

Study 9: 2nd Thessalonians Chapter 2

Introduction

The second chapter of the second letter is in some respects one of the most perplexing of the New Testament. Paul elaborates on some things that he has told them about whilst he was there (of which we are not privy to). He describes some events that were evident to the Thessalonians at the time, but we are left to guess what those events were.

Body of the Study

The Lord's return

The falling away

The man of sin

Characteristics of the man of sin

State of the Thessalonians

Benediction

Homework and preparation for next week:

- *Think through the possibilities of who the man of sin might be. Paul describes the characteristics, and some possibilities can be eliminated because they do not fit the description.*
- *How can we ensure that we are not deceived by the man of sin? What do we need to do? How do we go about it?*
- Read the notes as a review of the study.
- Read chapter 3 in preparation for the next study.

Notes for study 9: Chapter 2

Introduction

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Body of the Study

The Lord's return

Paul has given some details of the sequence of events at the Lord's return in the previous chapter, and he now addresses the things that will lead up to that event. Introducing the discussion, he instructs them "...not to become easily unsettled or alarmed..." (2:2:2 NIV). There was much speculation then (just as there is today) that the Lord was going to return soon. People were making prophecies about the time of the return, and some were even saying that Paul had given them instruction on the matter. However, Paul says that he gave no such instruction, and neither does the Holy Spirit "...some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us..." (2:2:2 NIV). It is indeed foolishness to attempt to speculate (and purport as knowledge) something that has been hidden from the angels in heaven (Mt 24:36).

Some of them were "...saying that the day of the Lord has already come..." (2:2:2 NIV). This clearly could not have been the case, since the earth still existed and had not been burned up (2 Pet 3:10). [However, we need to remember here that whilst these things are (or ought to be) plain to us because we have *perfect* knowledge, the New Testament was not yet written and the knowledge that the brethren had was only *partial*]. Those who said the Lord had already come, must have inferred that they had missed out on their place in heaven. To clear up this whole matter, Paul gives explicit description of some of the events that will precede the Lord's return.

The two precedents for His return were:

"...that day will not come unless the falling away comes first..."

"...and, the man of sin is revealed..." (2:2:3 NKJV)

The falling away

What was the falling away? When did (or when will) it happen? How will we know?

A closer look at the two phenomena accompanying the day of the Lord illuminates the characteristics of that day. "The rebellion" represents apostasia (GK G686), from which the English word apostasy comes. This word points to a deliberate abandonment of a former professed position. Attempts to identify the apostasy with some past or present movement are futile because of its contextual association with the Lord Jesus' second advent (v. 1). Other passages in Scripture likewise anticipate a defection of professing Christians (see Mt 24:11-12, 24; 1Ti 4:1ff.; 2Ti 3:1-5; 4:3-4; 2Pe 2:1-22; 3:3-6; Jude 17-18). (NIVBC)

Equally, the falling away from the true religion of Christ was a desertion of God. We only have to look at church history to see that many changes to the structure and organisation of the church had come about by the second or third centuries. Once this falling away had happened, then the way was open for the entrance of *the man of sin*.

The man of sin

There are several possibilities as to who the man of sin that Paul refers to might be. Many writers believe that it was the establishment of the Roman Catholic church. Others believe that it is the rise of Islam, or Emperor worship under Roman rule. Keep these ideas in mind, and let us look at what Paul says about the description of the man of sin.

Of course, the man of sin was a workman of Satan. He did not originate from God, in fact quite the opposite. He is described as “...*the son of perdition...*” (2:2:3 NKJV), or “...*the man doomed to destruction...*” (NIV).

He is in an exalted position, and one that demands worship. He “...*opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshipped...*” (2:2:4 NKJV). To worship him is like worshipping God “...*so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God...*” (2:2:4 NKJV). This description could equally apply to any of the three situations described above – Emperor worship, Papal worship, or worship of Mohamed. The reference to the Temple here could be a literal reference that would demand that the Temple be rebuilt before the Lord’s return – and many people teach such. However it could also just be a reference to the exalted position of this person in the religious realm, and is a common reference by Paul for the church (1 Cor 3:16-17; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:21).

Paul reiterates that the Thessalonians should have been aware of these things, and the current thinking and questioning should not have come about “...*Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things?...*” (2:2:5 NIV). Unfortunately we are not privileged to the discussion and explanation that Paul gave them.

The beginning of these events must have started very close to the first century. Paul says that there were some things that were stopping the man of lawlessness from being established “...*and now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time...*” (2:2:6 NIV). Notice that Paul says that the restraining forces are *evident* to the Thessalonians – they could *see* the things that were stopping him from establishing himself. Paul emphasises this even further “...*for the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only He who now restrains will do so...*” (2:2:7 NKJV). This lawlessness is what Paul has described as *the falling away*. The attempts by the Judaisers to bind the Law of Moses on the Christians, as well as the world invading the church as emphasised in the Corinthian letters and Colossians is evidence of this falling away beginning to happen, and not very long after the Thessalonian letters.

After these things have occurred, “...*then the lawless one will be revealed...*” (2:2:8) and he will continue to have effect until “...*the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming...*” (2:2:8 NIV). So, *the man of sin* will begin his reign soon after the first century, and will continue that reign until the Lord returns to overthrow him.

Characteristics of the man of sin

Paul describes the characteristics that the man of sin will exhibit. It will be “...*according to the working of Satan...*” (2:2:9 NKJV). He is not Satan, but rather a messenger whom Satan uses his position to accomplish Satan’s objectives of *opposing and exalting himself above all that is called God* (2:2:4). He will come “...*with all power, signs, and lying wonders...*” (2:2:8 NKJV) so that he is able to *appear* to perform miracles. From all appearance, he really does look like that he has the power and authority, but it is all deception.

He will engage “...*in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing...*” (2:2:10 NIV). Notice that what he is doing is *deception*. Those who are following him will be thinking that he is real (*He as God, sits in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God* 2:2:4) but it is all false. The signs that he performs may look real, but they are all false.

So, why do people follow him, and why do they believe? Paul answers the question “...*because they did not receive the love of the truth that they might be saved...*” (2:2:10 NKJV). If the

followers of the man of sin really had a love of the truth, then they would know that what is being shown is false. The problem is, that they just do not recognise the truth, and they really don't *want* to know it. There is a double meaning here – if we have a love of the truth, then we love the things that God has revealed in the New Testament, and we want to know what it is that God has revealed, and test them (1:5:21). But, Jesus said, I am the way, *the truth*, and the life (Jn 14:6). So, if we really know Jesus, then we will really know God, and we will not be deceived by the man of sin. It is a characteristic of scripture (ie one of the things that makes scripture *scripture*) that both of these meaning apply fully and equally.

Because they do not love the truth, “...*for this reason, God will send them a strong delusion, that they should believe the lie...*” (2:2:11 NKJV). The strong delusion is the threefold *power, signs, and lying wonders* that Paul has already discussed (2:2:9). The reason that people believe these things is because they do not love the truth, and have not tested them to find out if they really are true.

Those who follow these things “...*all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness...*” (2:2:12 NIV). God is right and righteous in condemning them because of their unrepented wickedness.

State of the Thessalonians

The Thessalonians were not among those who were being (or would be) deceived, as they had proved the things that were taught, and held onto what was found to be true (1:5:21). Consequently Paul marks a contrast with them “...*But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you...*” (2:2:12 NKJV). They were mostly Gentiles, and God had from the beginning, determined that both Jews and Gentiles should be saved through the blood of Christ as God's chosen people. “...*God has chosen you as firstfruits for salvation in consecration by the Spirit, and in the belief of the truth...*” (2:2:13 McCord).

This calling and election did not come as an arbitrary selection, but “...*He called you by our gospel...*” (2:2:14 NKJV).

Because of their state with God, Paul instructs them to “...*stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle...*” (2:2:15 NKJV).

Benediction

Paul closes this section of the letter by thanking God for them, and encouraging them to be comforted, and to continue in the things that they taught and practised.