

“Early Edition”
2 Thessalonians 2
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Christianity uses language that describes a day to come when the Jesus of past history will again come to this earth in a literal physical way.

The Bible describes the Jesus who was born in Bethlehem, Israel, the bi-vocational carpenter/preacher from Nazareth of Galilee, that man who was sentenced to die under the Roman governor Pilate literally coming to this earth again.

The Bible describes it in terms of physical clouds in the sky, cacophonous sounds of trumpet and shout, mighty angels, and the descending of a literal physical person in awesome majestic splendor, to a hilltop near Jerusalem.

Does that get a little too fantastic for you?

What do you do with the Bible’s information about a Second Coming of Jesus?

How do you massage those biblical pictures into your own beliefs?

How have you made them more compatible with what you think is reality?

Have you managed over the years to create two compartments in your mind?

In one compartment is your church language including the rather fantastical images in the Bible about the Second Coming of Jesus?

And in the other compartment are your less literal beliefs, the beliefs you would be willing to express in your university classroom or in the lunch-room at work – your rather vague beliefs in some kind of supreme power and some mystical spiritual dimension beyond death?

After all, outside of church, speaking about a literal physical return of Jesus is a little like admitting you believe in aliens and UFOs.

Is it possible that some of us have toned down the rhetoric of Scripture to the point that the Second Coming of Jesus is largely irrelevant to our lives?

And if we have, what is the result?

Look please in your Bible at 2 Thessalonians chapter two.

Through the Apostle Paul's preaching and teaching a church had begun in the important Greek city of Thessalonica.

No sooner had the church begun, however, than Paul was forced out of the city by those opposed to Christianity.

Paul kept in touch with the new church by letter and by sending his associate Timothy to help them.

In what we know as his first letter to them (1 Thessalonians), Paul taught them more about the coming again of Jesus that he had shared with them while with them.

But apparently Paul wasn't the only one influencing these new Christians.

Someone else, claiming he was Paul, was teaching these new believers **that Jesus had already come again.**

Now it's hard for me to understand how they could believe that Jesus had already come again since Paul had been so clear, in his first letter, about what that second coming would be like.

1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 "For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.

The only way I can imagine they could believe Jesus **had** already come was if they were convinced that the Second Coming was not literal.

And if he had already come, even in some spiritual sense, why were their lives unchanged?

They were being persecuted, they were experiencing trials and difficulties in life – but nothing had changed.

The result was that some were unsettled or alarmed.

We aren't told **exactly what was unsettling about this** but I think it is easy to surmise.

I think being told that Jesus had already come again, coupled with what they were still experiencing, **challenged their whole belief system.**

When Jesus came again, things were supposed to be put right.

When Jesus came, things would change.

But Jesus had come again, so they were told, and nothing changed.

Maybe their whole belief system was wrong.

Maybe they didn't belong to God.

They became immediately insecure in their relationship with God.

Maybe they began to have grave doubts about whether they were truly Christians.

I don't think there are many today who are suggesting that Jesus has already come back.

Yes, one cult teaches that Jesus came back secretly in 1874, then they changed it to 1914.

But more likely any confusion today, about the Second Coming of Jesus, centers more on esoteric arguments about the timing of the coming of Jesus **or a lack of conviction about his coming at all.**

We may argue about the details of pretribulation rapture versus mid or post tribulation rapture or premillennialism versus amillennialism but in truth many think and live as if they don't expect Jesus to come back, not in their lifetime.

And some of us live as if it will **never** happen.

Our sights have dropped from the lofty vision of the literal physical return of Jesus to a vague concept we affirm in the apostles' creed but with no meaning or muscle in our everyday lives.

Or worse yet our vision has dropped to this life only – with no confidence in what is to come, no building of our lives around the future, just living in and for the present.

But with that can come a severe unsettledness about our relationship with God.

If the Second Coming of Jesus is not literal than what else of what I believe is uncertain?

There is still enough logic left in us, even in the postmodern mind, that we are haunted by the idea that if we remove the foundation, the whole building may crumble.

- that if we reject certain ideas from the Bible, we have undermined all of them,
- that if we call certain things into question, we have nothing left of which we may be certain.

From the oldest book in the Bible to the most recent the recurring theme is that **a day is coming** when God will physically come to this earth bringing history to a close with the judgment of punishment and reward.

Job 19:25-26 “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God..”

Matthew 24:30-31 “At that time ...They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect...”

Revelation 19:11ff “I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war...And his name is the Word of God.”

In his first letter to the Thessalonians Paul had described the Second Coming of Jesus in very literal and very public terms.

The whole of Scripture describes it that way.

If Jesus has already come again and we didn't even notice it, what about us?

What do we have that is certain?

It is that uncertainty, that unsettledness, that temptation to wonder if anything is true truth, literal truth, which Paul wants to counter.

Listen to his words in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-17 READ

“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.

Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will 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. 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. 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 deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. 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.

But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you 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 then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter. 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.”

There was and maybe still is a television program called “Early Edition”.

If I recall accurately, the theme was a man who received the newspaper account of events several hours before the events happened.

And with that “early edition” information he set out to change the outcome.

The Apostle Paul gives the Thessalonian Christians and us an “Early Edition”.

He lets us see into the future, not so we can change events, but **so we can know with certainty what will happen** and be encouraged and confident in the present.

Look again at how he ended this section of his letter:

2 Thessalonians 2:15-17 “So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter. 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.”

Paul expected God to use this information to encourage their hearts and empower them in their Christian lives.

He is concerned about what they think and believe and how that affects their emotional and spiritual welfare.

If they are going to make it through this life, with its sometimes and maybe **often** difficulties, then they need to know the truth.

Paul teaches that the return of Jesus won't occur until three things happen:

1 Thessalonians 2:3, 6-7 “Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day **will not come** until **the rebellion occurs** and **the man of lawlessness is revealed**...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**. And then the lawless one will be revealed...”

1. V3 A rebellion occurs.
2. V3 The man of lawlessness is revealed.
3. V6 And whatever holds him back now is taken out of the way.
Of that last one, I am convinced after reading scholars from 1200 years ago to the present, that we do not know what Paul was referring to.

Obviously the Thessalonians did.

But it is important to note that Paul’s message is not hindered by our ignorance on this point.

Paul wants us to know that only after these things happen will Jesus most definitely come again.

2 Thessalonians 2:8 “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**.”

Paul’s point is that Jesus **cannot possibly have already come again** because certain things must happen first **and these things will be very obvious to believers**.

But doesn’t that contradict Jesus’ teaching that “no one knows the day or hour of his Second Coming” and Paul’s teaching that Jesus’ Second Coming will be “like a thief in the night”?

NO Paul doesn’t not contradict Jesus or himself.

It is true that no one knows the precise timing of Jesus’ return but Jesus himself made it clear that **we can read the signs** and know when his return is near.

In Matthew 24:30ff Jesus described what will happen before he comes again. He closed his remarks with these words, “Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door.”

That’s what Paul is doing for the Thessalonians – he is reminding them of the events that will occur **before** Jesus returns.

But what about Paul saying that Jesus' return will be like a "thief in the night"?

Yes, it is true that unbelievers will be caught unawares but in that same teaching Paul says you believers won't be caught by surprise:

1 Thess 5:4 "you are not in the darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief."

Just as with Jesus and the Apostle John, so Paul wanted believers to know what was going to happen.

They were not to be kept in the dark.

The Second Coming of Jesus would not catch them by surprise BECAUSE very definite things would happen.

Things that the New York Times and CNN would report – real time and space events.

Now it is a little frustrating to us reading this letter because we aren't here given all the information the Thessalonians had.

Paul wrote, 2 Thessalonians 2:5 "Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things?"

For us it's a little like listening to one side of a telephone conversation.

We don't know what the other person is saying or already knows.

So there are a number of things about which we can't be certain but **that uncertainty in some things leaves us in no doubt about the main teaching of the passage.**

While we are not here told much about the rebellion, we are told something about this "man of lawlessness" that would come.

2 Thessalonians 2:3-4, 9-10 "Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will 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... 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 deceives those who are perishing.”

Before Jesus comes again, a person will rise on the world scene and become so powerful that he will proclaim himself God.

And his dominance will be accompanied by all kinds of supernatural powers so that all non-Christians are deceived.

John, describing this in the book of Revelation, had a vision in which he sees **two beasts** joining forces with the dragon/Satan to accomplish Satan’s ends.

The first beast had political, governmental, military power.

Revelation 13:1-2 "And the dragon stood on the shore of the sea. And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. He had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on his horns, and on each head a blasphemous name.

In the Bible, “Horn’s, heads and crowns” always symbolized power and authority.

And from whom does this beast derive his power?

Revelation 12:2b “The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority.”

This last great government gets its authority from Satan himself - this government is under Satan’s direct control.

Some refer to this beast as the “antichrist”.

And this beast certainly fits the **descriptions Daniel and Paul give** of a coming person **and that Jesus predicts** would come at the end of the age.

The word “anti” in “antichrist” means both “opposed to” and “instead of”.

When we look at this beast we see that he certainly does both:

His task is to oppose Christ and Christ’s people and he certainly presents himself as God - “instead of” the real God.

He takes names for himself that belong to God alone

Not only does he take God's names but he mimics the death/resurrection of Jesus.

Revelation 13:3 "One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed."

And thirdly he takes the worship that belongs to God alone.

In Rev 13:4b "They also worshiped the beast and asked "Who is like the beast?" "Who can make war against him?" – phrases used in the OT of God alone.

It seems consistent then, with other Scriptures, to refer to this beast as the antichrist or as Paul refers to him in our text, "The man of lawlessness."

Consistent with Paul's description of this man of lawlessness having miraculous powers, listen to John in Revelation 13:11ff.

"Then I saw another beast, coming out of the earth. He had two horns like a lamb, but he spoke like a dragon. He exercised all the authority of the first beast on his behalf, and made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed. And he performed great and miraculous signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to earth in full view of men. Because of the signs he was given power to do on behalf of the first beast, he deceived the inhabitants of the earth.

What is Paul's point in describing the "man of lawlessness"?

This will not be a secret thing happening in the world.

This will be obvious and pervasive.

No one will miss it.

Having described what must happen first, **Paul then gets to what I think in the major point of this passage:**

Then Jesus will come!

2 Thessalonians 2:1 "Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him..."

Notice the two things of which Paul speaks:

1. The coming of our Lord Jesus AND
2. Our being gathered to him.

In 1 Thessalonians 4 Paul spent time describing both of these in some detail.

1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 “For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.

Now in our text for today he once again speaks clearly of the majestic and public coming again of Jesus.

2 Thessalonians 2:8 “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.**”

Jesus spoke clearly of these same two issues in Matthew 24:27,30-31

“For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be **the coming of the Son of Man** (meaning it is obvious to all)...At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will **gather his elect** from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.

If everyone will notice the evil reign of the man of lawlessness, then believe Paul, everyone will notice the coming of Jesus.

It will be so obvious that no one will miss it – everyone will either run in terror or welcome him as saving-Lord.

Now lastly we come again to WHY Paul told them all of this.

Don't get fooled into thinking and living as if the Second Coming of Jesus is only some vague spiritual idea.

Thinking that way will **undermine everything else you believe**
AND will eventually **leave you doubting your very**
relationship to God.

Paul concludes his remarks in this section with a resounding affirmation of the Thessalonians' relationship with God.

It is as if he says, "Don't forget who you are!"

2 Thessalonians 2:13-15 "But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you 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.

Two affirmations:

The first in verse 13: "God chose you, from the beginning, to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

"God chose you" – Paul is speaking of God's election of them.

God's choice of them was no recent invention.

God is not taken by surprise when someone receives his grace.

God chooses from the beginning.

Do you not realize that your relationship to God is by his choice and is as old as creation? Talk about security!

The second affirmation is in verse 14: "God called you to this through our gospel, (so) that you might share in the glory of our Lord..."

You, believers have been called by God to share in that awesome day when Jesus comes again in a public display of his unlimited power and majesty.

Every teaching of the Bible on this subject says **we will be there!**
We will be with him and we will see him in all his power.
And we will share in his glory - the whole world will see
whose side we are on.

Our “blessed hope”, what we look forward to most, is **not** our soul’s
spiritual presence with Jesus when we die.

What we look forward to most is **not** a secret rapture.

What we look forward to most is **the coming again of
Jesus as King of kings and Lord of lords.**

If we die before that day or if we are still alive when
he comes, we will be either resurrected or changed
instantly and we will be with King Jesus forever.

Does the truth of Christ’s return energize our personal lives and our
lives together as God’s people still in this world?

Does it energize our church?

Do we live as expectant people?

Paul doesn’t want these Thessalonians to lose heart, to become
discouraged.

What he does is remind them of what they have already heard
from him – Jesus is coming, there is **a sequence of events
that they can know**, AND **they can know that they are
included** among those who are chosen, called and saved by
God.