

2 Thess 2:5-12 – “How To Make Sure The Antichrist Won’t Fool You”

This is one of those Bible passages that gets too much of the wrong kind of attention. When I was fifteen, working at a summer Bible camp, I got swept up in debates about the end-times with older Bible college students and even pastors. It was fun. People crowded around tables with coffee cups, with Bibles open, with heated dialogue, arguments and counter-arguments. I loved it. But it took decades to undo some of the damage done by those debates. This is one of the passages that was used over and over again to score a point, where a single verse or two would be quoted as if it proved one person’s interpretation of the end-times was right and another’s was wrong. But nobody ever stopped and said “let’s study this verse-by-verse, word-for-word and find out what it means.” Everybody acted like they knew what it must mean even before they read it. Because, you know, if it doesn’t fit your interpretation of the end-times, it’s not worth knowing. Like I said, these were Bible college and seminary students, and pastors—and me. It’s so easy, isn’t it, even for people who believe the Bible, to like the sound of our own voice more than God’s Word; to get more excited about being right than we are about learning to love Jesus?

These verses are not given by the Holy Spirit to satisfy your curiosity, or to help you win a debate—they are given, a) in v1, so that followers of Jesus focus our hope on his coming and our being gathered together to Him, b), in v2, so that followers of Jesus are not shaken or alarmed by any teaching that might make us lose hope in the coming of Christ, c) in v3, so that followers of Jesus have some idea what to expect before Jesus comes. Verses 5-12 were written to protect these believers and those who came after them, from falling away from Christ when the counterfeit comes. Falling away is what that word “rebellion” means in verse 3. It’s the word apostasy. And the counterfeit of Jesus Christ is the “Man of Lawlessness” and “Son of destruction” in verse 3—theologians call him “the Antichrist”, but as we will see in these verses, a better word would be pseudochrist—because he doesn’t tell people not to believe in Jesus; he convinces people that he’s the one they need to follow *if* they believe in Jesus. **In verses 5-12, God’s Word gives us three predictions about why people fall away and are fooled by the Antichrist that remind you to embrace the truth with all your heart.**

God's Word predicts the delay of the Antichrist (read 5-7)

Verses 5-6 are clear that Paul had already taught the Thessalonians why the Antichrist would be delayed (5-6). He is clear, as FF Bruce says, that two things were already at work at the time this letter was written in the first century: the mystery of lawlessness was already working, and the coming of the Antichrist was being prevented by something and someone current.¹ Notice that detail: in verse 6, the Restrainer is a “what”—a thing; in verse 7 the Restrainer is a “he”—a person. The Thessalonians already knew all this. Paul had taught them (5). For us to know who the Antichrist is, we also have to deduce what was restraining him. How do we do that?

ILLUSTRATION. Can you imagine hearing Paul preach? Most of us would probably have been bored by his preaching. He preached for hours. People fell asleep (Acts 20:9!). He didn’t tell a

lot of stories. He wasn't an *impressive* preacher (2 Co 10:10). Tradition says he was near-sighted, balding, funny-looking, with a big nose. And his preaching was expository. [read Acts 17:1-4]. He evangelized the Jews with Bible-preaching that explained and proved from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ. If that's how he tried to *win* people to Jesus, what did he do to *keep* them following Jesus? More Bible-preaching, more explaining and proving from the Scriptures. From what we read about Paul's teaching, like in Thessalonica, he didn't take things out of context—he taught the context. He explained. He proved that what he was preaching was really what the Bible says (c.f. Acts 10:11). So when he writes, in verse 5, “remember I told you these things?”, these readers would be remembering those long hours of Bible exposition.

And Paul's Bible didn't yet have a New Testament. Since Paul had taught them about what was preventing the coming of the Antichrist, that sounds like he had been preaching from the Book of Daniel—that the Antichrist could not come until the Roman Empire was finished: in Daniel 7, that prophet foresaw four great “kings” rise up, one after another (v17), and then explains that they are not just individuals but “kingdoms” (v23)—Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and fourth, Rome. Then Daniel saw that Rome's empire will divide into ten smaller kingdoms—which is what happened in the early medieval European history. Then Daniel saw another, different sort of kingdom rise up among those ten European kingdoms—and wage a long war against the saints (Dan 7:25). So like the previous kingdoms, the Antichrist is not one man, but the kingship of a kingdom. And he was going to come when the Roman Emperors fell. Paul had taught the Thessalonians, from the Bible, that as long as Rome continued to be ruled by emperors, it wasn't yet time for the Lawless One.ⁱⁱ

I know this is different from what some of you have been taught before. It might not fit with your theories of the end-times. But it does fit the Scriptures, and it does fit how Christians have understood the Scriptures since the early church. In the 16th century, John Calvin explained these verses this way. But he points back 1200 years earlier to one of the greatest Bible expositors of all time, the bishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom. Chrysostom taught that just as Daniel predicted, Babylon was conquered by Persia, Persia by Greece, and Greece by Rome; and that Antichrist would step into the vacancy left by the Emperors of Rome. Calvin concludes, “There is not one of these things that was not afterwards confirmed by actual occurrence. Chrysostom, therefore, speaks truly in so far as concerns history.”ⁱⁱⁱ But even earlier, a man named Tertullian, born about 100 years after Paul wrote this, read this verse and said, “What is this but the Roman state, whose removal when it has been divided among ten kings will bring on Antichrist?”^{iv} You might wonder why Paul didn't just say that but can you imagine how Roman authorities would crack down on the Christians in Thessalonica if it got out they were predicting the Emperors would be replaced? Paul was being cautious and deliberately obscure but reminded the Thessalonians what he had taught in person (v5).^v

Paul was protecting these believers. Using his apostolic authority to equip them, prepare them, strengthen them. But in verse 7, Paul describes a “mystery of lawlessness” already at work in first century churches. This is what John described in 3 John when he said that a man named

Diotrephes “does not acknowledge our authority” (3 Jo 1:9)—he didn’t respect the Apostles as the teachers authorized by Jesus Himself. John said Diotrephes “likes to put himself first” above the authority of the Apostles. For us today, because the NT is the collection of the Apostles’ teaching, the equivalent is when someone tells you to listen to their interpretation instead of to what the New Testament clearly says. That’s a prime example of the “mystery of lawlessness” (v7) that was already at work and is still at work today. Like Sheba in 2 Sam 20 did not recognize the lawful authority of the King. Today, whether it’s about the Bible’s teaching on sexual orientation, gender roles in the family and in the church, even the number of genders, or civil disobedience, people love their own opinions more than they love the authority of Christ’s Apostles. And when the Bible confronts some area of your life, don’t tell me that you never disregard its authority. In verse 7, we learn that people were already falling away for the same reason Christians fall away from Christ today: because we all have this sin-driven tendency to prefer our own ideas more than we love God’s truth. If we don’t repent and embrace God’s truth with all our hearts, verse 8 shows us how that will turn out.

God's Word predicts the destruction of the Antichrist (read 8)

ILLUSTRATION. Apocalyptic movies would be way less thrilling if we already knew how it ends. We already know the outcome of this apocalypse: Jesus wins. **(Isa 11:4)** “Rod of his mouth” and “breath of his lips” are parallel—talking about the *Word* of Christ the Lord. This is how the Antichrist ends up. Killed by the Word Jesus breathes; finally annihilated at the Second Coming—the word here “*appearance* of his coming” is where we get “*epiphane*” from; it’s used in Greek literature for “dawn of day” or “daybreak”—it is about the brightness of His coming and echoes the awesome display of power Paul described in chapter 1: [read 2 Thess 1:7b-8].^{vi} So why does Paul here skip to the end? Why does he leap from Antichrist’s rise to his fall in verse 8? Remember, he’s writing to protect these readers and the generations after them. When Christians are called to endure great suffering for the sake of following Jesus, we need to know how the story ends. That’s the comfort verse 8 has given Christians for 2000 years.

Generations later, after Paul’s original readers in Thessalonica had died, after Tertullian, and not long after Chrysostom,^{vii} Christians saw the fall of Rome, the end of the Emperors. And they saw the new leaders of Rome who rose up in their place. They saw the bishop of Rome fill the vacancy left by the emperor. And 1400 years later, there is still a priest sitting on a throne in Rome, claiming to speak for God, claiming to be the head of Christ’s Church. *What we learn in these verses is that people fall away and are fooled by the Antichrist because they prefer the lies of men over than the truth of God.* And how will that turn out do you think?

Look at verse 8 again [read]. There is another prophecy in Revelation that describes that scene—the daybreak, the dawn, the bright appearance of His coming! [read Rev 19:11-16; 19-20] Verse 8 is not written so that believers will gloat. Verse 8 is written to the original readers so that they won’t stop hoping in Christ’s coming; and to later generations so that they will not be led astray; will not be fooled by the Antichrist; will not fall away and join the apostasy. History shows how the Popes are “lawless”—how they have for 1400 years subtly diminished

the authority of the apostles by claiming to be the successors of Peter, by claiming to have the last word on how to interpret Scripture, and in modern times, by claiming to speak with God's authority when they speak from their throne.^{viii} In verses 9-10, Paul exposes the Lawless One as an impostor, an impersonator, a counterfeit of Christ. We learn here about people falling away and being fooled by the Antichrist because they prefer the lies of men over than the truth of God.

God's Word predicts the deception of the Antichrist (read 9-10)

In verse 9, Paul is talking about things the Lawless One does to convince and persuade his followers to believe his teaching. Jesus' teaching was confirmed by the miracles God provided—walking on water, casting out demons, turning water to wine, feeding thousands with a few loaves and fish, healing diseases, bringing the dead back to life, and ultimately rising from the dead Himself! The same three words (power/miracles, signs and wonders) are used in Hebrews 2:4 to describe the way God confirmed the truth of Jesus' message by divine signs, wonders, and miracles (the Greek word can be translated power or miracle): According to Hebrews 2:4, "[our great salvation] was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by **signs** and **wonders** and various **miracles**..." Those are the same three words as in verse 9—except Paul says they are false.^{ix} They are not true proofs from God but false tricks from Satan. The Antichrist is a Pseudochrist—an imitator and counterfeit.

Why would anyone fall for relics, for holy water, for bones of saints, for lavish wealth, for buildings decorated in gold, for rumours of miracles, for myths about bread and wine being transformed, for fancy robes and hats, and for pomp and ceremony instead of for the beautiful simplicity of the message that Christ died in the place of sinners so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but will have eternal life? Because the Gospel Jesus preached, the Gospel he entrusted to his apostles, is just too simple. People often feel their guilt so heavily that they think surely I need to do more than just believe Jesus died in my place? I get that. But that is to listen to our guilt instead of God's Word. All the good you can do in your whole life does not even add up to the righteousness of a single day in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Even by dying, you could never atone for your sins. But the sinless Lamb of God already died for your sins. And when you say that's not enough to remove the guilt you feel today, you are saying the debt your sins incurred is greater than the price already paid by the death of the Son of God. My friend, the price Jesus paid to save you was infinite. That's why the only way you can honour Him is to put all your faith in His infinite grace. Verse 10 says the deception is "for those who are perishing"—[read v10b]. The Greek wording here is literally, "they did not accept the love of the truth."

You see? The difference between those who follow Christ and those who fall for the counterfeit is a matter of "the love of the truth." The Gospel is truth you need to love, to embrace with all your heart. Because it is the Word of the Lord Jesus Christ. The deception of the Lawless One is a counterfeit gospel relying on illegitimate authority that leads people to nullify the grace of God and turn away from the truth that could have saved them. [read vv11-12] Therefore.

Because people did not “accept the love of the truth”, because they did not receive the Gospel Jesus preached, because they did not esteem the infinite worth of the ransom Jesus paid in His blood, God sent them a delusion they liked a lot more than the truth. Don’t say this is not fair. When elections are held and votes are cast, isn’t it fair when God gives a foolish nation the foolish leader their foolishness deserves? We all sinned and fell short of the glory of God; we all, like the rest of mankind, were sinners deserving God’s wrath; but God being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, gave us His Son: what more could He give? What grace we have neglected! It is by grace we are saved, through faith, not by works; it is the gift of God.

What we learn here in these verses, about people falling away and being fooled by the Antichrist, because they prefer the lies of men over than the truth of God, is so that you will “have pleasure” in the righteousness of Jesus; embrace the truth with all your heart “and so be saved” (v10), not shaken or alarmed, but always hoping toward “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him” (v1-2).

ⁱ "It is plain, moreover, that both the mystery of iniquity and the restraining agency are at work at the time of the writing of the epistle; the restrainer has not yet been removed, therefore the man of lawlessness has not yet appeared, and a fortiori the Day of the Lord has not yet arrived." Bruce, F. F.. 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Volume 45 (Word Biblical Commentary) (p. 217). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱ The old, English, baptist preacher John Gill got straight to the point:

...**only he who now letteth, will let, until he be taken out of the way;** that is, the Roman empire and Roman emperors, and which were by degrees entirely removed, and so made way for the revelation of this wicked one: and which was done partly by Constantine the emperor receiving the Christian faith, whereby the Roman empire as Pagan ceased; and by increasing the riches of the church, and feeding the pride, ambition, and covetousness of the bishops, especially the bishop of Rome; and next by removing the seat of the empire from Rome to Byzantium, which he called Constantinople: here the Greek emperors continued in succession, and neither they themselves, nor even their exarchs, resided at Rome, but at Ravenna; so that way was made for antichrist to come to his seat, and there was nothing to rival and eclipse the grandeur, power, and glory of the Roman popes: and that which let was also taken out of the way, by the division of the empire, by Theodosius, giving to his elder son Arcadius, the eastern, and to the younger, Honorius, the western parts of it: the eastern empire was in process of time seized upon and possessed by Mahomet and the Saracens; and the western empire was overrun by the Goths, Vandals, and Huns, and became extinct about the year 476, in Augustulus, the last of the Roman emperors, who was obliged to abdicate the government by Odoacer king of the Heruli; when the kingdom of the Lombards took place in Italy, and afterwards that was translated to Charles the great, king of the French; so that there was nothing more of the Roman empire remaining than the bare name, as at this day; and by this means the popes of Rome got to the height of their power and glory, which is meant by the revelation of the man of sin. John Gill, Expositor, "2 Thess 2:7" Online Bible Module.

ⁱⁱⁱ Calvin's Commentaries, "2 Thessalonians 2:6"

^{iv} De resurr. carn. 24. Quoted in Bruce, F. F.. 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Volume 45 (Word Biblical Commentary) (p. 217). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

^v "...but because he meant the Roman Empire, he naturally glanced at it, speaking covertly and darkly. . . . So . . . when the Roman Empire is out of the way, then he [Antichrist] will come." Chrysostom, Hom. 4 on 2 Thessalonians. Quoted in Bruce, Ibid.

^{vi} "If ἐπιφάνεια ("manifestation") were synonymous with παρουσία here, the construction would be pleonastic; it more probably means "dawning," as in Polybius, Hist. 3.94.3, τὴν ἐπιφάνειαν τῆς ἡμέρας ("the dawn of day," "daybreak"). The bright dawn of Christ's Parousia will consume the man of lawlessness; we may compare the

“flaming fire” of 1: 7, 8.” Bruce, F. F.. 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Volume 45 (Word Biblical Commentary) (p. 217). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

^{vii} Chrysostom lived from 349-407AD. The Roman Empire fell in 476.

^{viii} C.f. The decree of infallibility in 1870.

^{ix} The ESV and CSB have it right I think: "false miracles, signs and wonders" (CSB)--the "false" applies to all three.