

**Introduction:**

A. *Illus.*: A long time ago now I was with a youth group at a national conference in Grand Rapids. One afternoon we were challenged to go out and look for people with whom to share our faith in Christ. I took Sean with me—quiet and unsure of himself. And I was nervous. We went to a city park. I saw an older man sitting by himself. We made eye contact, so we went over to him. He knew almost immediately what we were doing. I'd no sooner started than he said, out of the blue, "*Do you know what happened in 1914?*" Talk about a question out of left field. "*Ah, Word War I began?*" And the next thing I knew he launched into a lecture on the end times with details I'd never heard of, mixed with obscure passages of Scripture which he had memorized. I had no idea what was going on, but I knew something hinky was up.

Turns out, that guy was a Jehovah's Witness. Their founder, Pastor Charles T. Russell, first taught that the world would end in 1874, and then revised his calculations to 1914. After this year had passed, his successor, Judge J. F. Rutherford asserted that Christ did in fact come on 1 October 1914, but invisibly. On that day he exchanged an ordinary seat at the Father's right hand for the throne of his kingdom. So no parousia—*appearing, Second Coming*—of Christ is to be expected; it has already taken place. [in John Stott commentary, *The Gospel & the End of Time*, p.157]

Sounds preposterous, doesn't it? But there are 8 million Jehovah's Witnesses around the world. That is a modern day version of a problem Paul addressed in his second letter to the Thessalonian church. We're in a series on Jesus' Second Coming. This is the dark side of that story.

B. Turn to **2 Thess. 2**. In his first letter to this church, which we looked at last week. Paul addressed their fears that believers who had died would miss Jesus' Second Coming. This time they had been taught that Christ had already returned and they'd been "left behind." So listen to **vv.1-3a...** Being deceived about this matter is a lot bigger concern in the New Testament than it is to us.

**I. CHRIST WILL NOT RETURN UNTIL AFTER THE GREAT AND FINAL REBELLION LED BY THE MAN OF LAWLESSNESS (2:3-8)**

- A. You may remember from an earlier sermon that Jesus had assured his disciples that you could no more miss his Second Coming than you could miss lightning flashing across the sky. *Everyone* would see it! Now here, Paul explains that Christ will not return until two intertwined catastrophes happen first. **V.3**, "*Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until [1] the rebellion occurs and [2] the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction.*"
- B. "Until the **rebellion** occurs," the apostasy, falling away. Shortly before Jesus returns there will be an epic, world-wide rebellion, or falling away, from God, from law and order, from truth itself. Many professing believers in Christ will be caught up in this because they have never really turned from the world and embraced righteousness and truth, even though they've been so-called Christians. These are people who willfully rebel against God and reject Jesus Christ. **They mutiny against the Lord himself and unite in a powerful spiritual anarchy.** And this rebellion will be so worldwide, so dramatic and obvious that you can bank on it as a signal that Jesus is soon to return.

C. This epic spiritual rebellion will occur because “the man of lawlessness is revealed.” All people are sinners, but this man will be sin personified, the exact opposite of Jesus who was righteousness personified. Here will be a man with literally no redeeming qualities, but rather with sin in his veins, the devoted earthly agent of Satan. He obeys no law, neither moral nor civil. Yet he will be magnetic, charismatic and convincing. He will lead the rebellion.

In 1 John he is called the Antichrist. He is *opposed* to Christ as his vilest, most vicious enemy. He is also the complete *antithesis*, the *opposite*, of Christ. As you will see, all he does is a kind of parody, a diabolical remake of what Christ has done. In Revelation he is called the *beast*, because though he will be a human being, he possesses no human dignity. He is *bestly*.

He will be revealed, as one who is supernaturally hidden till a particular time. Satan himself will reveal him in such a way as to gain worldwide attention, again in some way mimicking the revelation of Jesus Christ to the world.

But don't miss the other identifier: “the man doomed to destruction.” He hasn't even appeared yet and he is already doomed. **Re. 19:20** says, “*But the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who had performed the signs on its behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped its image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur.*”

D. The M.O. (modus operandi) of the man of lawlessness is his audacious con of the whole world. **V.4**, “*He will oppose and exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God.*” This is a man, remember!

*“He will **oppose ... everything** that is called God or is worshiped.”* I take this to mean he opposes every religion. He doesn't make friends with them, or co-opt them for his own purposes. He doesn't call himself a Jew or a Muslim, a Buddhist and certainly not a Christian. He desecrates all that is sacred in order to proclaim himself as God.

But he will not leave the world religion-less: *“He will ... **exalt himself over everything** that is called God or is worshiped.”* The world has known audacious, arrogant rulers, even rulers who claimed to be gods, but no one has convincingly matched this! Incredibly, people will believe him!

*“So that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God.”* God hasn't had a temple building since 70 AD. In fact, the New Testament is explicit that we as God's people are his temple now. God dwells within us. So this might mean that this Lawless Man will declare himself to be the God right in the heart of the church, the ultimate rebellion against Jesus Christ, the Lord of the church. Once ensconced in God's temple he will *“proclaim himself to be God.”* Not a god, but God, capital G. And apart from those who cling to the truth of Jesus Christ, **the whole world will bow to him as God!**

- E. **Vv.5-7,** *“Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things? And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way.”* Here's the problem with those verses. Whatever it was that Paul told the Thessalonians when he was with them, he hasn't told us. So when he says, *“And now you know what is holding him back,”*

well, as a matter of fact, we don't. The brilliant St. **Augustine** wrote of this, "*I frankly confess I don't know what he means.*" [*City of God*, xx. 19. In Stott, p.168] Both a *what* and a *he* is holding the man of lawlessness back. The commentators have at least seven different answers, ranging from Satan to God himself. I thought the most convincing idea was that government, sanctioned by God (as we're told it is), and rulers, (whom we are intended to respect and obey), are holding back lawlessness for the time being, but they will lose the power to do so.

**V.7** says, "*For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work.*" That is not referring to the general sinfulness of the world. There's no secret about that! This is a kind of clandestine operation by Satan spreading lawlessness—a deep rebellion, an undercover anarchy, against God, governments, religion, and the very idea of righteous laws. But this mysterious power is held back.

- F. But then whatever is restraining the man of lawlessness will be removed. "*But the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed.*" I get the sense from texts you'll see that the astounding revelation of him will come like a resurrection, a counterfeit Easter, when the man who was dead, killed by a fatal head wound, will live again.

Let's listen to the description of this from **Rev. 13:2-9**,

*The dragon [i.e., Satan] gave the beast [i.e. the man of lawlessness, or the Antichrist] his power and his throne and great authority.*

This is a parody of what the Father did for Christ after his resurrection.

*One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed.*

Under the subversive power of Satan, the world will be ready for this Easter story—the man come back to life!

*The whole world was filled with wonder and followed the beast. People worshiped the dragon because he had given authority to the beast, and they also worshiped the beast and asked, “Who is like the beast? Who can wage war against it?”*

*The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies [vile words against God and all that is sacred] and to exercise its authority for forty-two months. It opened its mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven. It was given power to wage war against God’s holy people and to conquer them. [Notice that nothing hinders him. God himself does not stop it during this prescribed time.]*

*And it was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation. All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast [it has always been Satan’s goal to steal away the glory of God for himself.]*

*[But not all the inhabitants of the earth]—all whose names have not been written in the Lamb’s book of life, the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world. Whoever has ears, let them hear.*

- G. Back to our text. Remember how Paul added the phrase in v.3, “the man doomed to destruction”? He does it again here in v.8, “whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming.” This makes a mockery of the lawless man’s power and puffery, because there’s not even a battle. The Lord Jesus will overthrow him with two seemingly un-weapons: *the breath of his mouth and the splendor of his*

coming. The spirit and splendor of Christ will doom the Antichrist.

V.8 ends, “*and destroy by the splendor of his **coming**.*” V.9 begins, “*The **coming** of the lawless one will be in accordance with how Satan works.*” Two *comings*. The lawless one will mimic Jesus’ second coming with his own Satanically empowered coming. So far we’ve seen how the lawless one will be *revealed* – a word used three times. Now in **vv.9-12** we see the terrible result.

## **II. THE LAWLESS ONE WILL USE SATANIC MEANS TO DECEIVE ALL WHO DO NOT LOVE THE TRUTH OF CHRIST (2:9-12)**

- A. So if “*the coming of thee lawless one will be in accordance with how Satan works,*” just how does Satan work? Look at v.9: “*He will use all sorts of displays of power through signs and wonders that serve the lie.*” This again is mimicry of Jesus. Jesus displayed power through signs and wonders. The Antichrist will have astonishing miracle-working powers which will make it seem he must be God for who else could do such things! Listen again to **Rev.**

**13:13-15** talking about a second beast in service of the first:

*And it performed great signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to the earth in full view of the people. Because of the signs it was given power to perform on behalf of the first beast, it deceived the inhabitants of the earth. It ordered them to set up an image in honor of the beast who was wounded by the sword and yet lived. The second beast was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that the image could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed.*

There's the resurrection story! And it will convince everyone in the world that he is God. Except those who hold fast to the truth of Christ.

- B. There's another weapon in his arsenal, in **v.10**, "*and all the ways that wickedness deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.*" People who refuse to embrace the truth of the gospel always have their reasons. But the fact is, they refuse to love the truth of Jesus Christ. They love darkness rather than light. When someone is resistant to the truth of God, they are sitting ducks for Satan's temptations. They are like someone dying who has no resistance to disease.
- C. Since "*they refused to love the truth and so be saved,*" **v.11-12** says, "*For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.*"
- D. **John Stott** writes, "*The whole process is grimly logical. First **they delight in wickedness**, or 'make wickedness their deliberate choice' (NEB). (I'd add that delighting in wickedness simply means delighting to do our own thing, to ignore God's will.) 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.**"*

He goes on, "*This is extremely solemn teaching. ... The only way to be protected from being deceived is to love goodness and truth.*" [p.173] **Do you? Do you love doing good because you love Jesus? Do you love the truth that Jesus saved you and is your Lord?**

## Conclusion

This passage, for all its talk about the power of Satan and his diabolical schemes, is shot through with references to God's sovereign control over everything.

- Before he even appears, the lawless man is “*doomed to destruction.*” God is the Doom-er!
- God is behind that mysterious business of his restraint till a certain time. All of Satan's plans are co-opted by the Sovereign God for his holy purposes.
- The Lord Jesus will overthrow that arrogant lawless man with just his breath and splendor. There's no contest!
- God sends the “*powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie.*” Again, the act of the sovereign God.
- Finally, God is the one who judges and condemns.

There is one more statement of God's sovereignty in the next vss.

*But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters loved by the Lord, **because God chose you as firstfruits to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this** through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

So that brings us to what we are supposed to do about all this. He began by telling us “*not to be easily unsettled or alarmed by teaching*” that says Jesus has come back, or that he isn't coming back. He said to us, “*Don't let anyone deceive you.*” Now, after this teaching he says:

*So then, brothers and sisters, **stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you**, whether by word of mouth or by letter.*

**Then this benediction:** “*May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.*”