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**2nd Thessalonians 2:1–13 ESV, highly abridged.**

*2 We ask you, <sup>2</sup> not to be quickly shaken in mind, by a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. <sup>3</sup> 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, <sup>4</sup> who takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. <sup>5</sup> Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? <sup>6</sup> And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. <sup>7</sup> For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. <sup>8</sup> And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill. <sup>9</sup> The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with false signs and wonders, <sup>10</sup> and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. <sup>11</sup> Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, <sup>12</sup> in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness. <sup>13</sup> But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.*

### **The lawless one.**

Recently, I delivered a message about evil and overviewed a popular philosophical argument that says that evil is essentially the absence of good, that evil is what rises up when humans do things that do not reflect the goodness of God's heart. We live according to the commands for love, forgiveness, and empathy taught to us by Christ. We also admit our own faults and always strive to overcome them and be regenerated spiritually. As a result, we can fill the world with goodness

and refuse to let evil sprout up between the cracks. The argument is that evil is due to the actions of humans, and a primary job of ours on this earth is to build an environment where it cannot thrive. What we're looking at today is a passage in 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians that is somewhat reminiscent of the Epistles of John and the Book of Revelation. All of them talk about the Antichrist, which is called the "man of lawlessness" in 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians. This cosmic being, which is the polar opposite of Jesus Christ, is not a New Testament invention. The antichrist is derived from ancient Jewish traditions, as evidenced in the Book of Daniel. In the New Testament, the antichrist is the individual who will come to earth and try to substitute himself for Christ just before the Second Coming, when Jesus reappears at the End Times. We've talked before about various theories that these pieces of literature were not meant to be taken literally and are in fact allegories concerning contemporary people and empires. The author of Daniel is sometimes thought to have been alluding to the ancient leader of Palestine, someone called Antiochus Epimanes (or Antiochus the Mad) and not any true antichrist. The author of Revelation, John of Patmos, is thought to have been writing about the ultimate destruction of the Roman Empire and not the end of the world. And the author of 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians (who might NOT have actually been Paul) is often thought to have been referring to some evil emperor of Rome when he writes

about the Lawless One. What I want to talk about is this seeming fundamental conflict that faces modern believers: do we buy into the traditional or “literal” interpretation of the Bible when it comes to the End Times, or do we want to take a more symbolic, literary or non-literal view? I’d like to argue that it actually doesn’t matter, because whether we think the lawless one is some Satan-like being or is a clothed reference to an ancient Roman oppressor, the lesson we get from the Bible is the same. And that lesson is particularly relevant for us today. But first, let’s overview our Bible passage for today.

It is widely believed that Paul did indeed personally write 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians. But there is great disagreement when it comes to 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians. Much of the language and phraseology is the same in the two letters. But 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians is warm and filled with personal details. In comparison, 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians is colder, very formal, and downright authoritarian. So, we don’t know for sure that Paul actually wrote this letter; the other possibility is that a follower of his wrote it for him. One of the main purposes of the letter is to correct something that has apparently arisen among the believers in Thessalonica: someone has convinced them that the End Times are near. Paul, who was probably in Corinth at the time, heard that some false teacher or a fake letter attributed to Paul had predicted that soon, Jesus would reappear - and humanity would quickly cease to exist on

earth. Paul is trying to calm them down. He's reminding them that he has already taught them that other things must happen first, before the Parousia will occur. Remember that we have talked about the Parousia before; the Greek word "Parousia", which means "formal arrival" or "official visit", and might have been used to describe a visit by a Roman official, an important person, or a king. In the New Testament, it refers to the return of Christ, what over the centuries has become known as the Second Coming, although no such term appears in the Bible. First, before Jesus reappears, there will be a universal rising up of defiance toward Godly authority. This is the so-called Apostacy. And second, the "lawless one" will be revealed.

Paul provides some detail about this second event. This "lawless one" is someone who puts himself above God, who gives himself a seat in the Temple of God. The lawless one will declare himself to be God. But Paul, if Paul is indeed the author of this letter, does not come out and do what is done in the Epistles of John, and call this person the antichrist. Because of this, countless scholars and researchers have argued about the true identity of the lawless one. Still, unless we accept the argument that this story is an allegory, and the lawless one is some political figure of the day, like a Roman Emperor, the lawless one must be the antichrist. Interestingly, Paul then argues that some "restrainer" will arrive on the

scene and will keep the lawless one, that being who challenges the law of God, at bay. We don't know who or what the restrainer is. It could be a godly being, like the archangel Michael. Or it could be the Word of God and the Gospel itself. Paul then makes the situation a bit confusing by saying that God will send a "deceiving power" so that non-believers will fall for the lies of the lawless one and then be condemned for it. The passage ends, though, with Paul reassuring the good Thessalonian believers that God is behind them and will save them. The main point is that the End Times cannot arrive until the "lawless one" and the "restrainer", as well as the "deceiving power" have all done their jobs. The people can relax.

On one level this is all about the people of Thessalonica thinking the world was about to end and Paul is trying to calm them down. But a deeper view of this is that in the wake of Christ's resurrection, and this is something that continued on for the next couple of hundred years, many false interpreters of the Gospel have been rising up. This is something that we see in many other places in the New Testament. We see it in literature that appeared after the Bible was written. We've seen it in our own lifetimes, people professing to be prophets, or to be holding some hidden, secret knowledge of Christ, or to be predicting the exact date that the world will end. To me, this is the real lesson of our passage. It has

nothing to do with any debate about whether all of this refers to the literal end of the world or the demise of the Roman oppressors, or if the lawless one is Satan or a Roman Emperor. What we get from this passage is that people will constantly be trying to tell us that they know more than our Bible tells us, or that there is no God, or that Jesus was a fake or a madman, or that religion is just something that people believed in before science began to reveal the real truths of the universe. There will always be a lawless one in our lives, someone who works hard to get us to deny our faith.

As an academic who has been a professor in a major research university for going on 40 years, I have had many lawless ones in my life. I was at a faculty meeting once, a number of years ago. It was in the months leading up to the first time Obama was elected. He was running against John McCain. I'm not here to make a political statement or to take either a liberal or a conservative stand, but as it turned out, my faculty was universally and very vocally in favor of Obama. Some of them had even volunteered for his campaign effort. One professor in my department made a sarcastic remark about John McCain being a Christian, about him thinking that he was "saved". People laughed at this quip. Then this professor went on and said that she couldn't believe how many fools believed that Jesus was some kind of God. I was of course sitting there through all of this,

and I stood up and said, “I believe it.” Some folks continued to laugh, assuming that I was joking. But my expression stayed fixed, and in a clumsy way, the conversation petered out and people started talking about something very different.

The lawless one can be a person in your life. It can be our culture as a whole. It can be evil in some general sense, a force that we know exists and we know is due largely to the activities of humans. The lawless one will always be in your life. The lawless one will appear as TV dramas that depict Christians as brainless hypocritical bigots. The lawless one will appear as a neighbor or coworker who treats you coldly because you are a believer. The lawless one will be someone who drives past you with one of those fish icons on their car, the ones that make fun of Christian fish symbols by putting feet on the fish, as if all Christians are ignorant fools who think that evolution conflicts with Christianity.

But here’s an upside. Lately, I have been taking a lot of walks, mostly with Wendy, and often we have our son with us. We don’t have much else to do. I tend to wear the cap I have on now – it has a white cross on it. People walking toward us see it. Want to know what’s funny? People don’t treat me like a fool because I’m wearing it. They often smile and nod at me or say hello. A couple of people have identified themselves as Christians. I’ve seen something similar at

the hospital where I work, where people are suddenly very accepting of the one chaplain that isn't some kind of Buddhist. They ask for me special when a patient wants someone to pray with. More patients ask me to pray with them, by the way, than was the case before the epidemic of Covid-19. The current emergency has suddenly given people an acceptance of faith. This is something that we see over and over and over in our lives: people deny God and make fun of Jesus when times are good, and then they turn to God when things are bad. The difference with us is that we never go away. We believe in God and in Jesus in good times and in bad. Our hope is that some of those people who find faith when there's a pandemic will still believe when it is all over.

Don't get hung up on whether the Bible is literal in any modern sense. Biblical writers did not have the same sense of strictly separating truth from fiction like we do. They wrote faith stories that described God's love of God's people; they did not set out to write blow by blow histories. They wrote allegories. They made heavy use of symbolism and analogies and metaphors. They wrote letters and attributed them to famous people like Paul the evangelist – not to fool anyone, but to honor that person. Accept the Bible as God's word that can be read on many levels – and can be true on all those levels.

So, we don't know when the world will end. It could be tonight. Or it could be in a thousand years. Or a hundred thousand years. Maybe the end of the world will come in the form of some natural cosmic event where all matter compresses into a single bit of matter that is infinitely small, if I understand what some scientists are telling us. It doesn't matter. What matters is that we believe in God, we believe in what Jesus taught through his words and his actions – and that is to be kind, to defend the defenseless, to forgive, to seek forgiveness, to try throughout our lives to become more and more Christlike. We believe that we live in the Kingdom of God now – and we will live in the Kingdom of God forever. Let me offer a brief prayer.

*God, there is one gift that you have given us that we tend to not talk about a lot. That is the simplicity that you can help us extract from a very complex, overwhelming world. It is the simple fact that we were made in your image and that all we need to worry about is trying our best honor that image. If we do that every day, then we will have nothing to worry about. And if everyone everywhere lived like that, the world would be an astonishingly godly place. Amen.*