

Faith Under Fire: Thriving in a Hostile World

The Rise and Fall of the Lawless One 2 Thessalonians 2:6-12

Introduction

The apostle Paul's second letter to the Thessalonian believers is not a long letter. That's not surprising given how soon after the first letter Paul wrote it. Much of the first two chapters focuses on the return of Christ and the events related to it. Last week we learned what was going on with the believers in Thessalonica that would make writing them an urgent need that Paul's pastoral heart could not ignore. False teaching had wormed its way into the community, unsettling their minds and causing alarm. Some were claiming that the day of Lord was at hand, indeed already begun. That day when the Lord brings God's wrath against His enemies and vindicates His people. It's possible that the persecution the Thessalonian church had suffered from the start made it plausible to them that they were already in that time of great woe in the last days. But Paul says not so. Two things had to happen first: number one would be the great apostasy, the widespread rebellion of the professing church against the Lord; number two would be the revealing of the man of lawlessness, the son of destruction.

In our text this morning Paul goes on to describe the rise and fall of this evil world leader to come.

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. 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. 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.

1. Current Lawlessness and Its Restraint (6-7)
2. Revelation and Destruction of the Lawless One (8)
3. Satanic Power and Wicked Deception (9-10)
4. God-sent Delusion and Condemnation (11-12)

1. Current Lawlessness and Its Restraint (6-7)

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.

Mystery of lawlessness—something hidden that has been or will be revealed

Lawlessness—disobedience to and rebellion against the law of God

Already at work—already operational, already energizing; same word used in verse 9 to refer to Satan’s energizing and empowering the man of lawlessness. Whenever professing believers or churches fall away or individuals and cultures defy God’s laws, we see this lawlessness at work. Christians must stand firm against the attacks of Satanic deception and departure from the truth, as well as opposition and rebellion against God.

We see rebellion against God’s righteous laws at every level of our society—people worshiping the creature instead of the Creator—idolatry. Throughout the centuries totalitarian human governments have elevated the state above God and demanded complete submission and worship. Marxist

regimes have declared God to be a fable and the State to be the true God.

Others try to replace the Word of God with human science. We consider ourselves more sophisticated than the ancients who worshipped images of their idols, but we share their evolutionary worldview. It was revived with the influence of Charles Darwin in 1859. Over the course of the last century and a half since then the majority of educational and scientific institutions have declared that the universe is self-creating, that God has no place in His own creation. Despite the fact that every language and design origin we can observe comes from intelligent minds, they declare that a far more complex universe—whether we look through a telescope or a microscope—comes from random forces. They still cannot explain where life comes from. Even the simplest self-replicating cell is amazingly complex—impossible to come into being randomly because all the parts have to be functional from the start. And the missing links between kinds of living beings are still missing. But evolution is accepted and fiercely defended as foundational dogma—and declared to be proof that God does not exist and more importantly has no say in how we conduct our lives.

School history books have removed much of Christianity's positive contribution to Western

civilization and instead portray biblical faith as a major source of hatred and oppression. Doing so is important to legitimizing, affirming, and celebrating sexual perversion as positive good for advancing human identity, dignity, and fulfillment. Any limitation of self-expression is cast as inherently evil and abusive. Moral absolutes are taboo. To preserve complete sexual freedom, human life itself is no longer sacred. Killing the innocent is called women's health and freedom from oppression. In our pursuit of our own human freedom we sanction choosing death for other human beings.

But our lawlessness is found not merely in societal trends. It lives in every community, family, and human heart. Most murders are domestic murders. Most abuse is against those we know best. Wars and fightings come from the selfish, pleasure-seeking lusts raging in our own hearts.

Ephesians 2:1-3

¹ And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— ³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

However bad lawlessness may be in our world, our text declares that right now it is restrained. From time to time, we get a glimpse of how lawless and diabolical people and nations can behave: gladiatorial “games”; genocide; the guillotine of the French Revolution; world wars; Nazi death camps; Stalin purges; Pol Pot killing fields; Taliban beheadings—to name only a very few. We tend to think that only certain kinds of people can behave in such barbaric ways, but with a closer inspection of history, including our own, we find evil in our own communities and in our own hearts, despite many efforts to curb corruption and cruelty.

But think of a world where all the restraints fall away, and humanity can express its full lawlessness supercharged with Satanic power and codified into global tyranny. That’s what is coming.

This restraint is not merely by an impersonal power but by a person—“he.”
“You know what is restraining him now.”
“He who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way.”

Nearly all the Bible commentators admit that although the Thessalonians know who the restrainer is, as does Paul because he taught them, we don’t know for sure. One of the

most common answers is that Paul is referring to Roman law and to Caesar who enforced it—by extension, to human government ordained by God to reward good and punish evil. Part of civil government’s intended purpose is to restrain evil. Those that think civil government is what Paul calls “the restrainer” look for a coming time of unparalleled anarchy.

Others argue that only God has the power to restrain Satan and his power, so in some way the text refers to Him, in particular to the role of the Holy Spirit, in society or through the church. If truly born again believers are raptured prior to the tribulation period, the removal of the restraining influence of their lives empowered by the Spirit would have huge impact on society. It’s not that the Holy Spirit would no longer be present in the world, but that He would cease His current restraining work in the world through them. In the upper room discourse Jesus talked about the Comforter who would come, the Spirit of truth who would convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment—and would indwell believers. On the day of Pentecost that prediction was fulfilled. But His coming at Pentecost did not mean the Holy Spirit was not present at all in the world prior to that, as the OT well demonstrates.

Whether through the person of the Holy Spirit working in the church or through the instrumentality of civil government, God is the ultimate source of whatever restraint keeps lawlessness at bay in our present world. And it is God who will withdraw that restraint when the time for the lawless one arrives.

Applications

- How does knowing that God restrains how far evil can go in our world help you cope with the evils you see?
- How does knowing God restrains how far evil can go in our world temper the common tendency to elevate human achievement and goodness beyond what it deserves?

2. Revelation and Destruction of the Lawless One (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 man of lawlessness is also the son of destruction. The most powerful evil ruler ever has only a brief window to exercise his wickedness. God has already determined his destruction. He cannot stand up against the power of Jesus Christ. Paul captures his rise

and fall in one terse sentence. He is revealed and killed.

The King of kings has but to breathe and his enemies are destroyed as if by a blast furnace. *We do not fear the revealing of the lawless one, because the Lord Jesus will bring him and his entire empire of evil to nothing when He returns.* Shortly after the man of lawlessness steps onto the stage of human history, Jesus Christ will come and overthrow him. The Lord's appearance—his epiphany, shining forth—will set all things right.

Revelation 19:11-16

11 Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. **12** His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. **13** He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. **14** And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. **15** From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule 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.

In the following verses John describes the capture of the beast and the false prophet who had caused those who received the mark of the beast to worship his image. They both are thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulphur while the armies that followed them are destroyed by the sword from the Lord's mouth, their carcasses to be food for the birds.

Applications

- If the mightiest Satan-empowered leader of all time is so easily destroyed by the breath of the Lord Jesus, how fearful should followers of Jesus be of evil people who wield power today?
- If you choose to love evil instead of good, what do you think your chances are of winning your war against God?

If God is with you, you can't lose. If you rebel against Him, you can't win.

3. Satanic Power and Wicked Deception (9-10)

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.

The reason this lawless leader gains so much power and authority so quickly is that Satan is empowering him. He is Satan's fraudulent parody of the real Christ. He energizes him with all power (*dunamis*), and lying signs and wonders. Three terms for miracles—first emphasizing the power to do them, second the message of the miracle, and third the amazement miracles produce in those who witness them.

All of it is unrighteous deception geared to snare those doomed to perish because they refuse to love the truth and thereby be rescued.

If you refuse the truth, you are left with only lies. The problem is not so much the intellect of your mind as the affection of your heart—what you actually love.

Ephesians 4:18

They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart.

People imagine themselves wise when they reject God's revealed truth, but such action only makes them fools easily duped by the deception of Satan. People imagine themselves free when they cast off God's

rule, but such action only makes them Satan's slaves doomed to perish.

John 3:16

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

Applications

- What sins are you protecting that make you vulnerable to lies?
- Who will prove a better Master for you, Christ Jesus or Satan?

4. God-sent Delusion and Condemnation (11-12)

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.

Therefore—because they refused to love the truth

God sends them strong delusion—an energizing of error for them to believe the lie. God actually gives them what they want.

Look at the overwhelming tragic outcome of refusing to love the truth: Satan's deception works on you and God causes error to

become operational so that you instinctively believe lies.

The battle for truth is not just a human contest. It is tied into the cosmic battle of darkness and light. You and I are way out of our league. To think we are up for it on our own is delusional from the start.

And the certain outcome is condemnation—eternal judgment from God

The judgment is not so much that we are deceived as why we are deceived: They did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness. They are well pleased with what is unjust and unrighteous—what is contrary to the perfect standards of God. They love sinning so they don't want even to consider the truth. Once that heart disposition and mindset are place, everyone of us is easy to fool. Our condemnation is just. It is what we chose instead of deliverance from the God of truth and love.

Even in this final rebellion, those who are swept into the vortex of Satanic delusion and destruction end up there because of what they love. They find pleasure in what is wrong. They reject and rebel against what is right. That makes them pawns in Satan's kingdom and enemies of God to be destroyed.

James 1:13-15

13 Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. **14** But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. **15** Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

This is ever the way sin works. It is blinding. It makes us fools. It sets our course toward hell. It has always worked that way, from the Garden of Eden to the final rebellion under the antichrist.

John 3:19-20

19 And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. **20** For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.

So guard your heart. Pursue the light. Repent from your sin. Don't make an idol of it. Trust in God. Love His truth. He has made only one way for His enemies to be reconciled to Him—through the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ alone.

Romans 5:6-10

6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. **7** For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— **8** but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. **9** Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. **10** For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.

Applications

- Why not make today the day you end your love affair with sin and turn to Christ to save you?
- If you reject the truth because you find pleasure in unrighteousness, how can you hope to escape the delusion and condemnation God promises He will send you?

Conclusion

1. Current Lawlessness and Its Restraint (6-7)
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The gospel declares that God saves rebels—lawless ones. That’s what we all once were. This is the good news we take to the world no matter the cost.

We live in the time when lawlessness is restrained, the time to spread the good news with bold confidence not fear. The light has pushed back the darkness time and time again in human history. Think of the German monk who discovered from reading Romans that the just shall live by faith: “justification by faith alone in Christ alone.” After the dark ages came light, the light of awakening and revival called the Reformation. In that context Martin Luther penned the words to “A Mighty Fortress.” His words sting ring true today.

Summary of Applications

- How does knowing that God restrains how far evil can go in our world help you cope with the evils you see?
- How does knowing God restrains how far evil can go in our world temper the common tendency to elevate human achievement and goodness beyond what it deserves?
- If the mightiest Satan-empowered leader of all time is so easily destroyed by the breath of the Lord Jesus, how

fearful should followers of Jesus be of evil people who wield power today?

- If you choose to love evil instead of good, what do you think your chances are of winning your war against God?
- What sins are you protecting that make you vulnerable to lies?
- Who will prove a better Master for you, Christ Jesus or Satan?
- Why not make today the day you end your love affair with sin and turn to Christ to save you?
- If you reject the truth because you find pleasure in unrighteousness, how can you hope to escape the delusion and condemnation God promises He will send you?

Additional Discussion Questions

- What are some specific ways you can advance the gospel while the lawlessness of the age is restrained?
- What are some common lies today that reflect Satan's deception and opposition to God?
- What truths revealed by God in His Word debunk those lies?
- How can you demonstrate devotion to the truth and loving loyalty to God in contrast to the spirit of the age?