

The Coming of Christ and the Man of Sin

Has It Happened Yet?

¹ Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers,

² not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.

³ Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction,

⁴ who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.

⁵ Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things?

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.

Antichrist in Reformation History

WITHOUT QUESTION, THE MOST DISAGREED upon phrase in our confession of faith is found in the chapter on the church. It reads, “Neither can the Pope of Rome in any sense be head thereof, but is that Antichrist, that man of sin, and son of perdition, that exalts himself in the church against Christ, and all that is called God; whom the Lord shall destroy with the brightness of his coming” (LCF 26.4). This identical phrasing is to be found in the parent documents the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), the Savoy Declaration (1658), and the 1677 London Confession of Faith.¹

Not only this, but you find Antichrist identified in one way or another with Rome and the Papacy in The *French Waldensian Confession of Mérindol* (1543), the *Hungarian Synod of Gönc* (1566), the *Italian Lattanzio Ragnoni’s Formulario* (1559), the Confession of Faith in the Geneva Bible

¹ In his *True Confessions*, Jim Renihan capitalizes all uses of “Antichrist.” However, he only capitalizes “Man” and “Son” with the 1677 LCF. The use of capital letters is difficult because back then they capitalized all kinds of words that would not today. Therefore, I don’t think we can take say much about this from the capitalization. See Jim Renihan, *True Confessions: Baptist Documents in the Reformed Family* (Owensboro, KY: RBAP, 2004), 166.

(1560), the *Confession of the Spanish Congregation of London* (1560/61), the **Netherlands** famous *Belgic Confession* (1561), the **Transylvanian Synods of Gyulafehérvár and Marosvásárhely** (1566), The **Czech Bohemian Confession** (1573), the **Scottish King's Confession** (1581), the **German Bremen Consensus** (1595), the *Irish Articles* (1615); the **Lutheran Smalcald Articles** and *Book of Concord* adopted in **Germany** and **Scandinavia**, and there are many others.

As you can tell, this was pretty much the view of the Reformers. These include Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, Philipp Melancthon, Martin Bucer, Theodore Beza, as well as English theologians Cranmer, Latimer, Ridley, Tyndale, Bradford, King James, and many many more.² The idea goes back prior to the Reformation with men like the Italian Dominican friar Florentine Reformer Girolamo Savonarola (1452 – 1498) who called Pope Alexander VI the Antichrist. It went even before him with the likes of Joachim Calaber (ca. 1132-1202), Henry of Herford (c. 1300 – 1370), John Wycliffe (c. 1320-1384), and John Hus (1369-1415).³

² Referenced in **Stanko Jambrek**, “The Teaching of Christ and the Antichrist in the Thought of Matthias Flacius Illyricus,” *KAIROS – Evangelical Journal of Theology* IX:2 (2015): 225 (221-40). https://www.academia.edu/23272406/The_teaching_of_Christ_and_the_Antichrist_in_the_thought_of_Matthias_Flacius_Illyricus.

³ Ibid.

With such a pedigree, why might people object so strenuously to this point? I can tell you it isn't because most that object don't think that the papacy is in many ways against Christ. It has more to do with the language. Specifically, it uses the definite English article: "THAT antichrist ... THAT man of sin." A definite article means one not many. Furthermore, the language is taken from 2 Thessalonians 2:3 which talks about a "man" and a "son." Both of these are masculine singular nouns. They are not plural. The problem is, of course, unless they are talking about one particular Pope like Savonarola did—because the word Pope is also a masculine singular noun—they are abusing the English language, not to mention the Greek.

If it had said "the papacy" is antichrist (small "a"), I don't think there would be as many objections. Yet, it still directly quotes 2 Thessalonians 2:3 which talks about a singular man of sin and son of perdition. What I do not want to do today is spend a lot of time explaining why all the Protestants believed that the Pope or Papacy was this "man." It should be obvious from the Inquisition, to the excommunication, to the jailing, to the death penalty, to their doctrine surrounding salvation, their idolatry, their sacramental system, the deep moral corruption of the hierarchy, their perversion of

the original Mass, and so on why they would have thought this way. In fact, these are the very things pointed out in these Confessions.

Instead, because this topic is at the heart of our passage today, I want to try and discover what Paul meant by these and other things. Honestly, it doesn't matter what anyone else thinks. It matters what the man who wrote it thought. Just here there is a huge problem though. It is expressed this way by **Augustine**, "I confess that I am entirely ignorant of what he means to say."⁴ F. F. Bruce notices that "there are few New Testament passages which can boast such a variety of interpretations as this."⁵ And one scholar just makes up a poem for his interpretation,

*Commentators each dark passage shun,
And hold their farthing [cheap] candle to the sun.⁶*

So what is a pastor to do? There are two basic options. **Use the Old Testament** to try and figure out if Paul had anything there in mind and hope that those places are clearer. **Don't use the Old Testament** and go it alone. I think I'm

⁴ He says this specifically about vs. 9. **Augustine**, *City of God* 20.19.2.

⁵ F. F. **Bruce**, *New Testament History* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1969), 309.

⁶ Béda **Rigaux**, *Saint Paul: Les Épîtres aux Thessaloniens*, Études Bibliques (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1956), 279. Cited in **Desmond Ford**, "The Abomination of Desolation in Biblical Eschatology." A Thesis Presented to the University of Manchester (July 1972), 219-20.

being fair in how I put this, because if Paul is using the Old Testament and we can figure out where, but it is not being consulted, then for all intents and purposes we are going it alone, even if we have a whole continent full of people from whom we are borrowing traditions and ideas. This is interpreting the word of God on an extremely difficult subject apart from the original source(s! Unfortunately, the second option is almost always what is done on this topic. We are going to try the first and see what happens.⁷

Getting the Timing Right

Connecting Chs. 1 and 2

From the perspective of **an ancient letter**, 2 Thessalonians 2 begins *the body*. Ch. 1 contains the **prescript** (1:1-2) and the **thanksgiving** (1:3-12). As we have seen, this lays foundations for things to come. Particularly, **1:7-10** speaks in apocalyptic tones of the dreadful **day of the Lord Jesus** when

⁷ Dr. **Heiser** had this to say when he dealt with the passage on his podcast. “**Interpreting the New Testament without checking the Old Testament is foolish ... we need resources that alert us to how New Testament writers are using, reading, and interpreting the Old Testament ... Anyone you’re reading about End Times theology who isn’t doing this, who isn’t engaging the whole issue of how does the New Testament use the Old Testament ... should be listened to with extreme caution, if not outright ignored. They are not doing the kind of exegetical work that needs to be done.**” As far as the statement goes, I tend to agree. Unfortunately, there aren’t a lot of scholars doing this, especially on this passage. But there are some.

he will be revealed (*apokalupsis*) from heaven with angels in fire and flame to deal out retribution. This retribution is against those who “afflict you” and “also us,” in other words, it is against the local Jews and Gentiles in Thessalonica and Corinth and seemingly all the other places he travelled.⁸

He says of these people that they “do not know God” and “do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.” This coming will bring “eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord” forever. It will also bring about the glorification of Christ “on the day” in his saints and will be marveled at among all who have believed. It seems clear that this is talking about something that is still in our own future, for nothing like this has happened yet.⁹ I say this against the backdrop of the preterist view that this chapter has been fulfilled. We will talk more about this as we go along.

⁸ At Thessalonica and Corinth, it was Jews. But for example, in Ephesus it was the Gentile Demetrius, a silversmith.

⁹ Some partial Preterists like Gentry agree. “There the Second Advent judgment brings ‘everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord’ (1:9)...” Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., “The Man of Lawlessness: A Preteristic Postmillennial Interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2,” *Covenant Media Foundation*, <http://www.cmfnow.com/articles/pt550.htm>. The point is really quite important for interpretation. Those who see total fulfillment of 2 Thessalonians 2 and 1 in 70 A.D. are usually full preterists (partial preterists see it in Ch. 2). The argument would be that the destruction of the system of religion and the city had ramifications that reverberated throughout the Roman world. This is undoubtedly true, but overstated. Did that event bring “eternal destruction” to the Jews in Thessalonica? Of course not. Did not the synagogues continue? Did not Jewish persecution of Christians continue until the Jews saw that they had to once-and-for-all distance themselves theologically from Christianity by making two-powers

Chapter 2 begins with what seems to be a connection to these things and is therefore directly related. “Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers...” (2Th 2:1). The English word that connects the two passages is “coming.” Jesus is coming.

Why Does This Matter?

Why is he raising this issue? It is because of what follows. “*We ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the lord has come. Let no one deceive you in any way*” (1-3). Someone was going around telling these baby Christians that the day of the Lord had come, and they missed it. This reminds me not a little of how movies like *A Thief in the Night* scared the pants off of us by showing that many will miss the Rapture. Obviously, these people are anxious and troubled.¹⁰ And, worse, it seems that it doesn't

theology and other such things heresy for all Jews later in the second century and the two religions once-and-for-all went their separate ways?

¹⁰ Like the Rapture which is really a different “coming” from the Second Coming, this may be a sign that what Paul has in mind is something other than the Second Coming, because it is hard to see how anyone could miss that. This is why I believe that 70 A.D. is *at least* in view. As we will see, I believe it is more than that. If they have a bad understanding of the Second Coming, it is certainly possible to think you've missed it.

take much to get them this way, which also reminds me of the way I grew up, with each new book on the latest political fiasco adding to the anxiety. Trust me when I say that **living as if the world is going to blow up tomorrow**, whether because of religious newspaper eschatology or political doomsday propaganda from either the left or the right is no way to live your life.

This is precisely why Paul is writing to them about this. Before we go any farther, you need to understand **the pastoral point** of all that we are about to look at. It isn't to give dates and cleverly hide names that you can figure out through a secret code. In their case, some of the people had actually stopped working and were doing what cults of old have done: selling all they have and living on rooftops waiting for the end of the world. Paul says, **“Do not do this! If a man will not work, he will not eat.”** This purpose is to both **comfort** them with the news that they have not missed the Coming of Christ, but also to then talk them down from the ledge so that they will come back to reality and be worthy, productive members of society whom God will consider worthy of the calling he has given them. This was Martin Luther's point when someone asked him what he would do if he knew Jesus would return this afternoon. He said I

would plant a tree this morning. Keep this in mind as we continue.

The “Coming” Connection

Back to our verse. The Apostle uses **two different words** for these comings (*erochomai* and *parousia*). *Parousia* is the word used in Ch. 1; *erochomai* is used in Ch. 2. This has caused some to see two different comings!¹¹ Well, I don't know if it has “caused” it, but *because* of it, they allow themselves to see two different comings: The Second Coming in the first chapter (*Parousia*), and the 70 A.D. coming (*erochomai*) in the second chapter.

In what I am going to argue, I believe that at least in Ch. 2 and perhaps in Ch. 1, we have echoes of the 70 A.D. coming in judgment, but neither chapter is primarily about that. 70 A.D. and the judgment of God upon the nation of Israel in the obliteration of her temple and mass slaughter of her people in the ravaged city of Jerusalem is **a type** of a greater

¹¹ For example, because he sees the whole of 2:1-12 as already fulfilled in total in 70 A.D., but not Ch. 1, Gentry has to see two different comings (*erchomai* in 1:10 is the Second Coming; *Parousia* in 2:1 is the 70 A.D. coming) and thus two different things being discussed in these two chapters.

judgment to come. Certainly, 70 A.D. is a type of this (as we will see). But it is not the Second Coming!

It is not necessarily wrong to see two comings of Christ. Many argue the exact same point in Matthew 24.¹² I would as well. The disciples, after all, asked **two questions**. First, “**Tell us, when will these things be?**” (**Matt 24:3**). That is, when will “**not one stone here be left upon another?**” (**2**). When will the temple be destroyed? Second, “**... and what will be the sign of your coming (*Parousia*) and of the end of the age?**” Whether they believed this was all just one question or not, Jesus pretty clearly tells them that these are two distinct events. The destruction of the temple is a type of the Greater Destruction to come.

The problem is, in Matthew all those who argue this say that the *Parousia* is the Second Coming and the *erochomai* is the 70 A.D. coming. That is exactly backwards of what they then say of 2 Thessalonians. This is a great inconsistency and seems to me a reason to be skeptical of the idea that 2 Thessalonians 2 is only about 70 A.D., because it sounds like special pleading.

¹² For example, R. T. **France**, comments on Matthew 24:23, 30, 42.

Furthermore, it is important to remember that this is *Second* Thessalonians, meaning that there was a *First* Thessalonians. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul discussed this same *Parousia* (1Th 5:1-11). We saw there that the Parousia was about the Second Coming still sometime in our own future. Because of this connection, scholars have probably rightly pointed out that “it seems nearly impossible not to see the discussion here as related to some kind of misunderstanding of that passage.”¹³ And if so, then 2 Thessalonians 2 is mostly about the Second Coming.

Gathered Together

The other important idea in 2Th 2:1 is that we will be “gathered together to him.” When Paul wrote this letter, it is clear that he believed both of these things were yet future events. That doesn’t mean they are both future for us, but it is important to my interpretation.

This idea of being “gathered” along with Christ’s “Coming” form the first two of many allusions in this passage to Jesus’ Olivet Discourse (see chart below). There is a

¹³ Michael Holmes, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 30, citing G. D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 228.

problem here as well. In Matthew, it can be argued that the “gathering” is what happens, most likely,¹⁴ after the temple is destroyed, while the “coming” refers to the Second Coming. (People who believe in the “Rapture” will take the coming and the gathering as two separate events, separated by many years). It says, the Son will “gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other” (Matt 24:31). The idea is that once the temple is gone, Christians will no longer be tempted to worship there, and the influence of rabbinical Judaism will not hamper the gospel going out as was happening in seemingly every town Paul went to.¹⁵

¹⁴ While Jesus says this will happen “immediately after the tribulation of those days” (i.e. 70 A.D.), France seems to equivocate on this, though he calls it a “dual perspective.” On one hand, he says that this is what happens once the temple is destroyed. On the other, he sees this as the very mission of the Apostles which began with their Great Commission (Matt 29:19-20). Here’s a quote. “It is on the basis of that authority that he will then send his disciples to gather a new community out of all nations (28:19), and it is as a result of that ingathering that a new and far more inclusive “chosen people” will be formed to take on the mission of God’s people which had hitherto been focused in Jerusalem and its temple.” France, 928.

¹⁵ Gentry says, “The gathering of the elect in Matt 24:31 speaks of the gospel going out to all nations, unshackled by the constraints of Judaism. It is the beginning of the fulfillment of the Year of Jubilee. See my book, *The Olivet Discourse Made Easy* <http://www.kennethgentry.com/olivet-discourse-made-easy-book/>.” This is from a comment on a blog. Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr. “The Sing of the Son of Man (2), *PostmillennialWorldview.com* (Nov 22, 2016). <https://postmillennialworldview.com/2016/11/22/the-sign-of-the-son-of-man-2/>.

Jesus in Matt. 24– 25	Parallels on the Second Coming	II Thess.
BOLD = Second Coming in the Olivet Discourse Regular = 70 A.D. Coming in the Olivet Discourse		
24: 22, 29– 31	Persecution Cut Short	II. 1: 6– 7; 2: 8
24: 37– 41 (Lk 17: 22– 35)	Back-to-Back Rapture & Wrath	II. 1: 6– 10
24: 13, 22, 31, 40– 41	Surviving Believers Delivered	II. 1: 7
24: 31	Angelic Presence	II. 1: 7
24: 27– 30	Universal Perception	II. 1: 7– 8
24: 29– 30, 37– 39	Initiation of the Day of the Lord	II. 1: 7– 8
24: 30	Power and Glory	II. 1: 9
24: 31	Gathering	II. 2: 1
24: 3, 27, 37, 39	The Parousia (“Coming”)	II. 2: 1, 8
24: 27, 30	Initiation of the Parousia	II. 2: 1, 8
24: 6	Alarmed the End Has Come	II. 2: 2
24: 4– 5, 23– 26	Do Not Be Deceived	II. 2: 3
24: 10– 11	Apostasy of Many	II. 2: 3
24: 12	Lawlessness	II. 2: 3, 12
24: 21– 22	Opposition By Antichrist	II. 2: 3– 4, 8– 9
24: 15	Antichrist’s Desolation	II. 2.4
24: 29– 30	Parousia Follows Antichrist	II. 2: 8
24: 24	Deceiving Signs and Wonders	II. 2: 9– 10
24:24	Elect Will Not Be Deceived	II. 2: 9– 14
Kurschner, Alan (2014-03-19). <i>Antichrist Before the Day of the Lord: What Every Christian Needs to Know about the Return of Christ</i> (p. 179). Eschatos Publishing. Kindle Edition.		

Here’s the thing. Anyone who takes Jesus as referring to 70 A.D. (or any time before it) has to recognize that his “gathering” refers to the **calling of Gentiles to become Christians**. That’s its clear meaning in Jesus’ words. However, even though Paul is using the term here which appears

in Jesus' sermon, he seems to be using it *differently*. Why? Because these Thessalonians have **already been “gathered”** in this sense. They have already been called. These elect now belong to Christ. Yet, he says that they have not yet been “gathered.” In other words, he has some kind of a gathering in mind for these Christians that has not yet happened. This very obviously did not happen in 70 A.D.

I have no problem with Paul using Jesus' words differently, because he has a different context and purpose. But this only works, it seems to me, if there is a typological relationship between the 70 A.D. coming and the Second Coming such that what can be said about the former foreshadows the latter! This is exactly what I think is going on in 2 Thessalonians 2. Now that I've explained what I think is **the timing** that is in mind, let's turn to the real meat of this passage.

The Apostasy (2:3)

He begins by talking about the Day of the LORD. “**For that day will not come, unless ...**” **Unless what?** Unless **two things**. **First**, “**unless the rebellion comes first.**” Paul is saying that the Day of the LORD cannot come prior to “**the rebellion.**” In popular eschatology, this rebellion is often

tied to the supposed Rapture of vs. 1 (and the “coming;” there is no rapture in vs. 1), which is strange because it would put this rebellion that brings the Rapture after the being gathered together which takes place after the tribulation and coming of Jesus!

It is important to note here that the Day of the LORD is used throughout the OT to refer to various “comings,” against the nations and against Israel and Judah. Yet here, he says that “the” rebellion must come first. The problem is, in all of those cases there was *some kind* of rebellion. So, is he only talking about yet another in a long series of rebellions? Or might he be talking here about the Day of the LORD that the prophets seemed to look forward to that went beyond all these other relatively minor days? I think this is exactly what is going on. This is “The Rebellion,” not just a rebellion (clearly that 70 A.D. rebellion was significant). In this light, I find it interesting that in the entire section where Jesus talks about 70 A.D., he does not mention the language of “the day” until he begins talking about the Second Coming. In other words, this was not The Day of the Lord.

That said, this rebellion is the first of (at least) **three very difficult things** to interpret. The Greek word may actually be more familiar to you than the English! It is the word

“apostasy” (*apostasia*). You probably think of the word as referring to some kind of religious rebellion against God. The word means things like “defiance,” “rebellion,” “abandonment,” “breach of faith” (like a betrayal) and so on. But this can refer to either a religious or *political* revolt. It is used for a political revolt in **Ezra 4:15** LXX for example. As something political, **Josephus** calls the rebellion of Jerusalem against Rome an *apostasy* (Josephus, *Life*). Therefore, many (they are almost always postmillennialists) have seen here a prediction of this event.¹⁶ Of course, if he has in mind the 70 A.D. apostasy, then are we to think that this is the *final* apostasy that there is, that there is none to come, none worse? That seems to be what is required by “The Apostacy.” I find that a difficult pill to swallow.

Some see it as a combination of **political and religious** rebellion against God. The political rebellion has to be extrapolated here (people find it with the identification of the

¹⁶ Cf. Loraine **Boettner**, *The Millennium* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1964); Gary **DeMar**, *Last Days Madness* (Brentwood, TN, Wolgemuth & Hyatt 1991); **Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr.**, “The Man of Lawlessness: A Preteristic Postmillennial Interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2,” *Covenant Media Foundation*, <http://www.cmfnow.com/articles/pt550.htm>. R. C. **Sproul**, *The Last Days According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998); B. B. **Warfield**, “The Millennium and the Apocalypse” in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield: Biblical Doctrines*, vol. 2 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008);

“restrainer”; more below), but the religious apostasy is obvious, especially in vv. 8-10. Certainly, the Jewish leaders throughout the lives of the Apostles in nearly every town they came to were like this, especially in a religious sense. For my part, I think these commentators are right to see this as fulfilled in the first century, *to a point*. The Jews were living in apostasy against God and would soon revolt against Rome to their own destruction. This fits exactly what we saw last week when we looked both at the first chapter and the early portions of Isaiah 66 which was about Jewish rebellion.

There is a sense in which you can in fact read nearly everything in 2 Thess. 2 from this perspective. This would include the “[man of sin](#)” whom they would identify as Nero (or sometimes Vespasian or Titus), the setting up for worship of himself for worship, the desecrating of the temple, the proclaiming of himself to be a virtual God, and on down the line it goes. Many good articles and books have been written on this (see n. 16) and I will not spend more time on it here. In order to see, though, why I only see this as *a type*, we must move to the next of the difficult questions. Who is the man of lawlessness (or the KJV: man of sin)?

The Man of Sin (2:3-4, 8-10)

This person is the **second of two things** that must happen before the coming and the gathering. It says, “... **and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction**” (2Th 2:3). Here he is called two things. A man of lawlessness (*anomia* from “a” without and “nomos” law) and a son of destruction (*apoleia*, from which we get Apollyon). We see three things about him here. He is first, **a man**. Both “man” and “son” are masculine singular words. This is probably the main reason why this figure has been identified with **The Antichrist** (1Jn 2:18). Second, he is **lawless**. That is, he cares nothing about law, he mocks law, he rebels against God. Since God is the lawgiver, it presupposes he rebels against God. Third, he is a son of **destruction**, meaning that everywhere he goes he seeks to do harm and create chaos. Of course, this can be very subversive rather than in your face, and that would be just like Satan. But masks can't hide the truth behind them.

We began this morning talking about the man of sin and saw that almost all of the protestants took this as language for **the Pope**. I've also mentioned the name **Nero**, whom many church Fathers identified as this person. Certainly,

there have been many popes who have fit this and perhaps no person in human history has embodied it more than Nero. But how do we keep ourselves from pure speculation and newspaper eschatology, whether that newspaper came out last week, 500, or 1950 years ago? My answer is, we continue reading.

Vs. 4 is key. It says that he “opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.” Without doubt, there are things here that fit Nero. Of course, to a certain degree, they also fit the idea of a Pope, although I do not think the blasphemous belief that he is the highest representative of Christ on earth is equal with thinking that he is literally *God*. Similar maybe, but not the same.

What’s much more important is that for the first time this morning, we need to see that this language goes directly back to **the Old Testament**, to not one but three different passages. The first passage is **Daniel 11:36**. Here are the two side by side:

2 Thessalonians 2:4a	Daniel 11:36
He exalts himself against every so-called god	He will exalts himself against every god
Huperairiomenos epi panta legomenon Theon ὑπεραιρόμενος ἐπὶ πάντα λεγόμενον θεὸν	Hypothesetai epi panta Theon ὑπωθήσεται ἐπὶ πάντα θεὸν.

The only real difference is that Paul has added the word “so-called,” presumably to clarify that he isn’t actually going to exalt himself above the One True God.

This connection helps our interpretation, because if Paul is using it, then he would almost certainly have something in mind from that passage. Daniel 11 is perhaps the most detailed prophetic chapter in the Bible. It predicts the entire line of kingly succession from the Persians to Alexander to the Ptolemies to Egypt and Syria, to the Greek Seleucids and the reign of the infamous [Antiochus Epiphanes](#).

Antiochus is infamous because this is the man who fulfilled Daniel’s prophecy of the “abomination of desolation” when he, essentially, did everything that Paul predicts that the man of lawlessness will do. Yet, he did this around 168 B.C.! Here is where this gets interesting. Jesus takes the “abomination of desolation” ([Dan 11:31](#); [Matt 24:15](#); [Mark 13:14](#); [Luke 16:15](#)) language and, even though Antiochus fulfilled it, establishes that there will be another that takes place within “this generation.” This is exactly what happened in 70 A.D. with the Roman Emperors who sur-

rounded the city, desecrated, and destroyed it. Emperor Hadrian eventually set up a temple to Zeus on the foundations of its rubble. So, we have a **double fulfillment!**

There is something else to consider. Antiochus was a **Greek**. The Caesars were **Romans**. In other words, we have more than one nationality with this one prophecy. This is where our second connection to the OT in this verse is important. Most scholars see allusions in the next part of the verse to **Ezekiel 28:2**:

2 Thessalonians 2:4b	Ezekiel 28:2
He takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaims himself to be God.	I sit in the seat of gods/God ... you make you like the heart of God.

If this allusion is correct, then we have a **third nationality** associated with this person, because Ezekiel's prophecy is here against the King of **Tyre**. That means, what Paul is doing here is building his theology of Antichrist upon a composite person. In other words, based on this, we have no reason to think he is going to simply be a "Roman." He could be. He may not be.

Add to this that there is yet another OT reference in the man of lawlessness talk. This one comes from vs. 8 and **Isaiah 11:4**.¹⁷

2 Thessalonians 2:8	Isaiah 11:4
The lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth..	He will smite the earth with the Word of his mouth, and with the Breath of his lips shall he destroy the ungodly one.

This time, it isn't just one person, but many enemies that are in mind. In the previous chapter, it was the Assyrian and others. In another parallel, **Isa 30:27-30**, it is again the Assyrian, only unlike the ch. 11 reference which was tied to the birth of Messiah (see vs. 1-2), this time it happened *before* Jesus was born. Listen to the language there. “Behold, the name of the LORD comes from afar, burning with his anger, and in thick rising smoke; his lips are full of fury, and his tongue is like a devouring fire; his breath is like an overflowing stream that reaches up to the neck; to sift the nations with the sieve of destruction, and to place on the jaws of the peoples a bridle that leads astray” (**Isa 30:27-28**) This is classic apocalyptic language, and it happened to **Assyria** who

¹⁷ On all of these I consulted Hans K. LaRondelle, “Paul’s Prophetic Outline in 2 Thessalonians 2,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 21:1 (Spring 1983): 61-69. <https://www.andrews.edu/library/car/cardigital/Periodicals/AUSS/1983-1/1983-1-04.pdf>.

was brought to nothing by the Babylonians. It is this kind of non-literal previous fulfillment that makes some think that Nero and 70 A.D. is still a candidate for the fulfillment of this passage. No, fire did not literally come out of Jesus' mouth and kill Nero. He actually killed himself. But fire didn't come out of Jesus' mouth with Assyria either and it was fulfilled.

Why This is Hard to Understand

Before moving to the next difficulty, Paul himself interjects what is, for us, an [interlude](#). If you are sitting there wondering why all of this is so complicated and how it is that people can have such vast ranging interpretations as a past Roman victory, a Papal empire brought to nothing, and a future Antichrist with a Rapture and seven-year tribulation, perhaps you need to look no further than [vs. 5](#). “Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things?”

Though he had only been there for three weeks, Paul clearly tells us here that this very topic was of such importance that in those few days he spent much time explaining all of this to them already. Now, they had apparently

either forgotten it or ignored it, being taken captive by strange spirits and words and letters. What is clear here is that this was clear ... *to them*. What is also clear is that because it was clear to them, Paul doesn't make a lot of things clear *to us*, because *they* didn't need him to. And because of this, we are left somewhat in a confusing dark way of interpretive riddles and conundrums.

Let me say this. I think God, in his divine providence, knew this is what would happen. Therefore, he let Paul write things this way on purpose. Why might that be the case? I can think of *two reasons*. First, he did this to show us that *you do not need to know all the details of the future* (or past) in order to understand the main point. You must not be deceived into abandoning your life for a future you either immanently expect or think has already happened. This is what cults do, not Christians.

Second, even if you did know, you have to remember that they clearly did know, and *it didn't do them any good*. They were still being deceived. They were still alarmed and shaken and they knew the truth better than we ever will. It didn't help them. Therefore, God knew that you and I do not need to know these things in every detail, and that is for

the best of our lives here and now. Yes, he tells us something, and that is obviously important. But he doesn't tell everything.

As much as I would like to think that I might plant a tree if I knew I would die this afternoon, I'm pretty sure I wouldn't. Which means, what would that say about me if I was wrong about my expected hour of demise? Vs. 5 is therefore **a very practical thing**, even though it is also, perhaps, a frustrating thing for trying to understand the mysteries before us. With that said, let's move on to the next and last big problem.

The Restrainer (2:6-7)

Vv. 6-7 present us with a true difficulty. It deals with something called "**the restrainer.**" **And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. 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.**" This verse has given rise to a ton of interpretations. For example, preterists will say it is the **Roman empire** and **Pax Romana** rooted in Roman Law, law that held back Nero until his mother murdered the previous Emperor and Nero

was placed on the throne. Others say the **Jewish state** is the restraining power. Some say it is **Satan** who is restraining his protégé until just the right time. Others say it is an **angel**. Many say it is the **Holy Spirit** who restrains. Still others will say it is the **proclamation of the gospel**.¹⁸

How can you get things as different as a “thing” like Roman law and a Person like the Holy Spirit or Satan or an angel? It has to do with a very strange point of **grammar**. The word “restrain” is found twice, once in **vs. 6** and once in **vs. 7**. The ESV correctly translates the first as “**what is restraining**” and the second as “**he who now restrains**.” The first word is the **neuter** word *katechon*. The second is the **masculine** word *katechōn*. There is no textual difficulty here. Paul meant to write exactly what he wrote. One does not accidentally write an *o* (omicron) when he meant to write a *ω* (omega). This is not a slip of the pen. Somehow there is a “what” that restrains and a “who” that restrains it. According to the grammar, there are two restrainers, not one.

¹⁸ See G. K. **Beale**, *1–2 Thessalonians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 214-16; George **Milligan**, ed., *St. Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians*, Classic Commentaries on the Greek New Testament (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd, 1908), 166-73.

This has been seen by many people. What no one seems to have been looking for or able to find, until Roger Aus did his dissertation on this subject, is whether or not there could be some **OT counterpart** to this. It is at this point that I want to return to all that work we did last time with Isaiah 66.

In Isaiah 66 LXX, we have direct linguistic connections to **2Th 1:6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 2:4, 6-7, and 8**. Because there are so many overlaps, it is certain that **Paul has this passage in his mind** as he writes *both* chapters. The key here is that the word “**restrainer**” is found in **Isaiah 66:9**. The ESV reads, “‘**Shall I, who cause to bring forth, shut the womb?’ says your God?**” The word “**shut**” means literally “**to restrain.**” The full verse gives the context. “**Do I bring a baby to the birth opening and then not deliver it?’ asks the LORD. ‘Or do I bring a baby to the point of delivery and then restrain the womb?’**” asks your God?

This “birth” refers to the **birth of Jesus**, the Messiah. The Jews were interpreting this messianically even before the writing of the NT. So Paul sees in this verse **God saying that he will not restrain** a birth when it is time to come. That is, God is the object of the restraining.

However, in the passage, Isaiah has just been talking about the retribution that God is going to meet out against

the Jews for their identical treatment of God's people that Paul and the Thessalonians are now facing. This is one of the main reasons why Paul is so drawn to this text. But as this birth is announced, it is precisely **this judgment that is restrained by this birth!** The birth of Messiah puts the retribution on hold.

In the passage, it then begins to speak about the nations. God is to enter into judgment not just with the Jews, but with “**all flesh**” (**Isa 66:16**). He is going to slay many people. However, in the meantime, he is going to set a sign among them that when they see his glory in judgment, they will know that he is God. This sign will be the salvation of many Gentiles, peoples who go back to the very Table of Nations in Genesis 10. This is a prediction of the gospel going out to the Gentiles, and Paul sees himself and these Thessalonians as a chief part of its fulfillment.

These Gentiles will, over the course of time, win back God's elect Jews from all the nations and, serving as God's Levitical priests in the new covenant temple, they will bring them as an offering to the LORD. This is part of a **new covenant** which is symbolized as a new heavens and new earth, along with continuing worship when, finally, “all flesh” shall worship before God. But when they leave, they will see

the **dead bodies** of the men who have rebelled against Him. **The restraint is over.**

What this means is that there is something else restraining judgment in Isaiah 66. It is not a “who” but a “what.” That “what” is **the fullness of the mission of God’s elect to take the gospel to all peoples.** This is something that we actually see in Jesus’ Olivet Discourse as well. Jesus says, “**And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come**” (**Matt 24:14**). So it makes sense that this would also be in 2 Thessalonians.

It is at this point that it would be very easy for me to become a total preterist as far as it concerns 2 Thessalonians 2. You’ve already heard me tell you about all the connections to 70 A.D. that are here. This makes one more when you understand the broader point of Paul’s mission.

Let me take a moment to tell you about this relationship of the names from the **Table of Nations and Paul’s mission.** In Genesis 10, God punished the whole world, dividing them up into 70 nations. These nations were then given over to total darkness and the worship of the gods (the seventy sons of God). But something happened at Pentecost, something that is signaled in Isaiah 66 when it says that God will

send them to the nations (**Isa 66:19**). Acts 2 with its tongues and people hearing their own language even though those speaking were talking a different one is, essentially, the beginning of the **reversal of curse of Babel**.

What this meant for the Apostle Paul, according to prophecies like Isaiah 66, is that **the gospel must go out** to the seventy nations. The book of Acts is more than just an historical record of missionary journeys. It is a careful, deliberate explanation of how the Gospel was going to those nations.¹⁹ At the end of Romans, Paul makes this curious comment about how he had to get to Spain to preach the Gospel (**Rom 15:24, 28**). Why **Spain**? It is because Spain is where the fabled port of Tarshish was located, and it represented the last of the seventy nations (**Gen 10:4**), being that it was the farthest away.

Church tradition tells us that **Paul made it to Spain** before he was killed prior to the destruction of the Temple. Thus, Jesus' prediction that the Gospel had to go to all the nations was in fact fulfilled in one sense before 70 A.D. This is why Isaiah 66 can be such a powerful help to the preterist "*2 Thess 2-is-already-fulfilled*" position.

¹⁹ See Heiser, Unseen Realm, p..

The thing is, *nothing in the Bible* ever tells us that Paul made it to Spain. I do not think this is accidental. The reason is because *our* missionary journeys do not end with Paul reaching Spain. It isn't like that was literally the farthest outpost of human civilization needing to hear the gospel. Not even close. From the known world perspective, perhaps it was, though they clearly knew about places like the British Isles that were not yet reached.²⁰ But from the reality of North and South America, most of Africa, Asia, Australia, countless ocean-islands, and even much of Europe, many people groups had still never heard anything. There are still many 2,000 years later that haven't. It is for this reason that I believe God, again in his providence, did not have Luke record anything of Spain. It leaves the whole task “*open-ended,*” as it should be, *until Jesus finally returns.*

What this means is that because of the Isaiah 66 connection, the thing restraining the revealing of the man of lawlessness is *the need for the gospel to go throughout the entire world.* I'm not sure entirely what that means, but God knows. And I'm pretty sure it hasn't happened yet. Some

²⁰ Kind of. Thomas went to India and this supports the idea that more than the 70 nations were important.

Christians are planning to make it happen with the same fervor as some Jews are planning on rebuilding a third temple, and to do with within our lifetime. We'll see. When God sees this all as finished, I believe our passages is saying that God will finally take the restraints off and the man of lawlessness will be revealed. Then the end will come.

Until then, the “**mystery of lawlessness**” (2Th 2:7), yet another confusing thing in this passage, continues. It seems probable to me that this **mystery of lawlessness** is something akin to **Genesis 15:16** where God has a measure of iniquity that he puts up with, but once it is complete, judgment sweeps down from heaven. In revelation, it is “Babylon” who is called a “mystery.” In Paul’s day, it was Rome. Throughout history, it has been different empires and nations. Many people think of Russia and many others think of the United States in this way. The point is, lawlessness will continue to be the way of it and it is a mystery why God does not put a stop to it. Until, you realize that he is restraining his hand of judgment **for the sake of the elect**, that they might all come to Jesus before the end.

What will this end look like? **Terrifying**. It says, “**The Coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan**” (2Th 2:9). Notice that he has a “**coming**” too. He mimics Christ.

Satan is the one behind this, because it is an attempt to usurp God's throne.²¹ Satan will come with all power and false signs and wonders (9b). This is somehow an attempt to mimic God as we see in other books like Revelation. Usually, those signs and wonders try to duplicate the Exodus miracles. But as even Moses saw, those only go so far. Nevertheless, these are powerful, supernatural activities and they are from Satan.

This supernatural activity then moves to the next phase. He speaks of “those who are perishing.” This comes to “with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved” (2Th 2:10). Finally, we have something that is not difficult to try to understand. Note here that the blame is put solely upon them. They are deceived because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. People talk about God damning people to hell unfairly. Yet again, Scripture teaches us that people are

²¹ I should probably note here something about the “temple” mentioned in vs. 4. Amillennialists like Riddlebarger and Beale see “temple” language entirely through NT or new covenant lenses. Thus, the entire passage has to be about a man raising from within the ranks of the church itself, for the church is the temple of God. The Ezekiel 28 connection makes this interpretation less likely, but still possible. Whether he be someone who feigns to be a Christian at first, or someone like Nero who only and always hated Jesus Christ, I'm just not sure we can know the answer to this question.

given over to what they want. God hands them over to Satan to be deceived because they hated the truth and did not want to be saved!

“Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness” (11-12). The most terrifying thing of all this is that people will be right in the middle of it and not realize it. Because they have been given over to evil. God is letting Satan have his way with them in order that they may not be saved. What a terrifying thing when God lets you do exactly what you want to do.

And yet, lest we forget something we saw last week, and I will mention here as we close, it is the *Apostle Paul* here that we are talking about who penned these words. This Apostle was himself on his way to kill Christians. He thought he loved the truth, but he was there applauding the Jews as they stoned Stephen for preaching Christ. Yet, God saved him.

Thus, until the time that this man of lawlessness is revealed, this *delusion* is not irreversible. But this is only true in as much as the gospel continue to go out. For it is only the gospel that is the power of God to save a soul. It is *the gospel* that, I believe, restrains Satan! For with it he does not have

the power to deceive the nations (**Rev 20:3**), until the time of his releasing draws nigh. Then, all bets are off.

Therefore, here the word of the LORD this day. God is a supreme Judge who is going to punish your rebellion and sin. Make no mistake about it. Nothing can restrain his hand. Except his own oath.

That oath was to send his Son Jesus to this earth as a baby, as a man. This man grew and obeyed God in all things. For his obedience, his own people put him to death, and they were punished as a nation for it. This punishment was a type of the punishment that is coming upon the whole world for their rejection of the same Messiah. But you, now, are here listening to God's word. This Jesus, while killed, was raised to life and was seen by many witnesses. This Jesus ascended to heaven before the eyes of many. And he promised that one day he would return to take the fullness of the throne that is rightfully his as the King of kings.

This Jesus now offers you life and salvation and forgiveness of all your sins. This Jesus will clothe you in his righteousness if you repent and turn to him. This Jesus will cover all of your sins committed yesterday, today, *and tomorrow* as long as you call him Lord, fight the good fight, and finish the race. God will ensure that his elect come. It is your

job to make that calling and election sure by not forsaking him even though you sin, but by living a life of repentance and faith and ever-increasing obedience before he, as he promised, comes again to judge the living and the dead.

Even so, come quickly Lord Jesus.

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Septuagint Texts Alluded to in 2 Thessalonians 1, with Targums Added (Bold = Same Greek Term)			
Verse and Phrase	Definite Allusion	Probable Allusion	Possible Allusion
1:6 Since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you.			Isa 66:6 A voice of the Lord rendering recompense to his adversaries. Ob 14-15 to destroy ... in the day of affliction ... your recompense shall be returned.
1:7. When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven With the angels of his might		Isa 66:7 Targum: Her [messianic] king will be revealed . 66:2, 14, 15, 19 . " might " of the Lord.	Dt 33:2. His angels with him. Zech 14:5. The saints/holy ones (agoi) with him.
1:8. In flaming fire Inflicting vengeance .. those who do not obey . Those who do not know God	Ps 79[78]:6. Not know you	Ex. 3:2. In flaming fire Isa 66:15 and 66:4. Rendering vengeance ... recompense ... they did not obey	Isa 66:15 . A flame of fire Jer 10:25. Nations that do not know you. Isa 55:15. Nations which do not know you.
1:9. Eternal destruction Away from the face (prosopou) of the Lord and from the glory of his might.	Isa 2:10, 19, 21. From the face of the fear of the Lord, and from the glory of his might .	Isa 66:24b . For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh Isa 66:24a . And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me.	4Mac 10:15. The eternal ... destruction Ob 13 : in the day of their destruction
1:10. When he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints , and to be marveled at On that day .		Ps 89:9 ; 68:36a. God is glorified in the council of the holy ones ... wonderful is God in his holy [places].	Isa 2:11 (17, 20). On that day . Isaiah 66:18-21, 23 . All flesh. Tarshish, Put, Lud, Tubal, Javan, coastlands.
1.7-10. Judgment upon the enemies of God who do not obey. First Jew, second Gentiles?			
1:11. Good/Good pleasure			Ps. 89:17 . Good/good pleasure .
1:12. So that the name may be glorified : our Jesus Christ... in you.	Isa 66:5 . That the name of the Lord may be glorified .		
2:3 The man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of perdition/destruction	Ps 89:22 . Son of transgression (the enemy shall have no advantage against him ... shall not hurt him where him = messiah in Pesiq. R. 36/1.		
2:4. Opposes Temple Opposes and exalts himself against every god or object of worship His seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God.			Isa 66:6 . Opponents/enemies Temple Dan 11:36. He shall exalt himself and magnify himself above every god ... against the God of gods Ezek 28:2, 5, 6, 9, 17. King of Tyre (see Isa 66:19) seat of god heart of seas.
2:6-7. "what is restraining" (katechon, neuter) ... who now restrains (katechown, masculine)			Isa 66:7 . "I have also restrained" (YLT). "restrained is translated by katechein in Jdg 13:15-16, is associated with birth woes inn Jer 6:24, and the day of the Lord in Ps 48:7.
2:7. Until (the restrainer) is taken out of the way. (what is removed or "out of the way"? The mystery of lawlessness, anomia, cf. Isa 66:5, that is "our iniquities"		Dan 12:11. Burnt offering is taken away-removed-disappears.	Isa 66:9 . "who cause to bring forth, shut the womb" (shut = restrain). "The Hebrew says that just as ineluctably as a woman in her birthpangs must bear her child, so certain is it that God will restore Jerusalem, who will then suckle and console her people." (545, JBL)
2.8. The lawless one (anomos) Say him with the breath of his mouth and destroy him by his appearing and coming		Isa 11:4. He shall mite the earth with the word of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he destroy the ungodly one. (Messiah destroying he enemy of the Lord)	Isa 66:3 . The transgressor who slaughters an ox.
Chart based on the chart in David Roger Aus, "Comfort in Judgment: The Use of the Day of the LORD and Theophany Traditions in Second Thessalonians 1," A Dissertation to Yale University, Yale University: 1971: 113-114; also from Roger D. Aus, "The Relevance of Isaiah 66:7 to Revelation 12 and 2 Thessalonians 1," <i>ZNW (Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft)</i> 67 (1976): 252-68; Roger D. Aus, "God's plan and God's Power: Isaiah 66 and the Restraining Factors of 2 Thess 2:6-7," <i>JBL</i> 96/4 (1977): 537-53.			