

6. The Revealing of the Man of Lawlessness

The Letters to the Thessalonians

The Rapture will not take place until the (one) return of Christ, and will be preceded by the revealing of “the man of lawlessness” (2 Thess 2:3). In this connection, we must elaborate on the letters to the Thessalonians. After all, the question about the Rapture did lead me to write a series of sermons on these letters!

From these two letters, it seems there was a stubborn belief in the church at Thessalonica that the Lord Jesus had *already* returned. Perhaps he had landed in Jerusalem and was making his way westward to Rome. We must understand that this belief deeply affected the Thessalonians and completely altered their view on life.

For example, there were Thessalonians who, under these circumstances, did not consider it necessary to work and make a living anymore. Why should they work when the Lord Jesus was on the way and the whole earthly scheme of things was passing away? So they gave up their day jobs and only looked out for the triumphant entry of the Lord into their city.

Following the Apostolic Example

In the meantime, these people depended on other believers to support them. This met with the severe disapproval of the apostle Paul, who always provided for his own income carefully and in an exemplary manner. “Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you” (1 Thess 2:9).

This also explains his severe reprimand to those who had ceased their daily work. First, he warns the Thessalonians to “keep away from anyone who is

idle” (2 Thess 3:6) and then he reminds them of the rule he taught them in this respect: “If a man will not work, he shall not eat” (2 Thess 3:10).

This passage has been used wrongly. Some have employed it to ban all social legislation. But Paul is not writing about those who *cannot* work. It is the duty of the saints to provide for one another in times of sickness or handicap. Paul is writing about those who *will not* work, that is, those who refuse to work while they are able. Their reason for not working may sound very pious, but in fact they unnecessarily burden the brotherhood.

The conclusion is that we must carry on with our daily life and do our work, even though we have heard that the return of Christ is imminent. Was it not one of the great Reformers who said, “If I hear that Christ is coming back tomorrow, I will still plant a tree today?”

We must follow the apostolic example. Nowhere does the Bible encourage Christians to isolate themselves in some forsaken place or on a mountaintop, to cease all normal activity and only await the coming of Christ. That is a mark of sectarian eschatology and not the approach of the catholic faith.

Christ Has Not Yet Come

Throughout both letters to the Thessalonians, we find repeated assurances that Christ has not (yet) returned. In 1 Thessalonians 1:10, the admonition “to wait for his Son from heaven” already begins. We must still wait; Christ has not yet come.

This coming is presented as a *future* event, not one that is already past. Look at 1 Thessalonians 2:19 where we read, “For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ *when He comes?*” And look also at 1 Thessalonians 3:13, where we find, “May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy... *when our Lord Jesus comes* with all his holy ones.”

We could continue to quote from these letters to show that Paul wishes to

correct the wrong impression that Jesus Christ had already come. His point is clear: Christ has not yet come.

The Bible does not encourage us to fall into a tense “Adventism” where the only thing that counts is the focus of Christ’s return. Yes, we must ardently expect and await his coming, but it is not the *only* thing in which Christians are involved. We are here to fulfill a mandate, which is a holy calling. Part of this calling is to do our daily work and to fulfill our task to spread the gospel of life.

Certainly, we must always reckon consciously with Christ’s coming. The parable of the wise and foolish maidens with their lamps tells us to always be prepared. Our Lord himself told us, “Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man” (Luke 21:36). That is one side of the coin.

At the same time, the Lord Jesus tells us, “As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work” (John 9:4). As Christians, we must do the work of the Lord as long as we can. The “night” to which John refers is the time when even Christian ministry will be made impossible. Until then, however, we must work and be occupied in the matters of God’s kingdom. That is the other side of the coin.

God Has His Own Agenda

Christ will not return until certain things have been fully completed. I add the word “fully” to stress that, in God’s eternal counsel, there is no room for half measures. It is all or nothing. Where we might quickly consider a task done, the Lord looks at the big picture and knows what must yet be done in order to finish the work of the ages.

In that sense, we can say that God has his own agenda. It is a sovereign agenda that will not be influenced one way or another by any created being. The prophets of old already proclaimed in the LORD’s Name, “I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please” (Isa 46:10).

What God has planned, he will do. This is true also in the great tribulation. Our lives are not even for one moment under Satan's control. The devil will never wrest the power and the kingdom from Christ. This is the message and comfort of the book of Revelation and of all the Scriptures.

If Christ has not yet returned, we can be sure that this is only because God's agenda is not yet completed. There is divine work to be done, and Christ will return only when it is finished. We also may have a place and calling in this divine work, but it is God's agenda, and his timing is decisive and conclusive.

Who is the Man of Lawlessness?

In 2 Thessalonians 2, the man of lawlessness is prominently featured. The point here is that Christ will not return until this man is revealed.

Paul writes about "the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and *our being gathered* to him..." The words "our being gathered" unto Christ denote the Rapture that will take place when Christ returns. But we must note that Christ will not return until the man of lawlessness is revealed, has his day, and is subsequently defeated.

It is important to note that in the very same verse in which the man of lawlessness is mentioned, his destruction is also prophesied. He appears only temporarily on the scene of history, and the purpose of his appearing is that he may be confronted, exposed, and destroyed. He has no other reason for being. He is "doomed to destruction" (2 Thess 2:4). The outcome is never in doubt and this is an immense comfort for all who find themselves in the great tribulation.

The man of lawlessness is mentioned in one breath with "the rebellion." We will focus on this term first and later come back to the man himself. For now, however, it is important to note that the man of lawlessness is only described, not identified.

There are things we do not know. What we *do* know is that the man of lawlessness is only human. The expression "man of lawlessness" indicates

that he is only a man, in the sense of a human being. This man is not divine. He is also not Satan, for his coming will be “in accordance with the work of Satan” (2 Thess 2:9). He will have diabolical aspirations and abilities. He will imitate the devil and use satanic methods. This makes him a formidable foe.

Some have concluded that the ascribing of “all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders” (2 Thess 2:9) to the man of lawlessness makes him rather supernatural. He may appear to be supernatural, but the expression “*man* of lawlessness” definitely leaves him in the human realm and puts him in his proper place. In him, mankind may come to its most terrifying height, but the man is still merely a man. Only the Son of Man is also called Son of *God*. The man of lawlessness will be destroyed by the Son of righteousness.

The Rebellion

The apostle Paul reminds the Thessalonians that the man of lawlessness must appear before Christ’s return. We also read in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 that the man of lawlessness cannot come “until the rebellion occurs.”

What is this rebellion? On the one hand, we can say that, since the fall into sin, there has been a constant rebellion against God and his Anointed. The Bible even mentions specific rebellions, such as the rebellion of the ten Tribes against the house of David. Such rebellions have immense consequences.

Also, in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament, we read about the working of a power of evil. Often, the hostility is directed against the people of Israel, and thereby against God’s Anointed, the Christ. In particular, the prophet Daniel was given visions regarding the power of evil kingdoms, and it has been said that Paul’s choice of words in 1 and 2 Thessalonians is closely linked to the language of Daniel (L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1974 ed., p. 701). It would be beyond the scope of this book, however, to investigate such an idea more deeply. Perhaps interested readers could study it further on their own.

The final rebellion, mentioned in 2 Thessalonians, appears to stand out from all rebellions preceding it. The NIV footnotes correctly speak of an “active rebellion” and “the supreme opposition.” This rebellion has a powerful thrust, a worldwide range, and an unrelenting cause. It is not just a local uprising, but a global undertaking. It is not simply a rebellion, but *the* rebellion.

The man of lawlessness cannot operate in a vacuum. He needs a diabolical framework. He also needs to have a human network. Actually, this man of lawlessness is like a pathetic parasite that feeds off conditions and circumstances he has not realized himself.

The rebellion comes first, and in that atmosphere, the man of lawlessness finds and grabs his opportunity. We read that the man of lawlessness is “revealed.” This means that his appearing is not sudden, but gradual. He shows himself more and more as time progresses. As the rebellion takes place and gathers momentum, the man of lawlessness increasingly shows himself and offers his alternative to worshipping God.

The original word that is used for “rebellion” is actually the word “apostasy.” The rebellion is not vague or undefined, but it is particularly apostasy, a falling away from the Word of God. The truth of Scripture is vehemently denied and the application of Scripture in all of life is systematically opposed.

The rebellion is an organized campaign against Scripture. It is important that we understand this. The rebellion is not physical, but spiritual. As such, it is not persecution (although it will lead to persecution), but an attack on God’s Word. The rebellion seeks to remove the Bible from the public and personal sphere.

When the rebellion has taken effect, there is room for the man of lawlessness to fill the void. Lack of love for the Truth (2 Thess 2:10) opens the way for clinging to the Lie. Satan also does his part, giving credibility to the man of lawlessness through counterfeit miracles, signs, and wonders. The purpose is that the man of lawlessness sets himself up in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to *be* God.

When we come to the end of time, we find ourselves back at the beginning. For the lie of Satan in Paradise was precisely that if Adam and Eve rebelled against their Creator, they would be like God. The first lie is also the last lie; we have come full circle. Fallen man does not really progress, but just spins his tires and goes in circles.

A Powerful Delusion

Before we move on to other aspects surrounding the Rapture, we must take careful note that both the occurring of the rebellion and the revealing of the man of lawlessness have one thing in common: disdain for the Word of God. God's truth in the Bible is considered foolish and untrustworthy. Knowledge of the Bible will virtually disappear.

People will refuse to love the Truth and will delight in all forms of evil. What is surprising is that "God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie..." (2 Thess 2:11).

Is delusion really the way to combat rebellion? Should God not send powerful prophets who will bring the gospel? Why does the Lord support the man of lawlessness, in a sense, by sending this delusion and making people even more receptive to lies and deceit? Is this surprising action of God not counterproductive?

Literally, the verse says that God sends an "energy of error," indeed a *powerful* delusion. The error keeps on working, like the Energizer bunny. This is also part of the last days and the process of the millennium.

God has his own agenda. Even when rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the Lord is not an uninvolved bystander. Then he also works out his eternal council. This council includes the fact that God gives people over to their own wicked ways so that their extreme sinfulness becomes apparent and his righteous judgment is invoked.

Notice that this delusion from God is *preceded* by an outright refusal of mankind to love the truth. People simply delight in wickedness, but the

time is coming that God will let mankind go to its doom. He sends a (further) delusion to those who wish to be deluded.

When the Egyptian Pharaoh refused to listen to Moses and Aaron and let God's people go free, God hardened Pharaoh's heart. This did not absolve Pharaoh of his responsibility in any way. Pharaoh first refused to listen. And after each plague, the man hardened his heart. He remained unmovable in his plans for Israel. The LORD had said this ahead of time (Ex 7:13). He sees the hearts of all. God therefore gave Pharaoh over to his own wickedness. In the process of sinning, God lets us do what we obstinately choose to do. God himself cuts off the way to repentance and relief.

We find something similar in Romans 1. God's judgment over people who will not repent, but doggedly adhere to their self-chosen apostasy, is that he "[gives] them over" to their sinful ways (Rom 1:24, 26). This is a conscious and powerful act of God. He does not stand idly by, but speeds things on to the Day of Judgment. The delusion that he sends in the millennium is deserved and effective, hastening the time of final judgment.

In the book of Revelation, the same line is evident. God brings many plagues upon the earth and its inhabitants (reminiscent of those in Egypt), and yet the refrain is, "...but they refused to repent..." (Rev 16:9, 11). Instead of repenting and humbling themselves, people curse God.

In the millennium, people refuse to love the Truth. It is a constant and consistent refusal, an extreme and conscious hardening in sin. Then the Bible tells us, "*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" (2 Thess 2:11-12). The Lord does nothing without a specific reason and purpose.