

II Thessalonians 1:3 - 2:12

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In II Thessalonians 1:3-4 (written around A.D. 50-51), the Apostle Paul tells of his pride in the believers at Thessalonica. They were standing firm for the Lord in the midst of great persecution. In verses 5-7, the Apostle assures these believers (contemporaries of Paul) that relief from their persecutors was on the way. How was this relief to come? Verse 7 declares that the Lord Jesus was about to reveal his awesome power from heaven against the persecutors of the Thessalonians. Therefore the judgment of verses 5-8, is not referring to an end of the world event - unless there are some clear indications of this from the text.

The primary reason this passage is associated with the coming of Christ at the end of the New Covenant Age is due to the last part of verse 7. The Apostle Paul describes the judgment coming in his day as the Lord Jesus being "revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels." Cannot the Lord Jesus judge wickedness from his heavenly throne? And whenever he does, it REVEALS the power and authority he wields in both heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18; Eph. 1:18-21; Col. 1:15-16; Rev. 1:5).

In the Old Testament, God's judgments upon nations and leaders were sometimes referred to as a "coming of the Lord" (Isaiah 19:1; Micah 1:3-7). However, when God did "rend the heavens and come down" (Isaiah 64:1-3), it did not mean that people literally saw him descend out of heaven. In the same way, for our Lord Jesus to be "revealed from heaven" does not require that he be seen coming in the sky.

It should also be noted that when King Jesus judges, he uses his angels in the process. Angels are God's servants (Heb. 1:7) who execute judgement against the wicked (Isaiah 37:36) for the sake of the righteous (II Chronicles 32:20-22; Psalm 34:7). People normally do not see angels (II Kings 6:17); they are spirit-beings (Hebrews 1:14). And so when Paul speaks of Christ being "revealed from heaven in blazing fire (fire speaks of wrath) with his powerful angels" - this is biblical language of judgment and is not necessarily describing the end of the world (although this kind of judgment usually marked the end of the world for God's targeted enemies - II Thess. 1:8-10).

With this background in mind, we can now properly approach II Thessalonians 2:1-12. The "coming of our Lord Jesus Christ," spotlighted in verse 1, is the same divine judgment that Paul has already discussed in chapter 1. However, in chapter 2, the Apostle Paul needed to clarify that even though this judgment was on the horizon, it had not yet begun (as rumor was claiming - verse 2).

The "day of the Lord" in verse 2, is synonymous with the "coming of our Lord" in verse 1. Both phrases speak of massive, divine judgments upon nations and leaders. There were numerous "comings of the Lord" and "days of the Lord" that transpired in Old Testament times (II Sam. 22:1, 7-10; Isaiah 13:1, 6, 17-19; Ezek. 30:1-4). The "day of the Lord" the Apostle Paul is focused upon in II Thessalonians 1 and 2, was a judgment that would bring deliverance and relief to the Christians being persecuted in Paul's day. Who were the primary persecutors of Christians in Paul's day? The biblical answer is: apostate Jews, who not only became hostile toward Christians themselves, but also stirred up ill feelings towards believers among the Romans and other Gentile peoples (Acts 14:1-2, 19; I Thess. 2:14-16).

Christ's judgment against apostate Israel would not only punish the wrong-doers, but also bring deliverance to the righteous. This is what Paul means in II Thessalonians 2:1, when he speaks of Christians being "gathered to Christ." The prophet Isaiah spoke the same way to Judah hundreds of years earlier in Isaiah 40:10-11, "See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and his arm rules for him . . . He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart . . ."

Our Lord Jesus also stated this truth just before going to the cross. In Luke 21:23, he declared there would be great distress in the land of Israel. However, this very judgment upon unbelieving Israel, would cause believing Jews to "stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (Luke 21:28). And to make sure his disciples understood that these events were not hundreds of years away, Jesus solemnly promised, "I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened" (Luke 21:32). When Paul wrote II Thessalonians, over 20 years had elapsed on Jesus' time clock. The "day of the Lord," which resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple,

was rapidly approaching.

As we continue our examination of II Thessalonians 2, I want to acknowledge that I am very aware that this passage is commonly quoted when "end of the world" discussions are taking place. The "man of lawlessness" Paul refers to has been identified by so many as a superhuman antichrist who appears at the end of the New Covenant Age that very few Christians in the twentieth century have studied this text without presupposing a futuristic interpretation. This is extremely unfortunate, because when context, grammar and biblical parallels are treated seriously, there is very little chance that Paul was writing about events in OUR future.

Let me again review the context of this passage. In II Thessalonians 1:3-4, Paul praised the believers at Thessalonica for standing firm in the faith, even though they were being severely persecuted. In verses 5-7a, Paul assured them that God's judgment upon their persecutors was coming shortly. This passage CANNOT be describing events thousands of years from Paul's day. After all, what kind of relief will a judgment in OUR time bring to believers who have now been dead for more than nineteen hundred years?

All through the Old Testament, God demonstrated his ability to judge evil from his heavenly throne. Read the book of Isaiah if you have forgotten. Therefore, it should not surprise us that after our Lord Jesus took his seat at the Father's right hand (Eph. 1:18-22), he too began to demonstrate his power to judge the wicked from his heavenly throne. The more dramatic the judgment, the more dramatically it REVEALS Christ's power and sovereignty (II Thess. 1:7b).

In II Thessalonians 1:8, the Apostle reassured the believers at Thessalonica that Christ's soon coming judgment would be leveled against those "who do not know God and do not obey the gospel. . . ." The pouring out of Christ's wrath was not to be indiscriminate. The righteous were not going to be wiped out along with the unrighteous (we see this principle throughout the Scripture - Gen. 6:5-8; 19:12-13; Ezek. 9:3-6).

In verse 9, Paul declared that the coming judgment against the wicked would not only destroy their earthly well-being, but also seal their eternal doom. When people die in unbelief, their destinies are forever set.

Verse 10, contains a very important phrase: "on the day he comes." Throughout biblical history, major judgments by God have been referred to as: "a day of the Lord" (Isa. 13:1-9; Ezek. 30:1-4; Joel 2:1-3), and a "coming of the Lord" (Psalm 144:5-7; II Sam. 22:7-18; Micah 1:1-3). These references demonstrate that God often used foreign armies to carry out his judgments. Was there a major judgment coming in the days of the Apostles? Yes. Our Lord Jesus alluded to it in Matthew 10:17-23; 16:27-28; 23:33-36; 24:1-34. In all of these passages Jesus promised that his judgment upon those who persecuted his followers would occur within the lifetime of the Apostles. In Matthew 23 and 24, Jesus specifically stated that apostate Israel was going to be the target of his wrath.

In II Thessalonians 2, Paul continued to address this soon coming judgment foretold by Christ. However, the Apostle needed to clear up a false rumor that the day of the Lord (time of Israel's judgment) had already begun. Why did this rumor get started in A.D. 50-51? Let me submit the following reasons: (1) Jesus told his disciples that when THEY SAW Jerusalem surrounded by armies, its desolation was near (Luke 21:20). Israel had become a part of the Roman Empire around A.D. 6. Therefore, Jesus must have been referring to Roman armies surrounding Jerusalem. Why? Because Rome, the strongest nation on earth at that time, would not allow the armies of any other country to destroy what belonged to her. (2) In Acts 18:1-2, we learn that Claudius (Emperor of the Roman Empire when Paul wrote II Thessalonians) had recently expelled all Jews from Rome. Secular historians tell us that this event occurred in A.D. 49. Paul wrote II Thessalonians a year or so later from the city of Corinth, where he had met Aquila and Priscilla (Jewish believers who had been expelled from Rome). It is not hard to understand why some of Paul's contemporaries may have thought that the day of the Lord had begun.

In verse 2, Paul counseled the believers at Thessalonica not to become unsettled or alarmed over this rumor. Why should Israel's judgment alarm the believers at Thessalonica? It would be alarming to them because Jewish people were scattered all over the Roman Empire. If war was being declared on Israel, then Roman soldiers could have begun attacking Jews in every city (including Thessalonica). We must also remember that in A.D. 50-51, Christianity was still considered a sect of Judaism by Rome.

In verse 3, Paul's goal was to put the minds of the Thessalonians at ease by reminding them (v. 5) that the day of the Lord could not come until two dramatic events took place: (1) the rebellion (apostasy), and (2) the man of lawlessness had to be revealed. What did Paul mean by "the apostasy?" To apostatize is to fall away from the faith. This could not be referring to unbelievers who had never known the truth. We cannot rebel against what we have never had. Could the "apostasy" be referring to the Jewish people (Romans 9:4-5)? As a nation, the Jews should have embraced Christ as their Messiah. But as history testifies, they rejected Jesus and apostatized from the true faith. It is doubtful however, that Paul was referring to the Jews. I say this because the apostasy Paul had in mind in II Thessalonians 2, was a future event. Paul had already spoken of the Jewish apostasy as a past event in I Thess. 2:14-16. The apostasy in view therefore, was a falling away from the faith within the Church of Jesus Christ. This did take place, but not for another ten to fifteen years (II Tim. 4:16; Heb. 6:4-9; I John 2:18-19; II John 7; Jude 3-4; Rev. 2:1 - 3:22).

The other sign that would precede the day of the Lord was the appearance of the man of lawlessness. How did Paul know this man was "doomed to destruction" (v. 3)? Because Daniel 9:27 says so. According to Daniel 9:25-27, the RULER (whose people would destroy the city and the sanctuary) was going to set up an "abomination that causes desolation." An "abomination" is something totally abhorrent to God. Since it was the armies of Rome that destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70, it seems abundantly clear that the man of lawlessness was a Roman ruler who committed an abominable act sometime before Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed.

Because of verse 4 (and verses 8-12), it is being taught that a future antichrist will one day enter the sanctuary of a rebuilt Jewish temple at Jerusalem. This is not possible because of the following reasons: (1) a rebuilt stone temple at Jerusalem would not be holy to God. The Jewish temple was only a temporary provision until Christ came to offer himself as our perfect sacrifice - Heb. 9:1-10; 10:1-12. The days of a stone temple are over forever. (2) The temple alluded to in II Thess. 2:4, was present on earth even as Paul was writing - just as the man of lawlessness was present (but not yet revealed - v. 6). (3) It is highly unlikely that "the abomination" foretold by Daniel and alluded to by Paul, had anything to do with the stone temple at Jerusalem. I say this because that temple had been marked off by God for destruction as far back as Daniel 9:26; and made obsolete when Christ died on the cross (Matt. 27:50-51; Heb. 8:13). For a "man of sin" to enter an obsolete Jewish temple, which had been signaled out for destruction by God Himself, hardly seems to qualify as an "abomination."

So who was the man of lawlessness ready to be revealed in Paul's day; what was the temple the man of lawlessness was destined to take a seat in; and what was the abomination committed by the man of lawlessness?

I believe the man of lawlessness who was ready to be revealed in Paul's day was Nero Caesar. Please keep the following historical facts in mind as we consider the evidence for this claim. (1) Paul wrote II Thess. around A.D. 51. Caesar Nero came to the throne in A.D. 54. (2) According to ancient historians and church tradition, Nero put to death multitudes of Christians - including the Apostle Paul. (3) He was the sixth and final emperor of the Julio-Claudian line. These men ruled the Roman Empire during the birth, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ - an extremely significant time in history. (4) All of the Julio-Claudian emperors were deified by the Roman Senate.

Add to these facts the following biblical support for Nero as the man of lawlessness. In Dan. 7, we learn of a ruler who would emerge from the fourth kingdom of Daniel's vision (the Roman Empire). This ruler was to be given power to oppress the saints for "a time, times and half a time" (about a three and a half year period). Nero began to persecute Christians after the fire of Rome (July of A.D. 64). It undoubtedly took Nero several months to take care of the immediate crises caused by the fire and then develop his case against the Christian segment of Rome - whom he blamed for starting the fire. Nero continued to persecute Christians until the time of his death (June of A.D. 68).

The same beast (kingdom) and personage of Dan. 7:19-25, are spoken of by John in the book of Revelation. In Rev. 13:18, John gives an important clue about the identity of the beast by revealing the number of a man closely associated with this kingdom. The man's number was - 666. In ancient Hebrew, the alphabet also served as a numbering system. Each letter of the alphabet had a numerical value.

Most Hebrew lexicons or books on Hebrew grammar will give these numerical values. One of the natural spin-offs of this numbering system is that everyone's name had a numerical value. For example, the name David in Hebrew equals fourteen. Matthew uses this well-known fact to emphasize that Jesus was a descendant of David (Matt. 1:17). The name of Caesar Nero in Hebrew has the numerical value of six hundred and sixty-six.

In Rev. 17:10, the seven heads of the beast (the Roman Empire) are said to represent seven kings. When John was writing the book of Revelation, five of the kings had fallen (died), one was presently ruling (the sixth king), and the seventh had not yet come. When the seventh king did come, his rule would last only a short time. Caesar Nero was the sixth emperor of the Julio-Claudian Caesars. After Nero's death, Galba fought his way to the throne, but lasted only a few months before he was killed. Let's return to II Thess. 2:4. The Apostle states in this verse that the man of lawlessness was destined to "oppose and exalt himself over everything that is called God or worshiped." Paul is quoting from Dan. 11:36, which is closely connected to Dan. 7:20-21 and 25. Does Nero fit this description? He deeply offended the Romans of his day by having statues of himself placed all through the city of Rome - even in the most sacred of shrines. He obviously thought nothing of Jesus Christ and opposed Him by killing Christians for sport. Of course, all of the Julio-Claudian Caesars were touted as gods.

Objection #1: In what sense did Nero "take his seat in God's temple?" The word for temple in II Thess. 2:4, is "naos." Every other time Paul used that particular word, he was referring to believers in Christ (I Cor. 3:16-17; 6:16; II Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21). It is extremely clear in the New Testament that the Church is the temple of God on earth today. When Paul wrote II Thessalonians, the stone temple at Jerusalem had already been made obsolete by Christ's death on the cross (Matt. 27:51; Heb. 8:13-9:14). Why would Paul refer to the obsolete stone temple as God's "naos," when he clearly taught everywhere else that Christians were God's "naos?"

Objection #2: How can it be said that Nero took his seat in the Church - if the Church is what Paul was referring to by "naos"? To take a seat, is to take a position of authority. In Matt. 23:1-3, our Lord Jesus said the teachers of the law and the Pharisees "sit in Moses' seat" (there was no literal chair involved). Jesus goes on to explain that these men had gained positions of authority under the Mosaic system. Because the people Jesus was speaking to lived under that system, they had a responsibility to obey these leaders (but not follow their sin). In a similar sense, Nero ascended to the throne of Rome a few years after Paul wrote II Thessalonians. Most, if not all, of the Church in Paul's day was within the Roman Empire. Therefore, according to Romans 13:1-2, it can accurately be said that Nero gained a "seat of authority" that was to be recognized and submitted to by Christians as long as Nero's laws did not violate God's Law (Acts 4:19). When Nero used his God-given authority to punish good and reward evil, it was an abomination in God's sight (Prov. 16:12; 17:15)

Nero also "took a seat" in God's temple because some professing Christians tried to justify bowing to Caesar (Pergamum was the major center in Asia for Caesar-worship - Rev. 2:12-16). Particularly among these people, Nero gained a seat of power. Look now at verses 6-7,

"And now you know what is holding him back (the lawless one was present on earth when Paul wrote this letter in A.D. 51), 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."

Who was the one holding back the "man of lawlessness" and the "power of lawlessness?" According to Dan. 12:1, Michael is the angelic prince whose job was to protect Daniel's people. According to the context of Dan. 12:1, "Daniel's people" could refer to the entire nation of Israel or to just the believing Jews of Israel (those whose names are found written in the book). This verse speaks of a time of great national distress and deliverance for the righteous. Nero was given power over the saints for a short time (Dan. 7:25), but his greatest havoc was wrecked upon the nation of unbelieving Israel. It was when Nero was emperor, that Israel rebelled against Rome. This resulted in the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 (Dan. 9:26). It seems that Michael's protective care over the nation of Israel was to be withdrawn and transferred to God's new "chosen people" and "holy nation" (I Peter 2:9-10). After the restrainer was taken out of the way, Nero was free to unleash all his wickedness. God used the evil in Nero's heart to judge unbelieving Israel. However, because of what Nero did to God's saints, his doomed was sealed (Dan. 9:27; 11:45).

The manner in which Paul describes Nero's destruction has caused many Bible students to "faturize" (a new word which should soon be appearing in dictionaries everywhere) II Thess. 2:1-12. Listen to verse 8, "And then (after Michael's restraining force was withdrawn) the lawless one (Nero) will be revealed (Nero took the throne in A.D. 54, but did not show his true colors until about A.D. 62), whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming." Why do Christians today insist that Jesus will only deal with tyrants when he bodily returns to the earth at the end of the New Covenant Age? Our Lord Jesus has already been given all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18). Surely the ascended Lord Jesus is able to judge wicked people in the same way God the Father judged the wicked in Old Testament times. Listen to how David describes God's judgment upon his enemy Saul in II Sam. 22:7-16,

"In my distress I called to the LORD . . . From his temple he heard my voice . . . He parted the heavens and came down . . . Out of the brightness of his presence bolts of lightning blazed forth . . . He shot arrows and scattered the enemies . . . at the blast of breath from his nostrils."

In I Chron. 10:4, we learn that Saul died by falling on his sword (suicide). In I Chron. 10:14, we are told that the "LORD put him to death." David described it as the LORD coming down and destroying his enemies with a blast of breath from his nostrils. Why could not God the Son take care of the man of lawlessness in Paul's day, the same way God the Father took care of king Saul?

The Apostle Paul closes this section by informing the believers at Thessalonica,

"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" (II Thess. 2:9-10a).

When the restrainer (Michael) was taken out of the way (about ten years after Paul wrote this letter), Satan came rushing in with all his forces of darkness. Nero went berserk and the unbelieving nation of Israel became demon infested - just as Jesus foretold in Matt. 12:43-45. Josephus testifies that many false teachers arose at this time.

Admittedly, this has been a very brief look at II Thessalonians 1 and 2. But I hope you have seen that when context, grammar and biblical parallels are treated seriously, there is little chance that Paul was describing something in our future. What difference does this make? After all, cannot maniacs like Nero come on the scene today? Of course they can. The difference however, is that we no longer need to believe that a maniac like Nero MUST come on the scene. Add to this small bit of relief, the fact that most of the other devastating prophecies in the New Testament are closely tied to II Thessalonians 2. When we realize this, then a whole horizon of dark clouds are removed from our future. This allows Christians to once again see the sun (Son) and be optimistic about what the Gospel will accomplish in the days ahead.