

Another Look At 2 Thessalonians

By Stephen C. Kanski

The book of 2 Thessalonians holds special significance within the doctrinal view of the end times. The apostle Paul penned this epistle to address certain troubling beliefs that had arisen in the Thessalonian church.

Some of the scriptures Paul penned in his first Thessalonian epistle led the Thessalonian believers to conclude that Christ's return might be immediate, even imminent. That misunderstanding is what Paul corrects in Second Epistle to the Thessalonians

Some of these scriptures from 1 Thessalonians are:

Scripture (KJV)	Why it could be misunderstood
1 Thessalonians 1:9–10	“...to wait for his Son from heaven...” → Emphasizes expectancy without mentioning any prior events
1 Thessalonians 4:15–17	“We which are alive and remain...” → Sounds like Paul expected to still be alive at Christ's coming
1 Thessalonians 5:1–3	“The day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night...” → Suggests sudden, unpredictable arrival
1 Thessalonians 5:6	“Let us not sleep... but let us watch...” → Encourages constant readiness

It's not difficult to see why the Thessalonians might have come to incorrect conclusions after reading Paul's writings. Throughout church history, Christian scholars have struggled with the meaning of some of his writings. Such struggles are not surprising, since even Peter referred to Paul's writings as “hard to understand.”

“...the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation; even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you; As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be

understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction.” (2 Peter 3:15–16)

Paul was an intellectual giant in the early Christian community, spiritually gifted with many revelations from the Lord. Much of our current Christian doctrine came through his writings.

It seems that after Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians had been delivered, Paul got wind of certain false doctrines that had arisen among them. In this second epistle, Paul addresses these errors and seeks to restore the believers to the truth.

Paul begins by assuring the Thessalonians that they will receive rest from their troubles at the time when “the Lord shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels.” (2 Thess. 1:7)

Troubling Doctrine

It becomes apparent from the opening verses of chapter 2 that many in the Thessalonian church believed the coming of the Lord was imminent, or “at hand” 2 Thes. 2:2. Paul describes them as being “shaken in mind” and “troubled,” indicating a level of distress that would have certainly disrupted normal life.

I recall reading a book a few decades ago titled “88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988”. (*Edgar C. Whisenant, “88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988”, World Bible Society, 1988.*)

Written by a former NASA engineer, it presented many detailed arguments predicting Christ’s return in 1988. Of course, this did not occur. Yet the Christian Research Institute reports that 3.2 million copies were printed and over 200,000 were sent to pastors.

The impact of this prediction was substantial. Many Christians became excited, persuaded that the rapture was only months away. Some quit their jobs; many began seriously attending church for the first time. Such behavior is understandable—if one sincerely believed the Lord was returning momentarily, a naïve person might cease paying bills, sell property, run up credit card debt, spend recklessly or engage in other unwise actions.

A similar atmosphere appears to have existed within the Thessalonian church. Though Scripture does not detail their exact behavior, it is not unreasonable to imagine similar reactions. What we do know is that Paul explicitly states the believers were “shaken in

mind” and “troubled,” reflecting considerable confusion and anxiety, insomuch so that he felt it necessary to address the situation in a second epistle.

The emphasis—or some might even say the purpose—of Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians is to teach a correct understanding of the timing of Christ’s revelation from heaven, when He comes “with His mighty angels in flaming fire taking vengeance.” Because of a misapplication of Paul’s first epistle, the Thessalonians were confused, unsettled, and anxious. Paul aims to correct this misunderstanding and restore a proper eschatological perspective.

Paul responds by assuring them that “the day of the Lord” was not imminent. Certain events must occur beforehand: namely, a falling away and the revealing of “the man of sin,” also called “the son of perdition.”

“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.” (2 Thess. 2:3)

After teaching the Thessalonians that these two events must first take place Paul then states, “And now ye know what withholdeth that he might be revealed in his time.” (2 Thess. 2:6).

In other words, he is saying, in effect, “Now that I’ve explained it, you now know what two events must take place before the scheduled time comes for Christ to be revealed from Heaven.”

It is therefore more consistent to interpret the “he” of verse 6 as referring to Christ, not the antichrist, as some eschatological scholars assert. This makes sense, since the Thessalonians’ confusion regarding the timing of Christ’s return is the main reason for this epistle.

Paul has already spoken of “the Lord Jesus [being] revealed from heaven” in chapter 1, verse 7. The same theme appears throughout the epistle: the revelation of Christ, not the unveiling of the antichrist, is the controlling subject.

“The Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels.” (2 Thess. 1:7)

Peter uses similar language in his first epistle, reinforcing the idea that Christ’s revelation is the focal point of Christian expectation.

“Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” (1 Peter 1:13)

What Withholdeth?

The word translated “withholdeth” in verse 6 is the Greek term *κατέχων* (*katechōn*), meaning to restrain, detain, or hold back. Thus Paul is telling the Thessalonians that something is restraining the revelation of Christ from heaven until the appointed time.

“And now ye know what withholdeth that he (*Christ*) might be revealed in his time.” (2 Thess. 2:6)

Paul makes this restraint clear earlier in the chapter: two events must occur before the Day of the Lord—first, a falling away, and second, the revealing of the man of sin. These serve as divinely appointed benchmarks in God’s prophetic timetable. Christ’s revelation from Heaven does not precede these events; rather, these events occur first, preparing the stage for His appearing.

“Except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed...” (2 Thess. 2:3)

Paul is not suggesting that Christ is unable to return due to the antichrist’s power. Far from it. Since Christ is omnipotent, nothing in heaven or earth can limit His power. The issue is not Christ’s ability but God’s divine timetable, i.e. the unfolding of God’s predetermined plan.

Jesus Himself taught this concept of prophetic sequence. In Matthew’s Gospel He states that the gospel must first be published among all nations before the end shall come. Here again is the principle of divinely established milestones in kingdom theology.

“And the gospel must first be published among all nations.” (Mark 13:10)

Thus the “withholding” or restraining mentioned by Paul should be understood within the context of the divine order of prophetic events. Christ will be revealed precisely when God has appointed, following the falling away and the unveiling of the man of sin.

Days Of Deception

Paul continues his explanation in verse 7: “For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way.” The Greek term translated “letteth” (*katéchōn*) again carries the idea of restraining, holding back, or hindering. Paul teaches that the forces of evil are indeed active in the world even now, yet God sovereignly restrains their full expression until the appointed time.

“For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way.” (2 Thess. 2:7)

A reasonable paraphrase of Paul’s meaning is this: the spirit of iniquity is already present and at work in the world, but God restrains its ultimate manifestation. Only when He removes this restraint will the final manifestation of evil occur in the form of the antichrist. And thus, unrestrained evil will continue to unfold until it is finally taken out by Christ at His return. This understanding aligns with the broader biblical teaching that God is in absolute control of the unfolding of history.

Paul’s warning is consistent with Jesus’ own predictions concerning the last days. Christ taught that many false prophets would arise, deceiving multitudes. This deception will grow so powerful and pervasive that, if possible, even the elect would be deceived. Scripture reflects the sobering reality of this time of unparalleled spiritual deception.

“And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many.” (Matt. 24:11)

“For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.” (Matt. 24:24)

According to Revelation 13, this final deception will culminate in the rise of the antichrist—a figure who embodies all of the concentrated power and authority of Satan himself. Scripture teaches that the dragon (Satan) grants the beast his power, throne, and great authority.

“And the dragon gave him his power, and his seat, and great authority.” (Rev. 13:2)

“And they worshipped the dragon which gave power unto the beast: and they worshipped the beast...” (Rev. 13:4)

“And all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him...” (Rev. 13:8)

The antichrist will also perform miraculous signs designed to deceive, including calling fire down from heaven. These counterfeit wonders will persuade the world that he is a divine figure worthy of worship.

“And he doeth great wonders, so that he maketh fire come down from heaven on the earth in the sight of men, and deceiveth them that dwell on the earth by the means of those miracles...” (Rev. 13:13–14)

So great will the deception of the last days be that the entire world will worship the antichrist, believing him to be a savior, a deliverer, even God Himself. Paul describes the antichrist as one “whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders.” This satanic empowerment explains the unprecedented level of deception the world will experience.

“Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders.” (2 Thess. 2:9)

Paul further identifies the antichrist in verse 4 as the one 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.” This act of self-deification is the pinnacle of human rebellion—a direct challenge to the authority of God.

“He opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God... so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God.” (2 Thess. 2:4)

A telling prophecy, spoken by Jesus to the Jewish leaders, indicates that Israel itself will be among those initially deceived by the antichrist.

“I am come in my Father's name, and ye receive me not: if another shall come in his own name, him ye will receive.” (John 5:43)

The world, conditioned by a rising spirit of iniquity, antisemitism, and hostility toward believers, is already being directed toward the environment in which the antichrist will arise. Paul's observations about the "mystery of iniquity" working even in his day are even more evident in ours.

Just prior to Christ's return, the antichrist will have deceived the world into believing that he is actually God. (2 Thess, 2:4) The spell will be complete, seemingly final in its victory.

So how will this deception end? Who will reveal to the world what the antichrist truly is? Who will bring his reign of deception to an end? After describing the fullness of the antichrist's counterfeit power, Paul provides the answer.

He tells us that the mask will be pulled off and the antichrist will be revealed for what he truly is: the absolute enemy of God and mankind. At the return of Christ, "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." (2 Thess. 2:8).

Coming Of The Lord

Paul assures the believers that the antichrist's deceptive reign, though fierce and global, will be short-lived. The Lord Jesus Christ Himself will bring it to an end. Paul writes that the Lord shall consume the lawless one "with the spirit of his mouth" and shall destroy him "with the brightness of his coming." (2 Thes.:2:8.)

The contrast could not be clearer. The antichrist rises through satanic power, deceit, and false wonders. Christ overthrows him instantly—effortlessly—merely by the radiance of His appearing. No battle is described. No struggle is needed. The victory is absolute, immediate, and final.

The phrase "the spirit of his mouth" echoes Old Testament imagery of divine judgment, where God's Word is portrayed as a sharp sword proceeding from His mouth. This symbolism emphasizes the authority and power of Christ's spoken word—the same word that created the universe now brings the antichrist's kingdom crashing down.

"And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations."
(Rev. 19:15)

Christ's glorious appearing—His parousia—ends the reign of deception and inaugurates the final judgment upon all who “received not the love of the truth.” Those who have rejected the gospel will face the dreadful consequence of believing the antichrist's lies. Paul presents a sobering contrast between those who believed the truth and those who delighted in unrighteousness.

“That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.” (2 Thess. 2:12)

In this epistle, Paul lays out a sweeping eschatological panorama: the present restraint of evil, the rising deception, worldwide delusion, the revealing of the man of sin and finally the triumphant return of Christ. Each element fits within God's divinely ordered plan.

The Thessalonian believers, shaken and confused by false teachings, are thus given clarity, assurance, and a renewed hope. Christ's revelation is certain. His victory is certain. And His triumph over evil is inevitable.

Stand Fast

Paul's teaching in 2 Thessalonians 2 culminates in a sweeping reminder of God's sovereign control over all prophetic events. What seemed confusing and troubling to the Thessalonian believers is clarified by Paul's careful explanation of the sequence of end-time events. His goal was not merely theological instruction but pastoral reassurance.

Far from being left to fear or confusion, the Thessalonian believers were meant to rest in the certainty that Christ's revelation from heaven was fixed, ordered, and unstoppable. Nothing—not the rise of the man of sin, not the deception of the nations, not the mystery of iniquity already at work—can hinder the ultimate triumph of Christ.

The antichrist's rise, global deception and temporary power all serve to highlight the greater glory and majesty of Christ. Paul emphasizes that the Lord will destroy the lawless one effortlessly, by the mere brightness of His appearing. This is the blessed hope of the Church—the triumphant return of Jesus Christ in power and glory.

For modern believers, Paul's message remains just as vital. Confusion, false teachings, fear-based predictions, and sensationalism still trouble the hearts of many Christians. Yet the apostle's words call us back to clarity: Christ will come in God's perfect timing, according to God's perfect plan, and His revelation will silence every deception.

Until that day, Paul urges believers to stand fast, hold to the truth, and remain steadfast in faith. The same encouragement that strengthened the Thessalonians strengthens us today: Christ will be revealed, evil will be overthrown, and God's people will enter into everlasting consolation and hope.

“Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle.” (2 Thess. 2:15)

Thus the message of 2 Thessalonians remains a cornerstone of Christian eschatological understanding. It offers not only prophecy but peace—not merely sequence but certainty—not only warning but tremendous hope. Christ's victory is sure, and in that victory, believers find their confidence.