Lastly, “taking his seat in the temple” is not the same as being the temple. The temple of God imagery is not describing us entering the church, but God entering us.

2) Others believe that Paul was speaking figuratively of the arrogance of Antichrist who desired to dethrone God in order to enthrone himself. He is using thoughts from Ezekiel and Daniel to portray the character of the culminating manifestation of evil as an anti-theistic power which usurps the place of God in the world. Marshall says, “No specific temple is in mind, but the motif of sitting in the temple and claiming to be God is used to express the opposition of evil to God” (Marshall, 192; also Stott, 160, 165).

But, as Wanamaker points out, this could hardly be taken as the interpretation in Paul’s lifetime who, as a Jew, had the temple in mind as part of his eschatology (Dan. 9:27; 11:31; 12:11; Mk. 13:14; Wanamaker, 247).

It is also perplexing that Marshall says, “No specific temple is in mind.” The expression, “the temple of God” in the mouth of Jew is pretty specific (See #4 below).

3) Others suggest that this is the heavenly temple. Just as Satan stormed heaven and attempted to sit in the heavenly sanctuary, so the man of lawlessness will attempt to reach the heavenly sanctuary, though he will be slain by Christ (Frame, 256).

It is difficult to imagine how a man could make such an attempt.

4) The last view is that the temple is the actual, literal temple in Jerusalem.

Wanamaker says, “The inner sanctuary in question is almost certainly the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple where God was thought by the Jewish people from Old Testament times to dwell. ναόν [temple] is made definite by the article and the possessive genitive τοῦ θεοῦ (“of God”), indicating that a specific building was intended . . . Jewish Christians as well as Gentile Christians undoubtedly would have understood it as a reference to the one true temple of God in Jerusalem, especially since the verse contains an allusion to Daniel 11:33–36. . . The definite nature of this reference makes it impossible to believe that . . . [the] original readers of the letter would have understood the reference metaphorically, as Marshall (190–192) and Bruce (169) seem to favor” (Wanamaker, 246).

In sum, Wanamaker is certain that Paul had to have the literal temple in mind as he wrote, and his readers would have thought the same thing. However, then he states if we insist that Paul is speaking of a literal temple, “The passage can no longer be understood as valid, since the temple was destroyed in AD 70 without the manifestation of the person of lawlessness or the return of Christ’s appearing” (Wanamaker, 248). Therefore, he believes that we must accept that Paul and his readers understood this differently than we do today. They were thinking in terms of a literal temple, but we see it as expressing “the reality and menace of the power of evil which attempts to deny the power of God.” This, he says, “offers a meaningful interpretation of the passage, since it is true today as it was in Paul’s day” (Wanamaker, 248). The difference between this view and view 2 above is that in view 2 it is believed that Paul is thinking metaphorically; in Wanamaker’s view, Paul is thinking literally, but we need to extract the unchanging truth that lies within the things he said.

I am not convinced by Wanamaker’s reasoning. I admit that if the temple is rebuilt, it would not be the exact same structure that Paul and his readers had in his mind, but that doesn’t force us to the conclusion that the temple is non-literal. Even though the temple in Paul’s day was destroyed in 70^{AD}, a rebuilt temple would fulfill Paul’s prediction. In fact, there remains a significant stream within Orthodox Judaism that aspires to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem, and to return to an era when Jews worshipped through pilgrimage and sacrifices.

Others who reject this view do so with baseless reasons. Stott, for example, says, “it would seem a gross anachronism to make Jerusalem (even if it had a temple) the center of Antichrist’s global movement” (Stott, 160). I would simply ask, “Why?” Antichrist will set up a base of operation somewhere. Why is it so inconceivable for him to rule from the capital of Israel, the very land that God designated for His people, in the very building that depicted the dwelling of God among men? It is hard to imagine anything that would express Antichrist’s opposition to God and picture his blasphemous self-exaltation as God more than that. It is not anachronistic to believe what Paul has written; it is simply assuming that

the temple will be in existence and what Paul said will come to pass. Paul may not have known the temple of his day would be destroyed, but how can anyone definitively say it won't be rebuilt?

If the temple is rebuilt, Paul's comments would be understood literally in every generation. This would also fulfill the Jewish expectation that the physical temple in Jerusalem would be literally desecrated (Dan. 11:31; Wanamaker, 247).

2:6 And you know what restrains him now, so that in his time he will be revealed.

2:7 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.

With the insertion of "now" in verse 6, Paul turns from the future to the present state of affairs. What he is about to say was already known ("you know"—2:6) by the Thessalonians.

Discussions about these verses are very complex. Many of Paul's thoughts are vague and some of his sentences are incomplete. He is filling in gaps of existing knowledge between him and the readers that we do not have access to. The meaning of the verb *κατέχω* (*katecho*—"restrains") is debated. In verse 6 Paul speaks of "*what* restrains" and verse 7 he speaks of "*he* who restrains." That is, the neuter participle (*what* restrains) switches to a masculine participle (*he* who restrains) in the next verse. Why the change from "what" to "he"? Is it some thing or some person who restrains? Who or what is being restrained? What is the mystery of lawlessness? These are all issues that need to be addressed.

The verb can mean "restrain," "hold back," "detain" (in which case "him" must be supplied), but it could also mean "hold sway," "to prevail" or "rule" (in the intransitive form; Wanamaker, 253).

Most believe that Paul is speaking of something or someone restraining the man of lawlessness from being revealed (contra Wannamaker).

The following are several popular possibilities of the identity of the restrainer (see Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, 122–128; Stott 169–171; Wanamaker, 250–252 for various views):

- a. The proclamation of the gospel is restraining the revealing of the lawless one (Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 150; Beale, 215). This doesn't work well, however, for the switch from neuter to masculine gender participles
- b. The law, government (the power of the state), or a kingdom is restraining the revealing of the lawless one. Therefore, Paul uses a neuter participle. This is then personified (or in the case of a kingdom is represented by its leader) in verse 7, so Paul switches to the masculine participle (Stott, 170; Thomas, 324; Morris, 226, 227).
- c. The Holy Spirit is restraining the revealing of the lawless one. In John, pronouns used with the Holy Spirit also fluctuate between neuter and masculine (see Jn. 14:26; 15:26; 16:13, 15; Thomas, 324; against this view see Gundry, 125–126).

But all the views are speculative. “The plain fact is that Paul and his readers knew what he was talking about, and we do not” (Morris, 227). It may be best to simply acknowledge ignorance (as does Morris, 227). All we know is that some power is in operation and Antichrist cannot appear until it is removed.

All this will happen “in his time.” Although the antecedent of “his” is unclear, most think “his time” is speaking of God’s time (Marshall, 195; Thomas, 325; Morris, 227; Frame, 263; contra Wanamaker, 254). Antichrist will be revealed on God’s timetable, in accordance with God’s plan and purposes. God is sovereign even over evil. The removal of the restrainer is an act of God that allows evil to progress through the man of lawlessness.

“The mystery of lawlessness” is an unusual expression. The use of the term “lawlessness” connects this mystery to the man of lawlessness. A “mystery” in the NT usually refers to something hidden from men in the past that has now been made known. For example, the inclusion of the Gentiles in salvation is called a mystery—it was mentioned in the OT but hidden from people seeing it. However, it has now been revealed (Eph. 3:4–6). Here, the mystery is concerning lawlessness. There are hidden workings of rebellion against God that we cannot know. Nevertheless, Paul says to the Thessalonians, “you know. . . the mystery of lawlessness is already at work.” That is, even though we cannot perceive the hidden workings of evil, the existence of rebellion at work was perceivable. This developing lawlessness will culminate in the definitive apostasy on the earth (Frame, 264); it will be revealed openly, embodied in the man of lawlessness (Stott, 171).

2:8 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;

2:9 that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders,

2:10 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.

When the restraining power is taken out of the way, “*then* the lawless one (the man of lawlessness—(2:3) will be revealed (2:8) . . . that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan. . . (2:9).”

Antichrist comes with power, signs, and wonders in accord with the activity of Satan. He is characterized by all the deception of wickedness.

The word, “powers,” stresses the supernatural force that is often displayed in miracles; “signs” direct attention to something beyond the nature of the person acting; “wonders” emphasizes the awe people feel in the presence of a miracle or the unexplainable nature of what had just transpired. People are drawn to the mesmerizing, unexplainable power displayed. In Matthew 24:24 Jesus said, “false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.” The man of lawlessness excels in such deception beyond any who preceded him. This is a warning not to make signs and wonders the ground of your faith or the criterion of truth. All these signs and wonders are counterfeit, not because they aren't miraculous (they have satanic power,) but because they don't point to truth.

Although these are false miracles, they are convincing to those who will perish (2:10). These give the truth of God no welcome, and their rejection of truth is “fraught with eternal consequences” (Morris, 233)—they will not be saved.

Most see these verses as directly mimicking the incarnation.

- Jesus is revealed (1 Thess. 1:7); the man of lawlessness is revealed (2 Thess. 2:3, 6, 8).
- Jesus has “a coming” (παρουσία *parousia*); the man of lawlessness has “a coming” (παρουσία *parousia*).
- Power, signs, and wonders accompanied Jesus; power, signs, and wonders accompany Antichrist.

Jesus and Antichrist contrasted:

- Jesus’ coming was in accord with the activity of God; Antichrist’s coming is in accord with the activity of Satan.
- Jesus perfectly fulfilled the law of God and walked in perfect submission to the Father; Antichrist opposes the law of God and leads others in rebellion against the will of the Father.
- Jesus worked miracles; Antichrist works false miracles.
- Jesus came to reveal truth; Antichrist comes to deceive
- Jesus came to bring salvation; Antichrist comes to seal the destiny of the unbelieving, so that they will not be saved.

The point of verses 8 and 9 is that neither the rebellious world, nor the Antichrist is a match for Christ. The ease of which Christ defeats Antichrist is expressed in the words, “by the breath of His mouth.” Similar imagery is found in Revelation 19:15 where John writes of Christ, “out of His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations.” No physical action is needed by Christ to destroy His enemies; one word, one puff of air from the mouth of Jesus, and the man of lawlessness will be destroyed.