

# The Revelation of the Man of Sin

by John F. Walvoord

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*The sermon explains that the Day of the Lord cannot come until there is a widespread departure from the true faith, the revelation of the man of sin, and the removal of the Holy Spirit.*

**Scripture:** 2 Thessalonians 2:3

**Topics:** "Eschatology", "Apostasy"

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## Description

John F. Walvoord preaches on the rise of false teaching in the Thessalonian church, addressing the confusion caused by the false belief that they were already in the Day of the Lord. Paul reassures them that certain events, like the apostasy and the revealing of the man of sin, must occur before the Day of the Lord begins. The man of sin, characterized by opposition to God, will deceive many with signs and wonders, leading them to damnation. The urgency of preaching the gospel is emphasized, highlighting the importance of trusting in Christ before the Day of the Lord arrives.

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## Transcript

2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

The Rise of False Teaching

The second chapter of 2 Thessalonians is one of the great prophetic chapters of the Scripture. No other chapter in the entire Bible covers precisely the same points of revelation that are given here.

The occasion for the new revelation was the rise of false teaching in the Thessalonian church. Because of their persecutions, some of the Thessalonians had begun to wonder whether they were not already in the Day of the Lord, the predicted time of divine judgment. If so, they realized that they were already in the time of tribulation, from which they had been promised deliverance in 1 Thessalonians 5. In answer to this false teaching, Paul not only gives them assurance that they are not in this period, but he also gives them definite signs, the character of which cannot occur while the church is still in the world.

In the opening verses of the chapter, this problem is considered: "Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him, that ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand." Practically all scholars agree that a better translation of the closing phrase is, "that the day of the Lord is now present." In other words, they had been taught by someone that they were already in the Day

of the Lord, that this fearful period of divine judgment had already overtaken them. This troubled them because it was not what Paul had taught them earlier.

### The Alleged Revelation

The false teaching that had come to them by one of the three methods is mentioned in verse 2, by "spirit," "word," or "letter as from us." Some of them had claimed that the Spirit of God had revealed this to them as a special revelation. Paul flatly contradicts this as a teaching of God. He also denies that he had sent any word orally to this effect.

Further, he declares that he had not written it to them in a letter, "nor by letter as from us." Apparently, they had received a forged letter which claimed to be from the Apostle Paul, teaching that they were already in the Day of the Lord. He said in effect, "I did not write such a letter." The letter, if it was written, must have been a forgery. The teaching that they were then in the Day of the Lord is therefore labeled as false doctrine and their fears of being in this awful period are shown to be groundless.

### What Is the Day of the Lord?

In order to understand the nature of the error Paul is correcting, it is necessary to define what is meant by the "day of the Lord." This expression is found often in the Bible. In a word, it is the period of time predicted in the Scripture when God will deal directly with human sin. It includes the tribulation time preceding the second advent of Christ as well as the whole millennial reign of Christ. It will culminate in the judgment of the great white throne. The Day of the Lord is therefore an extended period of time lasting over one thousand years. This is brought out in the events included in the Day of the Lord, presented in connection with the study of 1 Thessalonians 5.

Our present time is a day of grace. God is not attempting in our day to deal directly with human sin. He may impose judgment in some cases; but there are many wicked people who flourish, who have health and wealth; they may succeed in business, even though they are not Christians and are not honoring the Lord. The Lord is not attempting to straighten that out now. This is a day of grace. The purpose of God in this day is to proclaim His grace, that souls may be saved by trusting in Christ and receiving God's gift of grace.

In the Day of the Lord, however, God will deal directly with human sin. The Scripture clearly presents the fact that the Day of the Lord is a day of divine judgment upon the world. In the Day of the Lord Christ will rule with a rod of iron over the entire earth (Ps. 2:9; Rev. 2:27). He shall administer absolute justice (Isa. 11:1-9). In that day also Israel will be regathered (Isa. 11:10-12) and brought into the blessed peace of the millennial kingdom (Zeph. 3:14-20). In a word, there is a time of divine judgment coming, the Day of the Lord, in which God will deal directly with this wicked world.

### Were the Thessalonians Already in the Day of the Lord?

The question which faced the Thessalonians, however, was whether their present sufferings were evidence that they were in this predicted period. Paul is answering this question in effect, "No, you are not going to enter that period. The Lord will come for you first."

In order to make this particular doctrine clear, some of the things that occur at the beginning of the Day of the Lord are revealed. Because these events had not taken place, it demonstrated that the Day of the Lord had not yet begun.

The Thessalonians could not be in the Day of the Lord because certain things had to happen first. Accordingly, Paul writes in verse 3: "Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition."

### The Predicted Departure From the Faith

Two things are mentioned in verse 3 as necessarily occurring before the Day of the Lord and the time of judgment can begin. The first thing that is mentioned is "the falling away," and the word translated literally is "the apostasy," which means a falling away or a departure in a doctrinal sense. Our English word apostasy comes from the very Greek word used here. Paul is writing them, then, that this Day of the Lord cannot come until there is a widespread departure from the true faith in God. Some have understood this "departure" to be the departure of the church itself--that is, the rapture. If so, it would definitely place the rapture before the tribulation. Most expositors have understood it as doctrinal departure, that is, apostasy.

At the time 2 Thessalonians was written there were, no doubt, some errors in the church, but there was no apostasy in the ordinary sense of the term. The churches were still true to the Lord. Paul is declaring that the Day of the Lord cannot come until there is a departure from the faith first. The Scriptures speak often of this coming apostasy. In 2 Timothy 3:13, it is revealed: "Evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived." Again in 2 Timothy 4:3-4, it is declared: "The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables." The Scriptures, then, predict that before this time of judgment can come, there must come first a turning away from true faith in God on the part of the professing church.

In the twentieth century the situation is entirely different than it was for the Thessalonian church. Today there is widespread apostasy. The sad fact is that there are many who are not preaching the true gospel and, moreover, are denying the central doctrines of our Christian faith. Some are teaching that Christ is only a man, that He did not rise from the dead, that salvation is not through His shed blood, and that He is not coming again. They deny that the Scriptures are the Word of God, and turn instead to some other forms of teaching. To a certain degree, apostasy is already here.

### The Coming of the Man of Sin

The Scriptures indicate, however, that this present stage of turning away from the truth is just the beginning. It will culminate in that period called the Day of the Lord. The record declares that "that day shall not come except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition." In other words, apostasy which today is general is going to become specific. It will be headed up in the particular person mentioned here as the "man of sin" or a man of lawlessness--a man who is opposed to God. He is called "man of sin" because this is his chief characteristic. Just as we refer to Christ as the "man of sorrows" because He was a man who had endured much sorrow, so this person is a man of sin. His very life is characterized by blasphemous sin against God.

The verses which follow describe the nature of that sin: "Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God." Many believe that this is a reference to the future world dictator, the beast out of the sea of Revelation 13. Others believe it is a reference to the false prophet (Rev. 13:10-18; 19:20), who is associated with him. In either case, the apostasy is embodied in a man who has not yet appeared. The Day of the Lord, therefore, could not have come because this evil person has not yet been revealed.

In verse 5 Paul adds this word: "Remember ye not, that when I was yet with you, I told you these things?" One of the remarkable facts about the Thessalonian church was that Paul had taught them so much in so short a time. When Paul came to Thessalonica, there was not a single Christian there. When he left Thessalonica after only three weeks of ministry, a small church had been formed. He had not only led them to Christ, but he had taught them some of the deep things of the prophetic word. Now he reminds them of it. Paul writes: "Remember ye not, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things?"

### The Restrainer

In verse 6 another reason is given why they were not in the Day of the Lord: "And now ye know what withholdeth that he might be revealed in his time." The "he" refers back to this man of sin. The statement of verse 6 declares that there is something holding back the revelation of this man of sin. An obstacle is in the way which had to be removed before the Day of the Lord could begin.

In verses 7-8 the explanation is given: "For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let [or as is translated in modern English, 'He who now restrains will restrain'], until he be taken out of the way. And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming."

The "Wicked" one in verse 8 is another reference to the man of sin. He can be revealed only when that which restrains his manifestation is taken away.

What is being referred to in this passage as the one who restrains? In verse 6 the restrainer is described as an indefinite thing, "that which withholdeth" or "that which holds back." In verse 7 the restrainer is described as "he"--"only there is one that restraineth now, until he be taken out of the way" A.S.V.). The record seems to imply that this must be a person, but who is this person? Expositors have had a good deal of difficulty deciding just what is meant. Even the best of Bible scholars who honor the Word of God do not necessarily agree on the identity of the restrainer. Many explanations have been offered.

One interpretation is that the man of sin was Nero, the Roman emperor. He was so evil that he was restrained by Seneca until Nero contrived to have Seneca put out of the way. Then, of course, Nero was released and could do as he pleased. He burned many Christians at the stake and brought much persecution on the church. But evidently this explanation is not correct. The things which should follow the Day of the Lord, such as the second coming of Christ, have not occurred since. The man of sin could not have been Nero and the restrainer could not have been Seneca.

One honored scholar says the restrainer is Satan--that Satan is the one who is restraining evil. His idea is that Satan is holding back evil in its true character and that restraint will be removed in the time of the tribulation and then sin will be revealed in its true picture. There may be some truth in the fact that Satan does not always manifest sin in its real nature, as he is sometimes "transformed into an angel of light" (2 Cor. 11:14). Certainly the Bible does not teach that Satan actually restrains sin. The Bible from Genesis to Revelation teaches exactly the opposite. Satan is revealed as doing all the evil he can. Furthermore, Satan is not taken away during the tribulation when evil reaches its peak. This interpretation, likewise, is not correct.

Another very popular explanation is that the restrainer refers to the law and order which came out of the Roman government. The Roman government was evil in many ways, but it did preserve a certain amount of law and order. Adherents of this view visualized the removal of law and order in the tribulation period

with the result that restraint of evil is taken away. They believe that the wicked one will be revealed then and sin will be brought out into the open. But this explanation is also inadequate. While the Day of the Lord is a very evil period, it will be a period of rigid government. There will be regimentation in that day such as we in America have never known. A government permit will be required to go to the grocery store and buy, and a government permit will be needed before one can sell. Government will not be removed in the tribulation. Human government will reach its peak of authority and power during this time. This explanation does not seem to fit the passage either.

### The Restrainer Is the Holy Spirit

Who is it, after all, that really restrains sin? The answer found in the Bible is that God is the one who restrains sin. In Genesis 6:3 it is declared that the Spirit of God was restraining sin in the days of Noah. It was predicted that instead of striving with sin God would judge it in the flood.

In the Book of Job it is recorded that Satan wanted to afflict Job, but God had built a hedge about him. Satan testified that he was restrained by God from trying Job. When Satan accused Job of serving God because God had been so good to him, God took down part of the hedge and permitted Satan to take away all of Job's property and all of his children in one day. He left Job only his wife and his own life. When the Lord called Satan's attention to Job's faithfulness in affliction, Satan said it was because God had preserved Job's health. Then God permitted Satan to afflict Job's body, but not to take his life. Satan then brought severe physical affliction upon Job, and Job was in torment in his body. But in it all Satan could not go any further than God permitted him. Satan was restrained by God Himself.

It would not be possible for any believer to do any work for God if it were not for God's protecting hand. It is God who restrains. God may use varying means. He may use the government which maintains a certain amount of law and order. In the end, it is God who does it. It is God who provides protection for the Christian.

More specifically, in this present age it is the Spirit of God who provides protection. As it is revealed in Genesis 6:3, the Spirit of God strives with men and opposes Satan and his program and his hatred of the children of God.

While the Holy Spirit has always worked in times past, on the Day of Pentecost the Spirit of God came in a special way. Christ, who had always existed and was always present in the world, came into the world, was born of the Virgin Mary, and in a special sense left the world when He ascended and went back to heaven, even though He said, "Lo, I am with you always." So also the Spirit of God came on the Day of Pentecost and now indwells the church and is present in the world. The Spirit will return to heaven at the rapture.

The most natural explanation of the taking away of the restrainer is to identify this particular action with the time when Christ will come to take out His church. If the Spirit of God indwells the church and the church is taken out of the world, then the Spirit of God will also be taken out of the world. This does not mean that the Spirit will not continue working in the world in some way; but it will mean a reversal of Pentecost. Just as the Spirit came on Pentecost, so He will leave when Christ takes the church out of the world.

The very removal of both the church and the Spirit from the world will release the world to sin as it never has before. The presence of believers in the world exerts a great influence upon the wicked world. Christians who have stood for civic righteousness and law and order will no longer be in evidence. For the

time being at least, there will be no one except unsaved people to run government. The net result will be that evil will be manifested beyond anything known in the history of man. The "mystery of iniquity" is, of course, already working as mentioned in verse 7, but the Holy Spirit is now restraining sin until He is taken away at the translation of the church. When this occurs, it is revealed in verse 8 that "then shall that Wicked one be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming."

There are, then, three good reasons why the Day of the Lord and the tribulation time could not have begun in the time the Thessalonians lived: first, the apostasy had not come; second, the man of sin had not been revealed; and, third, the Spirit of God had not been taken away. In a large sense, those unfulfilled conditions are still true today. While there is apostasy in our midst, the man of sin has not been revealed, and the Holy Spirit has not been removed. All of this constitutes real evidence that the tribulation time has not come and that it cannot come until Christ comes and takes His church home to glory.

### The Character of the Man of Sin

In verse 9, there is continued revelation of the man of sin. He is described as one "whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders." The principle that is expounded in Scripture is that Satan works by limitation. He wants to be like God. As God has described in His Word that Christ and Christ alone can rule the world in peace and righteousness, and has proved the deity of Christ by the many miracles which He performed, so this man of sin will be Satan's man even as Christ is God's man. He will be promoted in the world and assume the role of a superman. He will be set forth as the outstanding leader who can bring the world out of its difficulties. His power will come from Satan himself and Satan will enable him to perform certain signs and lying wonders. They will not be on the same plane as the miracles which Christ performed, but he will be able to do what will seem to be supernatural. The world will say of him, "Who is like unto the beast?" (Rev. 13:4).

In the verses which follow, the working of Satan is described as accompanied "with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: that they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness" (vv. 10-12).

### Unbelievers Will Be Deceived by Man of Sin

The Scriptures teach clearly that many will be deceived and will not receive Jesus Christ as their Savior. The man of sin will come as a substitute in place of Christ and people who resisted Christ and did not receive Christ will flock in great numbers to follow this evil character. This will come to pass, of course, in the time of the great tribulation. All of this is declared to be a judgment from God. Men will be deceived and perish "because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved." "God shall send them strong delusion." But how can God deceive a person? The answer is given in the context.

First of all, it is clear that those who are deceived had opportunity to receive Christ, but they did not do it. There seems to be a principle of divine justice here that when a person turns away from the truth God allows that one to be led off into error. So often when people depart from the truth it is because they have resisted the Spirit of God as He sought to lead them into the knowledge of the Word of God. So it will be in that day. Those who have turned away from Christ will turn instead to this false leader and thus believe a lie instead of believing the truth.

Some understand from verse 11 that if a person in this present age of grace hears the gospel and does not receive Christ as Savior, then when Christ comes and takes His church home to glory these will find it impossible to be saved after the church is translated. It is unlikely that a person who rejects Christ in this day of grace will turn to Him in that awful period of tribulation. But the usual principle of Scripture is that while there is life there is hope. It is possible, though very improbable, that a person who has heard the gospel in this present age of grace will come to Christ after the rapture. The Scriptures definitely teach that God will send strong delusion to those who do not believe after the church is gone. God will judge their hearts, and if they deliberately turn away from the truth He will permit them to believe a lie. They will honor the man of sin as their god and as their king, instead of acknowledging the Lord Jesus Christ. The result will be "That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness" (v. 12).

### The Destiny of Unbelievers

The awful destiny of those who turn away from the Lord Jesus Christ is presented in verse 12 so clearly. It is a sad fact that many today will not receive Christ. They are indifferent and turn away without trusting Him. It is so common that Christians often fail to realize how desperate the condition is of one who hears the gospel and turns away. The choice is not an unimportant alternative. Men are actually determining their eternal destiny. The person who turns from Christ finds himself in a path of total hopelessness. He is headed, as the Scriptures make very clear, into eternal punishment.

### The Urgency of Preaching the Gospel

This solemn truth should give to us all a sense of the urgency of our day to tell people about Christ. The great majority of people who are within the sound of the gospel today will not heed and turn to Christ. It is very evident that these will flock after this false leader and, instead of believing in Christ in that awful time of the tribulation, they will believe a lie and go on to their eternal damnation. But in this day of grace Christians have a real commission. The climactic days of the Day of the Lord will not come until Christ comes for us first. While we wait we certainly should be challenged by the Lord to give our hearts and lives to Him. As God enables us to proclaim the gospel, the message should be sent forth that Christ loves those who are lost and died for them, that He is able to save if they will come to Him. Christians need not fear the coming of this tribulation time, for we have the hope of His imminent return.

Believers may have trouble in this world and some have gone through awful testings. There have been tens of thousands of martyrs in our generation. But this is not the Day of the Lord; this is not the time of tribulation. This is still the day of grace. God is still waiting for lost men to come to Him. One of these days the last soul will be added to the church, and the church--the body of Christ--will be complete. When that last one accepts the Lord Jesus, at that very moment the Lord will come for His church, and the completed body of Christ will be caught up to be with the Lord. Then will follow, as the Scriptures make so very plain, this awful period described as the Day of the Lord--the time when God's judgments will be poured out upon an unbelieving world.

The obvious lesson from this portion of Scripture is that we should examine our own hearts. Have we really trusted Christ? Have we been born again through faith in Him? If we have not trusted in Him before, now is the time to put our faith in Him. If we take this step, we can look forward with every other Christian to the coming of the Lord. That is our hope. We need not fear the coming of the Day of the Lord for when that day comes on earth we will be with the Lord in glory.

## Questions

1. What was the nature of the false teaching which had troubled the Thessalonians?
2. How does this relate to evidence that Paul had taught they would be raptured before the Day of the Lord?
3. What is the first future event which Paul says must occur before the Day of the Lord is clearly come?
4. What is meant by the expression "the falling away"?
5. To what extent will there be apostasy before the day of the Lord and how is this in contrast to apostasy after the Day of the Lord begins?
6. How is the man of sin described and how does he relate to end-time apostate leaders?
7. What is the second major event which must take place before the Day of the Lord comes?
8. What is the significance of the expression "the restrainer"?
9. In what sense is "the restrainer" taken away?
10. How does the taking away of the restrainer relate to the rapture of the church?
11. How does this teach that the rapture takes place before the Day of the Lord begins?
12. Summarize the three reasons why the day of the Lord and the tribulation still remain unfulfilled.
13. What further description is given of the man of sin in verses 9-12?
14. What is indicated about unbelievers who are deceived by the man of sin?
15. Why is it so urgent to believe the gospel today and what are the dangers of unbelief?

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