

The Antichrist

(2 Thess. 2:1–12)



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *2 Thess. 2:1–12, Matt. 24:1–14, Zech. 3:1, Dan. 8:8–11, Acts 2:22.*

Memory Text: “Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction” (*2 Thessalonians 2:3, ESV*).

Key Thought: In correcting the Thessalonians' false theology of last-day events, Paul reveals truth about end-time deceptions.

In the midst of all Paul's words of encouragement as well as exhortation, he wrote about end-time events, including the greatest end-time event of all, the second coming of Jesus.

In this week's passage, though Paul talks about the end, his emphasis is a bit different from that which came before. For one thing, he already told the Thessalonians the details while he was with them. For another, his goal in this text is pastoral, to calm them and persuade them to be more patient regarding end-time events and to warn them about the false teachings being circulated on that topic.

The opening of this week's passage (*2 Thess. 2:1, 2*) contains several Greek words that point back to 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11, such as the coming of our Lord (*1 Thess. 4:15*), the gathering (*1 Thess. 4:17*), and the day of the Lord (*1 Thess. 5:2*). To some extent, this week's passage is a clarification of what Paul said earlier. In it he reveals truths that we ourselves need to understand today.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 22.*

The Problem (2 Thess. 2:1–3)

What is the topic addressed by Paul in the second chapter of 2 Thessalonians? How are these words relevant to us today? In what way do we face similar challenges within our church regarding end-time events (date-setting, conspiracy theories, and the like), however different our context may be? What similar principle do we find here that we also constantly confront? *2 Thess. 2:1–3.*

There is no clear evidence in this passage that the church was asking questions about the second coming of Jesus. Paul himself perceives a problem and addresses it. The concept of “gathering to him” recalls that which Paul wrote in the previous letter (*1 Thess. 4:15–17*).

In this passage, Paul’s words recall the warning that Jesus Himself had given (*Matt. 24:1–13*). The Thessalonians had been “quickly” destabilized by conflicting information that they had received in the short time since Paul had written his first letter.

Paul doesn’t identify the specific source of their confusion. Perhaps it hadn’t even been revealed to him. By “spirit” (*2 Thess. 2:2*) he likely refers to a prophetic teaching, either that of a false prophet or a misunderstanding of Paul’s first letter. The second possible source is the spoken word, a teaching passed from mouth to mouth among the members. When he mentions a letter “supposed to have come from us” (*NIV*), Paul is either referring to a letter forged in his name or a misuse of one of his genuine letters.

No matter how carefully a pastor may watch over a church, there are multiple ways in which false ideas can take root. It is sometimes easier for members to accept a report or rumor than to examine the Scriptures carefully for themselves. Sometimes the new ideas may even be biblical to a point but are promoted out of balance with complementary Bible teachings.

The latter seems to have been the problem in Thessalonica. The Thessalonians knew many correct things about the second coming of Jesus and the events preceding it. But they tended to emphasize one extreme or another of the teaching without its balancing perspectives. They had failed to heed Jesus’ warning about chasing after signs of His return (*Matt. 24:4–8*). As a result, in 1 Thessalonians they lamented the delay of Jesus’ return (*1 Thess. 4:13–15*). In this chapter they seem to have drawn the conclusion that they are already in the midst of final events.

Paul's Short Answer (2 Thess. 2:3, 4)

In the short interval between 1 and 2 Thessalonians, the Thessalonian church members became confused about the meaning of what Paul wrote in the first letter. They drew the conclusion that the Second Coming was either at hand or had already come in some secret way (2 Thess. 2:2). Paul's short answer to this problem? "That can't possibly be true. There are too many things that haven't happened yet."

The confusion in Thessalonica caused Paul to write his most extensive outline of final events. Had he not done so, it would not have been preserved for us.

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:3, 4. What does Paul tell us about "the man of sin" (*NKJV*) in these verses? What principles do we find here that help us to understand what Paul is discussing?

Verses 3 and 4 are an incomplete sentence in the original. "That day will not come" is missing in the Greek and is supplied in most translations. Paul lists the things that have to happen before Jesus can come. There will be a "falling away" (the Greek word *apostasia* for "apostasy"), and then "the man of lawlessness" will be revealed. That revelation is described in 2 Thessalonians 2:8–10 as the working of Satan just before Jesus comes (which we will examine more closely in Wednesday's lesson). But before that revelation of wickedness, there is a period of "mystery" and restraint (2 Thess. 2:6, 7).

Verse 4 is a description of the man of sin (or "lawlessness"), who operates under cover for a time and is then revealed at the end. He opposes God, exalts himself above God, sits in the temple, and proclaims that he is God. This verse is filled with allusions to Old and New Testament texts. The "opposer" recalls Satan in Zechariah 3:1. Exalting himself above God and usurping God's place in the heavenly temple recalls the little horn of Daniel 8. Showing himself to be God recalls Satan in Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28; it also points to the blaspheming power of Daniel 11:36–39. So, the description of the man of sin contains elements pointing to both Satan himself and a wicked agent of Satan in the course of Christian history.

In what subtle ways are each of us susceptible to having the same kind of attitude as we see revealed here in this "man of sin"?

The Restrainer (2 Thess. 2:5–7)

According to Paul, what two things characterized the world situation at the time he wrote? How do we see the great controversy revealed in these verses? *2 Thess. 2:6, 7.*

Combining these verses with the previous ones, we can see that Paul is outlining three stages of history from *his* time until the end. The final stage begins at the Second Coming. Before this stage is the revelation of the man of sin (*2 Thess. 2:3*), also known as the lawless one (*2 Thess. 2:8*). And before that stage is a time of mystery and restraint (*2 Thess 2:6, 7*).

While we would like very much to fully understand Paul’s meaning here, there are a number of uncertainties in these verses. The restraining power is neuter (a thing) in verse 6 and masculine (a person) in verse 7. The lawless one (masculine, *vs. 8*) is neuter in verse 7 (“mystery of lawlessness”), neither is it clear (*vs. 7*) whether the restraining power is taken out of the way or has the authority to remove itself (the *ESV* translates correctly— “until he is out of the way”).

Who is the restrainer, or power of restraint, in these verses? It is present in Paul’s day; it is upholding the law (a power that restrains lawlessness, *vs. 7*); it is on a divine time mission; and it is powerful enough to restrain the working of Satan (*vs. 9*).

According to other New Testament passages, what is holding back the Second Coming? *Matt. 24:14; Mark 13:10; Rev. 14:6, 7.*

In much of the New Testament the events leading up to the Second Coming follow from the final proclamation of the gospel (*Matt. 24:14; Mark 13:10; Rev. 14:6, 7*). In this case, then, it’s possible that God Himself is the Restrainer described by Paul, holding the final events back until everyone has had a chance to hear the gospel.

How much restraint do you need in your life? That is, when tempted, how can you learn to claim the power of God to restrain you from doing what you know is wrong?

The Antichrist Revealed (2 Thess. 2:8–10)

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:8–10. What’s especially important in all this about the phrase, “they received not the love of the truth”?

The man of sin was introduced in 2 Thessalonians 2:3, 4. Through much of Christian history he has operated to undermine God’s law (particularly the Sabbath) and to usurp powers that belong only to Christ. In passages such as Daniel 7:20–25 (the little horn) and Revelation 13:1–7 (the beast from the sea), this same power operates after the fall of the pagan Roman Empire, combining both religious and secular authority to persecute the saints of God. The only power in history that fits all the specifications of these prophecies is the papacy. Many interpreters from the Middle Ages, and even to this day, have designated this institution as the antichrist. (Only in the past century or two have the vast majority of Christians moved away from this interpretation, an interesting move in itself in light of our understanding of last-day events). This identification of the papacy fits the specifications of 2 Thessalonians 2 that the man of sin would be both masculine (a person) and neuter (a world power or institution).

In verse 7, “mystery of lawlessness” (*NKJV*) is an appropriate designation for his activity. But at the close of history, just before the Second Coming, there will be an even more worldwide, open defiance of God and His laws. The continuity of powers, both in this passage and elsewhere (*Daniel 7 and Revelation 13*), indicates that the papacy will play a major role at the end of time, as well.

What earlier work of God in the course of history will the final deception counterfeit? Compare 2 Thess. 2:9 with Acts 2:22.

Today’s passage draws back the curtain to reveal an even greater antichrist behind the one that has operated among the nations in the course of history. Satan himself is the author and finisher of the deceptions of the end time. As the return of Jesus approaches, events will force him into a final act of desperation. Through counterfeit miracles he will attempt to draw people’s attention away from the gospel (the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus) and even the Second Coming itself.

Dwell on this idea of “the love of the truth.” How do we “receive” it? Why is having this love so crucial for anyone who doesn’t want to get caught up in any spiritual deception, especially during the last days? How can we learn, even now, to “receive the love of the truth”?

Truth and Lies (2 Thess. 2:10–12)

Read 2 Thessalonians 2:10–12. Why does God allow so many to be deceived? According to this passage, what have the wicked rejected?

Verse 11 is a text that many people find extremely challenging. Paul states very directly, “God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie” (*2 Thess. 2:11, NIV*). The knee-jerk response to this text is something like, “How can a God of truth send deception? How can He act the same as Satan at the end?” (*compare 2 Thess. 2:11 with 2 Thess. 2:9*).

In today’s passage Paul draws back the curtain and gives us a glimpse of the great controversy between Christ and Satan, which involves much more than just the affairs of this earth and its history. Satan has accused God of being unreasonable, a bully, and a deceiver. In the final crisis of earth’s history, God “sends” a delusion upon the wicked, not because He lies but because He allows the wicked to choose lies over truth and, thus, expose the outworking of decisions that they have already made (*2 Thess. 2:12*). He simply allows them to bear the fruits of their wrong actions. The events of the end time clearly expose the mind and character of Satan and his followers for all to see.

The process of delusion begins when people reject the gospel of Jesus Christ. In verse 10 the wicked refuse to receive the love of the truth. The offer of salvation in the gospel is the subtext that lies behind the apocalyptic powers of 2 Thessalonians 2. Through its teachings and practices, the papacy has undermined the gospel. That work continues until it is exposed by the final events described in 2 Thessalonians 2:8–12. Thus, the final proclamation of the gospel (*Matt. 24:14; Rev. 14:6, 7*) sets the stage for both the final judgment and the delusions of the end time.

In the end, whatever the outward political and religious manifestations of the great controversy as it plays out here on earth, the gospel of Jesus Christ, not political events, has always been the crucial divide between good and evil throughout Christian history. Antichrist reveals its true character by usurping the life, death, and heavenly reign of Jesus. All other actors in the drama play subordinate roles.

Read carefully 2 Thessalonians 2:12. For what key reason do people not receive the truth? How have you experienced this principle in your own life? That is, how has the “pleasure” of unrighteousness, even subtly, kept your mind from being open to truth?

Further Study: “The apostle Paul warned the church not to look for the coming of Christ in his day. ‘That day shall not come,’ he says, ‘except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed.’ 2 Thessalonians 2:3. Not till after the great apostasy, and the long period of the reign of the ‘man of sin,’ can we look for the advent of our Lord. The ‘man of sin,’ which is also styled ‘the mystery of iniquity,’ ‘the son of perdition,’ and ‘that wicked,’ represents the papacy, which, as foretold in prophecy, was to maintain its supremacy for 1260 years.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 356.

“As the crowning act in the great drama of deception, Satan himself will personate Christ. . . . In gentle, compassionate tones he presents some of the same gracious, heavenly truths which the Saviour uttered; he heals the diseases of the people, and then, in his assumed character of Christ, he claims to have changed the Sabbath to Sunday, and commands all to hallow the day which he has blessed. . . . Only those who have been diligent students of the Scriptures and who have received the love of the truth will be shielded from the powerful delusion that takes the world captive.”—Pages 624, 625.

“In bearing the message, make no personal thrusts at other churches, not even the Roman Catholic Church. Angels of God see in the different denominations many who can be reached only by the greatest caution. Therefore let us be careful of our words. . . . Upon these themes silence is eloquence. Many are deceived. Speak the truth in tones and words of love.”—Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*, p. 576.

Discussion Questions:

❶ Today many believe that the papacy has changed, and in some ways it has. Yet, on the basic issues of salvation it still seeks to usurp all that Christ has done and is doing for us. It is still the power depicted in prophecy. How can we stand firm in our biblical position regarding Rome while, at the same time, doing it with Christian love, forbearance, and tact?

❷ As a church we are constantly being confronted with people who come up with new dates for final events, new charts, new conspiracy theories about this group or that. While we must remain open to new light, how should we deal with these challenges?

Summary: By correcting some of the Thessalonians’ wrong views about last-day events, Paul gave us precious truth on the topic. We must always remember, though, that the crucial issue of the last days is not the timing of events or even all the details, but on which side of the great controversy do we choose to be.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *2 Thessalonians 2:1–12*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize that the only recourse against falling prey to Satan’s end-time deceptions is to foster a love of spiritual truth in his or her life.

Feel: Sense the need to grow in a knowledge and love of the truth as revealed in Scripture.

Do: Resolve to study God’s Word on a daily basis and allow it to transform his or her life.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: God’s Truth Guards Against Deception

A To correct the mistaken idea that the Second Coming was already secretly underway in his day, Paul lists a series of events that must occur first. Which events does Paul list?

B To what extent have the events that Paul listed been fulfilled today?

C Before Christ returns, Satan seeks to deceive the world. What words in the passage of the Key Text point to falsehood or deception? What is the only protection from being deceived?

II. Feel: A Desire to Know the Truth

A Jesus said, “The truth will set you free” (*John 8:32, NIV*). What truth is Jesus talking about? How have you found God’s truth to be liberating?

B What reasons might someone have for not wanting to know the truth? How is that dangerous?

III. Do: Learning to Love the Truth

A What does loving the truth look like in everyday life?

B How can a person move beyond simply knowing the truth to actually loving the truth?

► **Summary:** Learning to love the truth of God’s Word is the only protection against being overcome by Satan’s deceptions.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: A love for the truth will protect the followers of God from the powerful worldwide deceptions that Satan will enact just before the return of Christ.

Could the majority of the world's inhabitants be deceived by a final end-time deception perpetuated by Satan? While the idea might sound difficult to believe at first, individuals certainly less capable than the master of deception himself have deceived our "sophisticated" world with their fraudulence. One such example is the reported discovery, in April 1983, of the "Hitler Diaries." According to news reports, Hitler's handwritten diaries had been rescued by a German general from a crashed Nazi aircraft near Dresden in 1945. The German magazine *Stern* had learned of the discovery in 1980 and had paid five million dollars to have the documents smuggled out of East Germany. English publication rights were then sold to *Newsweek* magazine and the *Sunday Times*.

To determine the authenticity of the diaries, *Stern* had commissioned three separate handwriting analyses of one page from one of the diaries by experts in Europe and the United States. In each case the experts had agreed; it was Hitler's handwriting. In addition to these tests, the *Sunday Times* asked Hugh Trevor-Rope, a world-class expert on Hitler, to closely examine the volumes. After initially viewing the volumes, Trevor-Rope reported in the *Sunday Times* that in his professional opinion the diaries were authentic.

Two days before their first installment in the *Sunday Times*, Trevor-Rope began to express doubts about the documents. After additional tests were conducted, the diaries were declared to be forgeries. They were ultimately traced to Konrad Kujau, a small-town crook with a gift for forgery. Kujau later explained how he had fooled the experts. He had gleaned details about Hitler's life from published biographies, invented incidental details, imitated Hitler's handwriting, and poured tea on the pages and struck them against a table in order to create an old and worn appearance. He was arrested and sentenced to nearly five years in prison.—"Konrad Kujau," *London Times*, September 14, 2000.

Consider This: If a small-town crook could deceive so many experts, just imagine how skillful Satan's end-time deceptions will be. What can we do in order to make sure that we are not hoodwinked then?

► STEP 2—Explore

Bible Commentary

I. Staying on Course (Review 2 Thessalonians 2:1–3 with the class.)

While our tendency is probably to jump immediately to the end-time deceptions that Paul warns against in this passage, it is important to first understand the context in which Paul frames his later remarks. In the opening three verses of chapter 2, we learn that Paul’s ultimate concern is for the spiritual well-being of the new converts in Thessalonica. They were off to a good start, but now Paul has learned that speculation about end-time events has them so worried that they are in danger of losing their focus regarding the ways in which they should live life now.

Paul describes the type of spiritual agitation that they are facing with two words: *shaken* and *alarmed*. The word *shaken* refers to the type of swaying motion generated by wind or wave. Here Paul seems to have in mind the image of a ship nearly ready to come free from its moorings or one being tossed about in a tempest. His use of the word *alarmed* points to the more internal emotions of fear that one experiences when startled. This type of spiritual angst is highly destructive to the Christian life. It gets people so worked up about that which is going to happen in the future that they struggle to live by faith in the present. Jesus warned against this danger, in Matthew 24, where He said, “ ‘And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed’ ” (*Matt. 24:6, ESV*).

What is the source of the Thessalonians’ alarm? Some of the Thessalonians had come to the conclusion that Christ had already returned. As strange as this might sound, it should not really surprise us. New believers are always more susceptible to false teachings given that they have not had the time to be grounded in Scripture. Because a literal interpretation of the Second Coming would clearly argue against the idea that Jesus had already returned, we can conclude only that some of the Thessalonians must have assumed that Christ had returned spiritually. Something similar, perhaps, to the modern belief of Jehovah Witnesses who maintain that the second coming of Jesus took place spiritually in 1914.

Consider This: Paul was worried that the Thessalonians might become so alarmed with final events that they would stop living for Christ in the present. As we anticipate the soon return of Christ, how can we guard against letting our faith go to one extreme or another?

II. The Great Rebellion (Review 2 Thessalonians 2:3–12 with the class.)

Having already told the Thessalonians that Christ’s return would be sudden and unexpected (*1 Thess. 5:2*), Paul now explains that Christ could not have returned already because there are certain events that must occur first. The first event will be a great “falling away” (*2 Thess. 2:3, NKJV*) or a “rebellion” against God orchestrated by the powers of evil (*compare Matt. 24:10–12; Acts 20:29, 30; 1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Tim. 3:1–5; 4:3, 4*).

In addition to the spiritual apostasy, Paul adds that the man of sin (or lawlessness) must be revealed. The fact that this man must be revealed indicates he is an individual who prefers to keep his identity hidden. While Paul does not specifically identify this individual, the characteristics that he does mention provide some clues. First, his actions are similar to the malicious behavior of Satan himself. Like Satan he claims to be God and desires to sit on God’s throne (*Isaiah 14, Ezekiel 28*). And as Satan opposes God and His followers (*Zech. 3:1, 2*), so the man of sin is one who “opposes” God and His work. But, as the lesson also points out, Paul’s terminology of the man of sin, in 2 Thessalonians 2:8–10, parallels the description of the little-horn power in Daniel that was used by Satan to hinder God’s followers and His work (*compare Dan. 8:9–12, 23–25*). These two clues point to Satan himself and the various “frontmen” that he has used down through the ages in order to do his work of deception.

At the end of time, Satan himself will attempt to gain the worship of the world by pulling off the greatest deception ever seen—a counterfeit Second Coming! Paul indicates this by using the very same word that he has used to describe the return of Jesus (Greek *parousia*) to describe the “coming” of the man of sin (Greek *parousia*, *2 Thess. 2:9*). In an attempt to legitimize his counterfeit “coming,” Satan will perform “miracles, signs, and lying wonders”—nearly the same phrase that the apostle Peter used in order to testify to the truthfulness of Jesus’ ministry (*Acts 2:22*).

Paul’s point is clear. The final deception will be so convincing that only those who are willing to “receive the love of the truth” (*2 Thess. 2:10, NKJV*) will not be fooled (*compare Matt. 24:24, Mark 13:22*).

Consider This: In line with the teaching of the Protestant Reformers, Seventh-day Adventists have historically identified the man of sin with the papacy. What danger is there, however, in focusing exclusively on the role of the papacy in end-time events? That is, though we must never forget its role, the issues are bigger than just the role of the papacy.

► **STEP 3**—Apply

Thought Questions:

- 1 In addition to the story of Jacob’s deception of his father Isaac, what

other stories in the Bible involve one person deceiving another? What can we learn from these accounts regarding ways in which to avoid deception?

2 Paul says that those who will be lost “refused to love the truth” (2 Thess. 2:10, NIV). While the fate of these individuals is to be lamented, what “good news” might we see in the use of the word *refused*?

3 Pilate once asked Jesus, “What is truth?” (John 18:38). In light of the importance that Paul places on the “truth” in 2 Thessalonians 2:10, 12, how would you answer this question?

Application Questions:

1 God is described as the one who restrains evil through the preaching of His Word. How is God’s power of restraint present in your life?

2 Many people will be deceived by Satan’s deceptions. What can you do now, not only to protect yourself but to protect others who are within the sphere of your influence?

► **STEP 4**—Create

Just for Teachers: As Friday’s section of the lesson points out, many people today do not see the papacy as a threat, and certainly not as a major player aligned against God’s people in the final events of earth’s history. With this in mind, and keeping fully before us the Adventist perspective on the papacy (which is powerfully supported in the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy), it would still be wise to handle this matter with sensitivity. The following activity may be helpful in this regard.

Activity: Point out to the class that Satan has actively been working since the resurrection of Christ to undermine the work of Christ in this world and in the lives of His followers. Divide the class up into groups and have them come up with a list of people and institutions that might be seen as “manifestations” of the ultimate end-time “man of sin.”