

# **An Exegesis of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-10**

*By: Mark Jeske*

It is an easy matter for 20<sup>th</sup> Century preachers to chide the First Century Jews for failing as a nation to recognize and embrace their Messiah. After all, OT Messianic prophecies abound, and with the benefit of centuries of hindsight we assert that those prophecies point clearly and unarguably to Jesus Christ. We are quite properly humbled, however, when we grapple with those prophecies still unfulfilled at the end of the Apostolic Age which speak of events in our time. It is not so easy to make quick applications from Daniel 7-11 or from Revelation.

If Scripture's prophecies of the Christ caused widely different expectations, it should come as no surprise that Scripture's prophecies of the Antichrist would often be misunderstood. Even among Lutherans there is little agreement. On the one hand there is Rev. Richard Neuhaus, who calls John Paul II "our pope", and on the other there is Prof. Frederic Blume, who testified to the nuns at St. Alphonsus Hospital that the pope was the very Antichrist. The Scripture portion assigned to me for exegesis is the most detailed of the Scriptural loci on the subject of the Antichrist, 2 Thessalonians 2:1-10; we shall discuss it in five sections:

## **The Rise and Fall of the Man of Lawlessness**

- I. Isagogical and contextual considerations for II Thessalonians 2
- II. Exegesis of vv.1-10
- III. Summary of the lawless one's characteristics and insights from the other Scriptural loci
- IV. Interpretation and application to the papacy
- V. The doctrine of the Antichrist as a Lutheran article of faith

After Paul had been released from prison in Philippi on his second Journey, he came through Amphipolis and Apollonia on the Egnatian Road to Thessalonica, the capital of Macedonia and a major Mediterranean seaport. He preached in the synagogue on three sabbaths and then had to leave because of the violent reaction of the unbelieving Jews. Some think that Paul's stay there was longer than three weeks, since he received money from the Philippians twice during that time (Pp 4:16) and since he had had time to give the tiny church there detailed instructions in eschatological matters (II Th 2:5).

When Paul came to Corinth after passing through Berea and Athens, Silas and Timothy rejoined him. Paul knew that all was not well in Thessalonica and wanted to return, but he was hindered by Satan (1 Th 2:17-18). So he sent Timothy as his personal representative. When Timothy returned, his news was good and bad—the persecutions which Paul had predicted had taught them patience and perseverance, and their Christian joy and hope were an example to all Macedonia. Unfortunately, their eager expectation of the Lord's Second Coming led to anxiety that those brothers who had died would somehow lose out. About the year 51, then, Paul wrote them a letter praising their steadfastness, comforting them about the Second Coming, and exhorting them to a holy life.

Somehow further information soon reached Paul in Corinth that a new and greater problem had arisen. The Thessalonians were still standing firm, but their excited hope of the Second Coming was growing hysterical. They thought that Paul's teaching that Jesus would come suddenly meant that He would come immediately, and disorderliness grew in the infant congregation. Some argued that Paul had taught a *parousia* "any day now" and gave up their jobs, idly sponging off the brothers and causing disruptions. False letters may have been circulating (2 Th 2:2). Paul therefore decided to write a second letter; chapter two is his Spirit-inspired attempt to cool off feverish expectation without quenching the hope that would sustain them in their tribulations.

Vv.1-2: “Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report, or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come.”

Paul loves these people. He does not order them around as his spiritual inferiors, which they certainly were, but he requests them, *erwtwmev*, as brothers. The “we” refers to Paul and Timothy, and perhaps Silas, too. Luke seems to have parted company back in Philippi. *Parousia*, from *pareimi*, literally means “presence,” but it became a technical term for the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus to judge the world. The “gathering” referred to, *episuvagwgn*s, could refer to the people’s assembling themselves in congregations (as in Hb 10:35) but more likely refers to the Lord’s gathering His people to Himself as Paul had written in I Th 4:17 (cf. also Mt 24:31, Mk 13:27). The repetition of *epi* is a Hellenistic redundancy.

*Eis to* in v.2 is the Hellenistic equivalent of a subfinal *iva*, i.e., it shows the content of the verb of exhorting (Burton, 412). The negative *mn* is construed best not with *tachews* but with *saleuthnvai*, an admirably chosen word. Its root *salos* refers to a pitching, heaving ocean swell. A decade later Paul would urge the Ephesians to be mature, knowledgeable Christians, not infants “tossed back and forth by the waves and blown here and there by every wind of teaching” (Ep 4:14). The Thessalonians were losing their moorings, jarred loose from their *vous*, the calm, sensible composure which leads to intelligent analysis and decision making. They should neither be shaken up (aorist) nor in a continual state of alarm (present).

Paul lists three possible sources of confusion, none of which should mislead them; *dia pveumatos*, i.e., misinterpreting a *pveuma* (here meaning “prophetic message”) of Paul’s or listening to someone’s false claims of Spirit-revelation; *dia logou*, i.e., through word of mouth, regular teaching; or *dia epistolns ws di nmwv*, a spurious letter. Whether or not a false letter was circulating in Thessalonica is an arguable point; regardless, Paul in v.5 directs them to an infallible source of information: “Don’t you remember when I was with you I used to tell you these things?”

*ws oti* introduces the gist of the error disturbing them: “as if (saying) that the day of the Lord has (already) come.” They knew that the day of the Lord would be ushered in by the parousia; some might have been interpreting their persecutions as the final convulsions spoken of by Jesus in Mt 24:29-30, or some might have been despairing that they had somehow missed the whole thing. These false ideas were causing disturbances and hysteria (cf. the Millerites in 1844).

Vv. 3-4: “Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the apostasy occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He opposes and exalts himself over everything that is called God or worshiped, and even sets himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God.”

*Exapatnsn* is a rare use of the prohibitory subjunctive; the double negative *mn mndeva* reinforces Paul’s charge. The *parousia* of the Lord will come suddenly, like a thief in the night (1 Th 5:4), but certain things must happen first, things that Paul had already explained to them in person. The curious Greek which follows is an ellipsis, omitting an implied apodosis to a FMV condition: supply “That day will not come unless...”

Christians will be able to recognize the signs. First must come the apostasy (note the definite article). *Apostasia* here refers not to some challenge from outside the Church, but a rebellion and defection from within (Hb 3:12; Jesus’ prediction in Mt 24:10-13). Paul wrote to Timothy (1 Tm 4:1): “The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons.” There will be a massive falling away after the first gains of the apostolic age.

The next sign which Christians are to watch for is the revealing of the man of lawlessness (Note: although modern commentators and textual specialists prefer *tns avomias*, a wide and ancient selection of MSS reads *tns amartias*; the meaning is the same, but *avomias* in v.7 seems to support the former.) This man is characterized not as being without law, but as deliberately hostile to known law, to God’s Law. He is

rebelliousness personified and will lead the apostasy. He is characterized as the son of destruction; *uios* is a Hebraism (*ben-*) loosely used of anyone “belonging to, worthy of, destined for” (Moule, 175). Judas Iscariot is a type of this arch-rebel; in Jn 17:12 Jesus calls him a “son of destruction,” i.e., worthy of being destroyed. *Apwleia* here refers to eternal destruction in hell (Pp 3:19; Mt 7:13).

The lawless man is described as resisting, worse, as exalting himself over everything called God or worshiped- not only over all pagan gods and altars, but also over and against (i) the true God Himself. He blasphemously claims authority, worship, and honor that God reserved for Himself. *Wste*, actual result, is ascensive: “He even seats himself in the temple of God.” This is gross blasphemy indeed- this is not merely taking a seat in the temple courtyard (*ieros*) but in the sanctuary itself (*vaos*). The NT temple is the Christian Church found in Christian hearts (I Co 6:19; 11 Co 6:16; Ep 2:21). The lawless man sits down and stays put (aorist *kathisai*). He may claim to be doing this to worship God, but in reality he is usurping God’s throne and stealing God’s worship. There he proudly shows off (*apodeikvuvta*), passing himself off as God. (*Eautov* with *oti* is a mixed construction, showing the Hellenistic decay of the ACI in favor of *oti*).

*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 mystery of lawlessness is already at work; but only until the one who now holds (it) back is taken out of the way.”*

The adult instruction course in Thessalonica had included a pretty thorough section on eschatology; they should have known better than to suppose that Christ would come any day now. (Here, incidentally, is good advice when we are confronted with doctrinal unrest-abandon speculation, reason, and fashionable philosophy in favor of the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures. As Isaiah said, “To the Law and to the Testimony”).

The lawless man was at work already, and the Thessalonians knew what was restraining him, holding him back, from being publicly recognized. The mystery of lawlessness, the loathsome, rebellious power, was secretly growing in the young Church like a cancer, leading it to apostasy, but so far it was hidden, a mystery, to be revealed at the proper time (*kairos*). The subject of v.7b, *o katechwv* (which refers to the same thing as the neuter participle in v.6) appears before its conjunction *ews*. *Ek mesou gevntai* can be passive, “taken out of the way,” or active, “gets out of the way.” The idea is not that the mystery will work only until the restrainer is gone, but that it will work secretly only until the restrainer is out of the way, and then be revealed.

*V.8-10: “And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of His mouth and destroy by the splendor of His coming. The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs, and wonders, and in every sort of evil that deceived those that are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.”*

Just as Christ was revealed to mortals, so the antichristian lawless man will be revealed. At some time after that the Lord Jesus will overthrow him; *avairew* usually means to “slay violently, give the death blow.” *Pveuma* in v.8 probably means just “breath”; perhaps the picture is similar to that of Rv 1:16 where the one like a son of man has a sharp, double-edged sword coming out of his mouth. Is 11:4 describes the Lord as slaying the wicked with the breath of his lips. Most Lutheran commentators regard this quick, powerful, sharp sword as the Word of God.

Then the Lord will abolish him, utterly destroy him (*katargew* means “put an end to”). This seems to be a separate act, since different datives qualify the verbs. *Epiphaveia tns parousias* is pleonastic; perhaps *epiphaveia* connotes also splendor or brightness. This destruction will be visited by the Lord in person-this is the end of time. It is not the hollow showing off of the man of lawlessness, but a genuine display of divine glory and power.

The sequence of events is in classical prophetic form. Paul describes them without perspective, without specifying time. He says only that the mystery is already at work, that the restrainer will get out of the way, that the Lord Jesus will mortally wound the lawless man with his breath, and that he will utterly destroy him when he comes again.

In vv.9-12 Paul answers a vexing question: how this lawless man could wreak such havoc in Christ's kingdom.

First of all, although the lawless one does have a *parousia* (*ou* refers to *o avomos*) it was orchestrated by Satan himself. In his furious, raging desire to be God, Satan imitates God-since he can't work man's salvation through the Christ, he works man's damnation through an anti-Christ. To deceive as many as possible, Satan uses all his devilish powers (which are considerable) to prop up his agent. The lawless one appears with power, signs, and wonders (the three Greek words speak of the source, significance, and effect of the miracles), but, as the NIV correctly translates, all are counterfeit, all are lies. Yet, they will fool many; Jesus predicted that false signs and wonders would be used to deceive the elect, if that were possible (Mt 24:24).

Satan and his agent will pull out all the stops-every unrighteous deception that they know. Satan is a liar, the father of lies; he masquerades as an angel of light instead of the repulsive creature of darkness that he is, and his servants masquerade as righteous (2 Co 11:15). Paul foresees that the dirty work will have great success-many will perish eternally through the lawless one's false signs and unrighteous deceptions (*apollumevois* is a dative of disadvantage). In a sense, Satan and the lawless man are the cause of that perishing.

But in another sense, the damned have no one to blame but themselves because they refused to love the truth (*avth' wv* is causal). By willfully pushing themselves away from the truth, unbelievers push themselves into damning lies. Deliberate contempt for the truth of the Gospel will bring God's most fearful punishment: "You want to live without me? Have it your way, then." Vv.11-12 describe how God gives willful unbelievers what they want-he helps them believe Satan's lies the more, and thus those who love Satan's unrighteousness will be judged and condemned (cf. Ro 1:24; 2 Cr 18:22).

### Summary and Comparison

Let us summarize the eschatological insights which Paul gives us; the following will take place before the end comes:

1. A great apostasy will occur;
2. Lawlessness will work as a mystery at first because its prime mover is being restrained;
3. The restrainer will get out of the way and reveal the lawless man for what he is;
4. The Lord Jesus will deal him a death blow with his breath (Word);
5. The Lord Jesus will utterly destroy him when he comes again in glory.

The lawless man is characterized as follows:

1. He is a man of lawlessness and rebellion;
2. He is worthy of and destined for destruction;
3. He resists everything called God;
4. He exalts himself over and against everything called God and is worshiped;
5. He takes a seat in God's temple;
6. He proclaims himself to be God.

A reading of John's epistles should convince anyone that in 1 Jn 2, 1 Jn 4, and 2 Jn he is describing the same apostasy as Paul in 2 Thessalonians. Look at the similarities:

1. 1 Jn 2:18: “This is the last hour, and you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come (these “little antichrists” are part of the mystery of lawlessness which Paul speaks of).
2. 1 Jn 2:19: “They went out from us.”
3. 1 Jn 4:3: “This is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard is coming, and even now is already in the world.”
4. 2 Jn 7: “Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the Antichrist.”

The OT prophet Daniel in ch.7-11 describes the forces of Antichrist as the “King of the North.” Some of what he foretells refers to Antiochus Epiphanes, the Seleucid king who ordered swine sacrificed to Zeus in Jerusalem’s Temple. Antiochus was a type of the Great Antichrist to come, which explains the many similar-sounding phrases in the NT (Dn 7:8,25; 8:4,10,11,25,26; 11:31,36).

The Book of Revelation, too, describes the Antichrist, although its imagery is harder to interpret. The beasts of Rv 13 certainly do the work of the Antichrist; the head with the fatal wound that healed sounds like 2 Th 2:8. We see the blasphemy against God, the persecution of the saints, the stealing of God’s worship, the false signs deceiving many people. Consequently it seems clear that from these passages we may regard the lawless man and the Antichrist as the same.

### **Interpretation and Application**

Identifying the lawless man-Antichrist has caused a great deal of speculation among theologians. Guesses range from Caligula to Nero to a Nero Redivivus to some Christian heretic to the Jewish nation to Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin, Communism, Islam, and so forth. Millennialists generally prefer not to commit themselves, looking instead to a future man near the time of the rapture. It has always been the contention of Lutheran orthodoxy that the Antichrist was meant to be identified in history, and that overwhelming historical evidence points to only one possible identification: the Roman papacy, understood collectively.

Most of Protestant Christianity shrinks from such an interpretation; they cannot bring themselves to see the papacy in Paul’s and John’s harsh descriptions (Catholics identify the Antichrist with Luther). Judge for yourself; keep in mind Paul’s characterization in 2 Th 2 and consider the following:

1. The main point of identification: not only does the pope deny the central teaching of the Scripture, but he anathematizes it (*Decrees of the Council of Trent*, Session VI, Canons 9 and 11). The pope curses people who believe that God justifies people purely out of grace for Jesus’ sake. He elevates the shameful *opinio legis* to the central Roman teaching.
2. The pope arrogantly claims to be the earthly head of the invisible and visible church. He thus makes salvation dependent upon membership in his church (cf. Boniface VIII, *Unam Sanctam*).
3. The pope has elevated tradition and the magisterium above God’s written Word, thus making himself Scripture’s judge (“The Church gave birth to the Scripture, not vice versa”).
4. The pope arrogantly claims the right to formulate new articles of faith (as the Immaculate Conception in 1854 and the Holy Assumption in 1950) on the basis of the “shrine of my heart”.
5. The pope claims to speak infallibly in matters of faith and doctrine. In fact, the history of the Roman church is full of examples of the popes and bishops contradicting one another (cf. what happened to St. Christopher.)
6. The pope passes off human commandments as divine (eating meat, celibacy, vows). He thus increases sin and binds consciences.
7. The pope blasphemously claims power not only over this life but over the next as well with his indulgences, purgatory, treasury of merits, transubstantiation.

8. The pope has always been fascinated by temporal power and has mixed church and state to the detriment of the church's message to the world. Even today the Vatican is deeply involved in world politics.
9. The pope insults Christ and cheapens his work of salvation by fostering faith in and reliance on Mary and the saints.
10. The pope encourages people's fascination with relics and superstition instead of directing them to the one sure source of forgiveness, help, and comfort.

Franz Pieper said (quoted in Lenski, p.435):

“From my own experience I must confess that in my own conscience I was not vitally convinced that the pope is the Antichrist until, on the one hand, I realized what the doctrine of justification is and what its significance is for the church, and on the other hand, that the papacy has its real essence in denying and cursing the doctrine of justification and by its show of piety and its claim to be the only saving church binds to itself men's consciences.”

We may now identify the great historical stages to which Paul refers in 2 Th 2:

- A. The mystery of lawlessness. This refers to the seeds of the papal heresy which were growing already during the apostolic age. Many little antichrists were at work. The Roman bishop, however, was restrained in his claims.
- B. The Antichrist is revealed. This is subject to some discussion; the restrainer is variously held to be the Holy Spirit, Paul, the Christians' spiritual knowledge, or the Roman empire. In my opinion, the latter interpretation seems to have the most merit. It is only God, of course, who is powerful enough to muzzle Satan and his agents, but God uses people and events to accomplish his will. When the Roman empire began to disintegrate, the danger of persecution in the empire diminished and the Roman bishop was rid of a political rival. Although after the fall the Roman bishop gained enormously in prestige and power, in general Caesaropapism was a terrible curse for the Christian Church.
- C. Jesus slays the Antichrist with his breath. Could this not refer to Luther's Reformation, in which the pope's monopoly over Christendom was dealt a mortal blow by the Word?
- D. Jesus destroys the Antichrist. This will occur when he comes again in person to judge the quick and the dead. All the lies and blasphemy will be consumed.

### **The Doctrine of the Antichrist as a Lutheran Article of Faith**

It might be interesting to close by taking a very cursory look at some of the historical interpretations of the Antichrist. The early church fathers generally regarded the Antichrist as a person, but Augustine concluded that it could well be a collective reference. The idea slowly grew, silently and furtively, that it was the papacy; it was becoming more evident by the 11th Century. The Waldensians, Savonarola, and the Hussites all labeled the pope as the Antichrist, and Wyclif especially harshly criticized Rome.

Luther's attitude is quite well known among us. His suspicions grew more certain until in 1520 he publicly called Leo the Antichrist in “To the Christian Nobility,” “The Babylonian Captivity,” “Against the Execrable Bull of Antichrist,” and later his most vitriolic attack of all, “*Das Papstum zu Rom vom Teufel gestiftet.*”

The Lutheran Confessions name the papacy as the Antichrist in the Smalcald Articles, Part 11, Art.II, 25, and in Art.IV, 10-14; in the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, 39-41, 57; and in the Apology, XV, 18-19, and in XXIV, 97-98. Zwingli, Calvin, and Beza agreed, and the Westminster Confession has a section on the Antichrist in ch. 25. The orthodox Lutheran theologians were unanimous in regarding the papacy as the Antichrist.

In the United States the ALC followed its Iowa Synod background and left it an open question, although the *Chicago Theses* of 1928 do mention it as a matter of historical judgment. Missouri followed Luther for most of its history; the *Brief Statement* of 1932, for instance, clearly presented the teaching of the Confessions. *The Common Confession* of 1952, which Missouri and the ALC signed, however, included a wishy-washy statement that could be interpreted according to the wishes of the reader.

The Wisconsin position has remained identical to that of the Confessions, as the 1954 Tract #9, the 1959 Doctrinal Statements booklet, and numerous *Quarterly* and *NWL* articles attest. May that firm allegiance to the Gospel and its material principle of justification *sola gratia, sola fide, propter Christum* always characterize our Synod.

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