

How to Know the Day of the Lord Has Come

2 Thessalonians 2.1-12

Are we living in the last days? The COVID pandemic, advances in technology, threats of war and famine, and a rise in lawlessness all remind us of biblical prophecies. But to keep us from getting ahead of ourselves, Paul ‘fills in the blanks’ on what happens first.

The Deception: ‘The day of the Lord has come!’ (1-2)**The Correction: ‘This will happen first!’ (3-12)**

- The apostasy of the professing church will occur (3a)
- The man of lawlessness (sin) will rise to power (3-4, 8-12)
 - He is worshipped as and claims to be God (4a)
 - He will set his seat in God’s temple (4b)
 - He is controlled by Satan (9a)
 - He will perform signs and wonders (9b)
 - He will deceive the world (10-12)
 - He will be defeated by Jesus at His second coming (8)
- The one who restrains lawlessness will be taken away (7)

2 Thessalonians 2.1-12

Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God. Do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things? And you know what restrains him now, so that in his time he will be revealed. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way. Then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming; that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved. For this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness.

Twenty-five years ago, Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins burst onto the world stage with the publication of their book *Left Behind*, a novel based on the biblical prophecy

of the Rapture and the Great Tribulation. The series grew to 16 books in all, and four feature-length films. In 2012, Jonathan Cahn wrote *The Harbinger*, proposing that 9/11 was a wake-up call from God to America. He's written five more books since. Documentaries and movies now predict the Rapture is coming soon. Recent world events like the moving of our embassy to Jerusalem, the peace agreements between Israel and Arab nations, and the rise of Iran and Turkey, all point, say Bible prophecy experts, to the soon return of Christ to this earth – that we are living in the last days – or as someone said to me a week ago, the 'last seconds'!

Biblical prophecies have caused rampant speculation for centuries; in fact, all the way back in the first century, Christians were looking for signs of Jesus' return. That is, in fact, why this letter from Paul to the Thessalonians was written. For 2000 years, Christians have looked for Jesus' return. We are still looking today. There is nothing wrong with this. Jesus told us to do this in His parable of the fig tree (Mt. 24.32-33); He said that when we see all these prophesied events coming to pass, "He is near, right at the door"! I am confident that we are living in the last days, but before we get ahead of ourselves, as Christians are wont to do when it comes to prophecy, we need to let God's Word speak, and that brings us to 2 Thessalonians.

The church in Thessalonica was in trouble. They were doing great spiritually: Paul praises them – they were on fire for the Lord! But they were severely persecuted by Jews and city authorities, and now, to make matters worse, they were getting false teaching.

The Deception: 'The day of the Lord has come!' (1-2)
The problem was this: In his first letter to them, Paul told them about a future time called the day of the Lord when God's judgment would be poured out on a wicked world. But he assured them they would not go through this time of wrath. Twice he tells them that God is going to save them from this time. He said that Jesus would descend from heaven and take them to be with Him forever. He told them to comfort each other in the midst of their persecution, knowing that they would be with Jesus.

But now, false teachers had started challenging Paul's teaching about the Rapture. Someone even produced a letter ostensibly from Paul saying the same thing. Their message was that the dreaded day of the Lord *had come*. Their suffering was part of God's wrath being poured out on the earth, and worse was coming.

But if that was true. Paul was wrong. What about the promise of Jesus appearing and taking them to be with Him forever? Doubts crept into their minds: Were they unsaved? Had they been left behind? Were they destined to go through the Great Tribulation after all?

In the first chapter, Paul assured them that what they were experiencing was not God's wrath: God was not angry with them. What they are facing is preparing them to be worthy of Christ's kingdom; those who persecute them now with one day be punished by God. But how can they know? 2 Thess. 2.1-12 is the answer. It is the heart of this letter. It reveals truth about end times found nowhere else in Scripture, and confirms that Christians should not fear God's coming judgment.

The Correction: ‘This will happen first!’ (3-12)

In verses 3-12, Paul reveals three things that will happen before God’s wrath is poured out on the earth.

- The apostasy of the professing church will occur (3a)

The first thing Paul says will happen before this terrible time is that “the apostasy” will come. Apostasy isn’t sin or wickedness in the world; apostasy is rebellion against God within the professing church. It is a ‘departure’ from God and His Word. The church not only won’t condemn sin, it will condone it! It not only won’t teach the Bible, it will pervert the gospel. This is already happening in many Christian churches in America today

- The man of lawlessness will rise to power (3-4, 8-12)

The second thing Paul says will happen evidently occurs at the same time as the apostasy. At the end of v3, we read that ‘the man of lawlessness will be revealed, the son of perdition or destruction.’ A man is going to rise to power in the world – a man who embodies evil. In these verses, we learn six things about this person:

- He is worshiped as and claims to be God (4a)

Verse 4 says that he “opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship.” According to the Encyclopedia of Gods (yes, that’s a real thing), there are over 2,500 deities worshiped in the world today. The man of lawlessness will not allow the worship of any god but himself.

- He will set his seat in God’s temple (4b)

Secondly, he will demonstrate his claim to be the one true God by going into the inner sanctuary of the temple, into the Holy of Holies, and sitting in the seat of God.

- He is controlled by Satan (9a)

In v9, we read that his “coming is in accord with the activity of Satan” – that he is controlled by Satan.

- He will perform signs and wonders (9b)

In the second half of v9, we are told that Satan gives him supernatural power to perform miraculous signs. The signs will support his claim to be God, and everyone who sees them will be filled with awe and wonder.

- He will deceive the world (10-12)

With the help of his amazing signs, he will deceive all unbelievers – and v11 says that God will “send upon them a deluding influence” so that they will believe what is false.

- He will be defeated by Jesus at His second coming (8)

Finally, v8 tells us that the Lord will utterly defeat him “with the breath of His mouth” at His second coming.

“OK,” you say, “we know a lot *about* this person...but who *is* he?”

Biblically, the ‘man of lawlessness’ is the world leader identified as ‘The Beast’ in Rev. 13.1-10. The beast gets his power from Satan; he performs miracles so that he is viewed as God; everyone worships him (2-4, 8), and he blasphemes God and His temple (6-7).

This is where Bible prophecy gets really interesting. In the OT, the prophet Daniel prophesied about a man in the end times who would “desecrate the sanctuary...do away with the regular sacrifice...(and) set up the abomination of desolation” (Dan. 11.31). What was he talking about?

More than five hundred years later, the week before His crucifixion, Jesus sat on the Mount of Olives and talked about the end of the age and His second coming. He said that false prophets would arise, and lawlessness would increase, then said this: “When you see the abomination of desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place,” a time of “great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world” will follow (Matt. 24.11-12, 15, 21).

Everything matches up: Daniel’s prophecy, the warning of Jesus, the passage we are looking at this morning, and the prophecies of the book of Revelation. The beast – the world ruler also known as the Antichrist, will desecrate the Holy of Holies in the temple of God. And he will do this *before* the pouring out of God’s wrath of this earth.

People have been suggesting who this mysterious person is for centuries. The Reformers thought it was the Pope. In my lifetime, I remember as a boy some suggesting it

was the notorious Russian communist Nikita Khrushchev. In recent years, almost every president has been proposed as the Antichrist. Books have been written about this, but as our passage says, he will be revealed.

So those are two of the three things Paul says will happen before the judgments of the day of the Lord, the apostasy and the rise of the man of lawlessness. What is the third?

- The one who restrains lawlessness will be taken away

The third thing that must happen is in vv6-7 and it must happen before either of the other two. Paul writes in v6 that right now, something is restraining this explosion of evil; in vv7-8 he says: *For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way. Then that lawless one will be revealed...*

This enigmatic phrase is maddeningly vague: We know what the first half of verse 7 means: Satan is already spreading his evil throughout the earth. We see it every day on the evening news. He opposes everything that is from God. God gave life; he markets in death. Children are a gift from the Lord; he promotes killing children in the womb. God gave the institution of marriage; he seeks to destroy it. God made us male and female; he confuses our genders. Make no mistake: Satan is active!

But right now, *someone* is restraining him, keeping him from completely controlling the world with his evil plans. Who is this? Who has the power to restrain Satan?

There have been many suggestions, but I agree with those who say this must be the Holy Spirit, working in and through Christians. When will the Holy Spirit be 'taken out of the way' (v7b)? When Christians, who the Spirit indwells, are taken out of the world at the Rapture. That will be the signal for Satan to ratchet up his wicked schemes, and for God to pour out His wrath on the earth.

Paul ends the passage in vv11-12 by focusing in on those who are not saved when the end comes. Scripture tells us that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night; in an instant, millions of Christians will be Raptured out of the world to be with the Lord. Verse 11 tells us that at that time, "God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false." Millions of people have just vanished from the face of the earth. The people who are left want to know what has happened. The man of sin appears, claims to be God, gives some explanation for the Rapture – and everyone believes him.

Paul wrote this end-time prophecy to the Thessalonians so that they would know that the day of the Lord had not come, and keep standing strong for Christ, and looking for His return. Why did God include it in the Bible?

Let me leave you this morning with two reasons. First, for every Christian who hears these words, you can rest assured that no matter what persecution or suffering you may face in life, no matter how crazy this world may get, God is in control. He knows the end from the beginning, and one day, He will righteously judge those who do not receive the truth and believe in Him.

For those who do not know God, who have not believed in the Lord Jesus as Savior, this is a warning. The end is coming, and it may be near. God's offer of forgiveness for sin and a forever home in heaven is now available. It will not always be. Let this be the day you trust in Jesus as your Lord and Savior, and start a new life – a life that will go on forever.

This section of Paul's letter is his clarification of his own instruction, or correction of false teachings by others, which had led to misunderstandings concerning "the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering to Him" (1). This "gathering together" refers to the Rapture, when all believers, both dead and alive, will be 'gathered together' with the Lord (1 Thess. 4.16-17). Paul urges them not to be shaken (2a) or taken in (deceived, 3a) by anyone saying that the Day of the Lord (NKJ 'day of Christ') has come (2c). Some said they had received a revelation from God to this effect; others said the persecution they were suffering was a fulfillment of prophesied judgments. A letter claiming to be from Paul taught the same error (2b). Paul responds that three things must happen first:

1) First, something that is restraining lawlessness in the world will be taken away (7b). Paul says in v3 that there is a "man of lawlessness (sin)" or "the son of destruction (perdition)," and in v7a he tells us that he is now active in our world ("the mystery of lawlessness is already at work"). But who or what is restraining evil today? Some say this refers to governments, but many governments encourage evil! Most likely, this refers to the Holy Spirit, and the restraining effect He has on evil through Christians. Paul is saying that the day of the Lord will not come until Christians are taken out of the world at the Rapture, and the restraining power of the Holy Spirit will also go.

2) The second and third things Paul mentions seem to happen together. In v3, he says "the apostasy" (*ἀποστασία*; rebellion against God) will come. This isn't ungodliness in the world; it's rebellion against God within the professing church. After the Spirit is gone, the church not only won't condemn sin, it will condone it! It will depart from truth altogether, and proclaim nothing resembling the gospel. This 'lawlessness' is already at work (7a). In much of the church in America, this is happening today.

3) The third thing Paul mentions is the rise of the man of lawlessness at the same time as the great apostasy. In vv3-4 and 8-12, Paul reveals otherwise unknown truths about this person. He will make himself out to be God; be worshipped in God's temple (4). He is controlled by Satan; he has power to perform signs and wonders (9). And he deceives unbelievers (those who "did not receive the love of the truth," v10). At Jesus' second coming, he will be defeated by the mere breath of Jesus' mouth (8).

The obvious question is: Who is this guy? And when is all this going to happen?

- This man aligns perfectly with the Beast (Antichrist) of the Great Tribulation in Revelation 13.1-10. Satan gives him power to perform miracles and counterfeit God; everyone worships him (2-4, 8), and he blasphemes God and His tabernacle (6-7). Daniel also prophesied of a man who would "desecrate the sanctuary...do away with the regular sacrifice...(and) set up the abomination of desolation" (Dan. 11.31). Jesus, telling His disciples about the end of the age,

said false prophets would arise, and lawlessness would increase, then said, "When you see the abomination of desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place," a time of "great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world" will follow (Matt. 24.11-12, 15, 21). And Rev. 19.11-21 tells exactly what will happen to this man: When Jesus returns, he will be seized and thrown into the lake of fire (1 Thess. 2.8b).

- Of course, there is no temple today. When Paul wrote this letter, the temple stood in Jerusalem, but since 70 A.D. it has not. But now Israel is a nation, and plans to rebuild the temple are already in place. Since 1987, there has been a Temple Movement among orthodox Jews in Israel, who are planning to rebuild the temple where it once stood. The leader of the Zehut political party in Israel wants to start rebuilding right now. Dozens of books and websites give detailed information of the rebuilding plans. I believe that at the beginning of the seven-year tribulation, Israel will rebuild the temple, setting the stage for the Antichrist to set himself up as God, and set in motion God's terrible wrath being poured out on the earth.

Paul ends the passage, in vv11-12, by telling what will happen to those who do not believe in Christ. In v11, we read that "God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false." Remember what has just happened: Millions of Christians have just vanished from the face of the earth. People want to know what has happened. The man of sin appears, claims to be God, and gives some explanation for the Rapture – and everyone believes him. Paul gives this stunning revelation to assure the Thessalonian Christians that the day of the Lord has not yet come.

Digging Deeper

1. The context for Paul's instruction in these verses is the coming Day of the Lord, a time which includes judgment and blessing from God. What specific events occur during this time? Which events does Paul allude to in v.1?
2. The false teaching that had shaken the Thessalonian Christians was that "the day of the Lord has come" (2), that it had already started! Why might Christians in Thessalonica be susceptible to this idea? What teaching of Paul in 1 Thessalonians (see 1.10 and 5.9) would be proven false if they were in fact living in the Tribulation period?
3. Paul says that before the judgments of the day of the Lord can come, other things must happen. The first thing he mentions is "the apostasy" (ἀποστασία = rebellion, falling away). This is a reference not to evil in the world, which is always there, but to a time when the professing church will abandon God's truth in His Word. What signs of this time approaching do you see?
4. A second event which will signal the imminent judgment of the day of the Lord is the 'revealing of the man of lawlessness' (3b and 8a). What do we learn about him in verses 3-4 and 6-10?
5. A third factor which will signal God's coming wrath is that *something or someone* that now "restrains" lawlessness will be "taken out of the way" (6-7). What (Who) has enough power to restrain the spread of satanic influence in the world today? Can you guess how He does it? What event will remove this power from the earth?
6. Paul ends by telling what happens to unbelievers at this time: *God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false* (11). If millions of Christians have just vanished from earth in the Rapture, what lies of the man of sin might people be deluded into believing?