

The Great Apostasy Foretold

2 Thessalonians 2:3-12

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Introduction

Last week in our sermon series from 2 Thessalonians, we came to chapter 2.

- If you were here, you will remember that I did a brief overview of the whole chapter in which we saw that in this chapter:
 - Paul urged the Thessalonians not to listen to those who had been spreading the teaching that the Day of Christ had already come...
 - It is clear that he is not talking even about the judgment of Jerusalem, but about the final coming of Jesus when He comes at the last day to gather us all to Himself.
 - Paul went on to explain that there would be a great apostasy that would come first—in which the man of sin who is also called the son of perdition would arise and lead those who were not true believers astray.
 - Paul then assured the Thessalonians in verses 13-17 that having seen the fruit of true faith in them, he was convinced that they would not be led astray, but would be among those who would be gathered to Christ for salvation at the last day.
- We then zeroed in on what it means to be gathered to Christ in that day.
 - This is our great hope as God's people—that He will come for us and bring us into the Father's house and establish a new heaven and a new earth, giving us resurrected bodies and perfect holiness.
 - God's people have always been identified as those who are gathered to Christ, in the Old Testament as Christ was ritually presented to them, and in the New Testament as we are spiritually gathered to Him.
 - Even in our weekly worship, we gather to Him spiritually in anticipation of our gathering to Him for all eternity at the last day.
 - What a splendid thing it is to think of seeing Him!

This week, we are going to turn to the great apostasy of which Paul prophesies in this chapter.

- This is sometimes said to be most difficult passage within any of Paul's letters to interpret, and that is saying something because even Peter says that Paul's letter are sometimes hard to understand.
- But the wonderful thing about a passage that has difficult things in it is that the things that are essential for us to know are clear.
- It will be my intent this morning to be sure that we do not miss the clear teaching of this passage on account of the parts that are difficult to understand.
 - But we also ought to be careful not to fall into the category of those who struggle with interpretation simply because we don't *like* what a passage is teaching.
 - That is definitely one of the things that makes this passage difficult, but clearly, it has other difficulties besides.

Let me read it to you now. I will begin in 2 Thess 2:1 and read through verse 12.

- Give careful attention because this is the very word of God.

2 Thess 2:1-12: Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you, ² not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come. ³ Let no one deceive you by any means; for *that Day will not come* unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, ⁴ who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God. ⁵ Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? ⁶ And now you know what is restraining, that he may be revealed in his

own time. ⁷ 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. ⁸ And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming. ⁹ The coming of the *lawless one* is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, ¹⁰ and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. ¹¹ And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, ¹² that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

May the Lord bless to us the reading of His holy word.

I. You can see here that the Holy Spirit teaches us, through Paul, that there will be a great falling away before Jesus returns for us.

- Verse 3 says: **Let no one deceive you by any means; for *that Day will not come* unless the falling away comes first**

A. The falling away is an apostasy—

1. The word translated *falling away* is *ha apo-sta-sia* in the original Greek.
 - It literally means *the standing away from*.
 - It was often used in the military for those who defect—they stand away from their comrades.
 - It is a rebellion—a breaking away from.
2. Paul is using it, as it is almost always used in scripture, of a falling away from the Lord and His people.
 - It is used of those like Judas who were part of the professing church, but then turned away from us.
3. What is noteworthy here is the definite article—it is *the apostasy*.
 - There are many in the church who fall away—there always have been...
 - but this is *the falling away—the apostasy of apostasies*.
 - That is why I referred to it as a *great* falling away.
 - It is not just the falling away of a person here and another one there, or of a church here or a church there.
 - It speaks of an apostasy that affects the whole church—one so significant that it is called *the apostasy* much as we might speak of *the Halifax explosion*.
 - There have been many lesser explosions, but everyone knows what you are talking about when you speak of *the Halifax explosion*.
 - It is the one that devastated the whole city.

- B. This great apostasy will involve the emergence of one called *the man of sin*.
- He is referred to in verses 3-10...
1. Look at the different titles by which he is called.
 - a. In verse three, he is called *the man of sin*—which is a way of referring to him as the man who is characterised by sin.
 - b. And in the same verse he is also called *the son of perdition* which means that he is a man who is destined for perdition or ruin...
 - We are told this right from the start about him.
 - c. And then if you move down to verse 8, you can see that he is called *the lawless one* which means that he has no regard for obeying God.
 - He does what he wants instead of what God wants.
 - Like Satan and all of us in the fall, he has no regard for God’s authority.
 2. His rebellion reaches to a very great height!
 - a. He sets himself above all that is called God or that is worshipped...
 - Verse 4 says: **who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped,**
 - Civil rulers are sometimes called gods because they are appointed by God...but this man will set himself over all of them—above the law.
 - He will set himself over all idols and all objects of veneration of any kind.
 - Worst of all, he will set himself over the one true God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
 - b. And verse 4 goes on to say that he will sit in the very temple of God, showing himself that he is God.
 - He actually endeavours to take the place that belongs to God.
 - To make laws binding upon others.
 - To determine worship.
 - To judge those who displease him and sentence them to hell.
 - To be venerated by all—to have kings bow to him and kiss his feet.
 - Clearly, he is the same as the one called the antichrist.
 - That word *anti* means *instead of*, so *antichrist* is one who replaces Christ.
 - James and John asked to sit on the right and left of Christ, but the man of sin wants to sit on His very throne as if he is God.
 3. It is clear that he arises in connection with the apostasy.
 - a. He is introduced in verse 3 as arising with it—that is when he is revealed.
 - He arises at the same time the rebellion arises.
 - b. If you read on, it is clear that he is instrumental in bringing about the apostasy.
 - Verses 9 & 10 explain that he is the one who deceives the people who did not receive the love of the truth.
 - I will say more about them in a moment, but for now just notice that he deceives them with “all power (or miracles), signs, and lying wonders.”
 - Again he is a counterfeit Christ- who exhibited power, signs, and wonders among us to show that He was the Son of God.
 - The man of sin will use lying powers, signs, and wonders to lead people astray—away from the truth that they were taught.

- C. And if you look carefully, you can see that the man of sin and the apostasy itself arise gradually.
1. Paul says in verse 7 that *the mystery of lawlessness* is already at work.
 - Like most apostasies, the great apostasy is not one that comes suddenly, but one that was already starting to happen in Paul's day.
 - It is called a mystery because it was something hidden that was going to be clearly seen (revealed) in the future.
 - It could be seen somewhat, but it, along with the man of sin, was being restrained at the present time.
 2. Look at how Paul describes that which is restraining the emergence of the apostasy and the man of sin in verse 6-7.
 - The thing restraining is both an *it* and a *he*.
 - 1 Thess 2:6-8: **And now you know what is restraining, that he may be revealed in his own time. ⁷ 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. ⁸ And then the lawless one will be revealed...**
 - Here we run into an interpretation difficulty because Paul says, "you know what is restraining," and while the Thessalonians knew, we do not.
 - This is something he had spoken to them about before, as verse 5 says.
 - The problem is, we do not know, except that it was something that was present in Paul's day and that restrained lawlessness and that would be taken out of the way.
 - We might think it was the Holy Spirit or God (as the translators of the NKJV suggest by capitalising the pronoun—albeit with a marginal notation with it uncapitalised) if it were not for the fact that it says that it and he will be *taken out of the way*.
 - That is hardly a way to refer to the Holy Spirit or to God.
 - For this reason, many interpreters both ancient and more modern—even both Roman Catholic and Protestant—understand the one that restrains to be the government of the Roman empire.
 - The Empire was too powerful and the church was yet too small for anyone to rise up to such power (in the church) as the man of sin was to attain.
 - The Roman Empire would have to be weakened and then this one who would be able to stand above all authority—to show himself as God and to spread his deception to all those who did not love the truth in the church.
 - 3. All of this suggests that the apostasy and the man of sin will arise gradually.
 - If it was already beginning in Paul's day and was going to be manifested fully in the future—when the restraint of the Empire was taken away,
 - Gradual development is what we would expect.
 - For this reason, many interpreters also believe that the man of sin is not an individual, but a seat of power that is occupied by a succession of men over the generations...
 - in the same way that the throne of David was referred to as David's throne, and *David* was said to flourish when he had faithful descendants and to

flounder when he had unfaithful descendants, until at last his throne was forever established when Jesus came.

- The throne of the antichrist is similar, but as a throne for wickedness—as power increases over the generations until it comes to full expression.
- It is then that it will bring about the falling away that will affect the whole church, as we already saw in verse 10,
 - sweeping away into deception all of those how did not receive the love of the truth.

D. But you also can see that this apostasy and this man of sin who leads it will be brought to ruin by Jesus Christ.

1. It will be a very great falling away, but as we have already seen, the man of sin is called the son of perdition as soon as he is mentioned in verse 3...

- He is the man destined to be destroyed—however great his power may be.

➤ Paul seems very eager to tell us of his destruction—he sort of gets ahead of himself—always mentioning that destruction is where he is headed!

- In verse 8, he starts to tell us some things about him, but first he interrupts himself to add the words: **whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming.**

2. Here are two ways that man of sin will be destroyed—

a. First, that he will be consumed (future active) by the breath of the Lord's mouth—probably pointing to a gradual weakening of his dominion.

- The breath of Christ's mouth could refer to his decree where He speaks destruction upon him—but more than likely, it refers to the word of truth preached by faithful ministers.
- He sends forth the gospel and exposes the lies and the deception of the man of sin so that the man of sin loses his credibility and authority.
 - His pretended power and his lying wonders are seen in their true colours, and his wickedness, cruelty, and greed are fully exposed so that few are interested in following him anymore.

b. And his being destroyed (also future active) by the brightness of Christ's coming refers to his final and complete destruction.

- When Jesus comes at the last day, it will be to judge.
- The light of truth will break forth in all its brilliance and every conscience will see clearly what is right and what is wrong.
 - It is then that the antichrist, and Satan who led him, and all those who followed him, will be cast into the pit of destruction to suffer their punishment forever for not believing the truth but for having pleasure in unrighteousness (v. 12).

3. All heaven and earth—all the saints that is—will then break forth into rejoicing and praise in the triumph of our exalted Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

- As it says in Revelation 19:1-3: **After these things I heard a loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, saying, "Alleluia! Salvation and glory and honor and power belong to the Lord our God! 2 For true and righteous are His judgments,**

because He has judged the great harlot who corrupted the earth with her fornication; and He has avenged on her the blood of His servants shed by her.”³ Again they said, “Alleluia! Her smoke rises up forever and ever!”

TRANS> So you see what is revealed to us about this great apostasy.

- But this might raise a question for us...

II. Why do we need to be told about this?

- Surely it is not superfluous if God has put it in His word, but why do we need to know about this great apostasy?

- Here are three reasons:

A. First, we need to know about it so that we will not stumble on account of false expectations about the kingdom of Christ in this world.

1. We might suppose that now that Jesus has come and has called us to go into all the world and make disciples, things would all advance smoothly...

a. Our Lord is reigning and he will not let His church fail!

- Certainly, there was the great apostasy of Israel that led to the destruction of the temple and the exile...

- And there was the great apostasy of the Jews when Jesus Christ came and they rejected Him.

- But now that Christ has been raised to lead His church, we might expect things to be different.

- Did He not tell us that He has all authority and power in heaven and earth and that we would carry the gospel to all nations and that many would enter His kingdom from the north, south, east, and west?

- He certainly did!

b. But He also revealed to us that there would be great apostasy even in His kingdom.

- He told us that there would be many false sons in the kingdom who would profess Him and then turn away when it got too hard or the world got too enticing.

- He told us that there would be many false prophets who would even come in His name and that many would follow them—

- so many that if the days were not shortened, even the elect would be deceived.

- And here in our text, Paul speaks of this great apostasy that is spoken of elsewhere in the scriptures.

- Paul's words are Christ's revelation to us that there will be a great apostasy.

2. Knowing about this great apostasy in advance guards the true saints (true born again believers) from two errors.

a. First, it keeps us from supposing that the apostasy must be right because so many Christians are following it.

- This is actually an argument that those who worship idols and venerate saints use to this day.
 - How could the whole church be wrong about this, they say?
- It is very easy when lots of people are following an error—and when they are saints—to be drawn along with them—because it is what everybody believes.
 - That is why we must always stick closely to God’s Word.
- b. The second error that knowing about the apostasy in advance keeps us from is supposing that our Lord Jesus has failed to protect His church.
 - To think like this can obviously make us uneasy and insecure
 - But we know that our Lord has not failed to protect His church.
 - He rather ordered the apostasy in order to draw away those who do not love the truth or believe the gospel, but who had pleasure in unrighteousness.
- And that brings us to the second way that it is important for us to know that there would be a great apostasy in the church...
- B. That we might make sure that we love the truth and do not have pleasure in unrighteousness.
 1. I put the question you plainly—**do you love the truth?**
 - Is the gospel precious to you, or it is something you are rather indifferent about?
 - Perhaps you are in high school and you don’t care much about the gospel.
 - You don’t see what all the fuss is about—and why it matters that Jesus died on the cross two thousand years ago.
 - You have a lot of important things to think about—your job, your career, your video games, your friends, your clothes...
 - I tell you, if that is how it is with you, you are just waiting for deception to sweep you away...
 - It may come in the form of traditional religion that holds that we are all good decent people and should just try to all get along...
 - Or it may come in believing in evolution and that we really can’t know that God created us.
 - Or maybe in one of those false churches that teaches that, yes, Jesus forgives us, but that we do not need to repent of sins...that is just legalism to say that.
 - But if you love the truth and have no pleasure in unrighteousness, then you will follow Jesus with joy and you will rejoice in His saving grace.
 - You will recognise all the false gospels and false religions for what they are.
 - You belong to Jesus, and He will keep you—it will not be possible for you to be deceived.

C. And the third reason that He has told you about the great apostasy in advance is so that He might assure you in advance that it will fail.

1. When the apostate church is strong and powerful, it can seem invincible.
 - We can feel ourselves quite powerless against their persecutions.
 - We can feel inferior against their received beliefs that are held by people that are much smarter than we are.
 - We can see their prosperity in the world for a time—their authority, their influence, their success year after year, and it seems like they will never fail.
2. But Jesus, who has told us about all of their success in advance in His word, has also told us that He will destroy them with the breath of His mouth and the brightness of His coming.
 - We have seen already how Paul is eager to make this point in our text.
 - We need to keep that before us with assurance when they rise to power.
 - We need to know that it will not last—that they may be like gods now, but that they will die like men.

TRANS> So you see, it is very important for us to know about the great apostasy.

- That we might not stumble, that we might be motivated to make sure that we love the truth, that we might know that the apostasy will be brought to ruin by our Lord.
- But now there is another question that arises from looking at this subject today.

III. When is this great apostasy? Has it already happened, or is it yet ahead of us?

A. Those are difficult questions.

1. The church does not have a good record at trying to understand the particular details of prophecy.
 - Many of the Jews thought that when Christ came, He would reign on an earthly throne and all the nations would immediately be brought under Him.
 - Even what we have been looking at today reminds us of how wrong that view is.
2. Many have sought to determine who the antichrist is in their own generation.
 - They have worked up the scriptures to speak of events in their own day.
 - And they have been wrong.
 - Sometimes, they have been destructively wrong and have even led people away from Christ.
3. All this to say that we need to be very careful about prophecy and about interpreting it.
 - We need to look at what is clear and not fall into speculation.

B. So what is clear from the testimony of scripture?

1. First of all, we are told expressly that there are and will be many antichrists.
 - John uses those exact words when he notes that we are in the last hour—the final phase of history.
 - **1 Jo 2:18 Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour.**

- This is obvious in history.
 - Already, there were those like the Nicolaitans who led many people astray (Rev 2:15), or like Diotrephes who loved to have the pre-eminence and did not receive the apostles (3 John 1:9).
 - And there was Marcion who rejected the Old Testament in the second century,
 - Arius who led many in the church to reject the deity of Christ in the third century,
 - Pelagius who denied original sin in the fourth century.
 - Today, we have those like Charles Russel who denied the deity of Christ and founded the Jehovah witnesses,
 - Liberalism that denies the inspiration and authority of scripture,
 - or someone like Rob Bell who gains a following by denying eternal punishment in hell.
 - The list of such movements is endless.
2. But the closest example we have of one that fits all that is said here about the man of sin (the particular man) is the pope of the Roman Catholic Church.
- a. He arose and a great apostasy with him when the Roman Empire diminished (v. 6-7).
 - Once the empire began to diminish, the bishop of Rome began to be manifested as the one who claimed to have authority over all.
 - b. He claimed the authority that the man of sin is said to claim to himself in v. 4.
 - 1) He certainly claimed authority over all that is called God or all that is worshipped and he certainly set himself up in the temple of God as God.
 - He demanded veneration and kisses on his feet and obedience from kings and rulers and all other bishops.
 - And he punished those who did not submit to him with fines, imprisonment, death, and eternal curses.
 - 2) Listen even to the blasphemous titles he took to himself that prove he set himself up as God:
 - Dominus Deus noster papa—Our Lord God the pope;
 - Deus alter in terrâ—Another God on earth;
 - Idem est dominium Dei et papae—The dominion of God and the pope are the same.
 - 3) He claimed for himself authority to dispense against the apostles and the Old Testament, and claimed that the Scriptures were inferior to his decrees, and only have authority through him.
 - 4) Calvin says: Scripture declares that God is the alone Lawgiver (James 4:12) who is able to save and to destroy; the alone King, whose office it is to govern souls by his word. It represents him as the author of all sacred rites; it teaches that righteousness and salvation are to be sought from Christ alone; and it assigns, at the same time, the manner and means.

There is not one of these things that the Pope does not affirm to be under his authority. He boasts that it is his to bind consciences with such laws as seem good to him, and subject them to everlasting punishment. As to sacraments, he either institutes new ones, according to his own inclination, or he corrupts and deforms those which had been instituted by Christ -- nay, sets them aside altogether, that he may substitute in their place the sacrileges which he has invented. He contrives means of attaining salvation that are altogether at variance with the doctrine of the Gospel; and, in fine, he does not hesitate to change the whole of religion at his own pleasure. What is it, I pray you, for one to lift up himself above everything that is reckoned God, if the Pope does not do so? When he thus robs God of his honor, he leaves him nothing remaining but an empty title of Deity, while he transfers to himself the whole of his power.

- 5) Just think of it, he actually devised alternate ways of salvation—
 - by paying money to him to purchase indulgences for forgiveness of sin or to bring the dead out of purgatory.
 - What is this but to claim the authority to be a Saviour a forgive sin?
 - c. Popes were known to be men of sin—full of pride and immorality, of lavish indulgence—so he is the son of lawlessness and the man of sin.
 - d. And when it comes to miracles, signs, and wonders, Dr. Thomas Manton gives examples of popes confirming seven points of popish doctrine by miracles: Pilgrimages, prayers for the dead, purgatory, the invocation of saints, the adoration of images, the adoration of the host, and the primacy of the pope.
 - e. And since the reformation, we have seen him being consumed by the breath of Christ as little by little, his lies have been exposed and his sin uncovered.
3. Is the pope of Rome indeed *the* antichrist?
- The only thing he is possibly lacking is that he did not manage to bring the eastern portion of the church under his sway.
 - They certainly had their own problems and their own heresies that grew up with the Roman church in the west, but they did not submit to the pope's authority.
 - This may still be *the* falling away that is spoken of, for the east certainly did fall away then too...
 - But it is at least possible that the popes are only antichrists and that *the* antichrist is yet future to us.
 - And that when he comes, the entire church will fall under his dominion—except for the elect people of God who love the truth and have no pleasure in unrighteousness.
 - There is no clear leader that is visible today in the church, but there certainly is widespread apostasy,

- And it may be that an individual will arise as the antichrist and sweep them all under his authority who love not the truth and, though baptised into the church, do not believe the gospel.
 - This is all in God's hands.
- C. Uncertainty about the fulfilment does not change the application of this passage which we covered in the second point and which I repeat here.
1. That we should not stumble when we see widespread apostasy and suppose that we must be wrong because so many Christians are following it.
 2. That we should rather make sure that we are among those who have received the love of the truth, who believe the gospel, and have not pleasure in disobedience—lest we be swept away in apostasy.
 3. That we need to go forward with confidence in our triumphant king who will consume the man of sin and all who follow him with the breath of His mouth and with the brightness of His coming.
 - What a glorious Saviour He is who bled and died for us that we might have life and who is coming again to judge the living and the dead and to gather us to Himself to live in glory with Him forever.
 - Let us give our adoration to Him, not to some antichrist who tries to take His place!
 - Love the truth—Love the gospel—Love the one true Saviour whom God sent from heaven—believe on Him and you will never perish.