

## **The Rise of Evil Cannot Thwart the Reign of God (2 Thessalonians 2:1-12)**

### **Matthew Williams**

Over the years, various people have asked me, “Pastor, as a Christian, should we celebrate Halloween or not?” I hate to break it to you, but the Bible doesn’t provide the kind of answer you’re hoping for – a straight up or down vote on observing the holiday. Halloween, in that sense, is no different than dating, clothing, R-rated movies, stem-cell research, and a thousand other realms of life where Scripture doesn’t give us the list of do’s and don’ts we might prefer. But that doesn’t mean we’re free to do whatever we want.

Why not? Because the wisdom of Scripture often comes to us in the form of principles that we must wrestle to apply with the help of God’s Spirit and God’s people. On the surface, it’s a harder row to hoe. But in the long run, it advances the very thing God most cares about – enjoying a growing relationship with him. Since relationship is the goal, the Lord is just as (if not more) interested in the wisdom of the questions we ask in our decision-making process than he is in the final decision itself.

Here’s a critical one we need to ask: Are the choices I’m currently making in my life awakening or numbing my heart to the spiritual gravity of evil? Why do I urge you to ask that question? Because your entire life (whether you realize it or not) plays out in the midst of a cosmic conflict between two spiritual powers: the power of God and the power of Satan.

There’s a reason the struggle between good and evil in some of our most beloved movies and novels resonates so deeply. Though the story itself might be pretend, the context couldn’t be more real. In 2 Thessalonians 1, Paul reminds us of the cosmic conflict between good and evil and that human history will culminate in a decisive act of divine judgment where good will prevail because King Jesus will prevail. Evil will be punished, righteousness will be rewarded, and the Lord alone will be exalted on that day.

The day of the Lord is good, the day of the Lord is guaranteed, and the day of the Lord has yet to come. We’re still waiting. We’re living in the gap between the inauguration of God’s kingdom in birth of Christ and the consummation of God’s kingdom in the return of Christ. 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 helps us know, in part, what to do in the gap.

**As we wait for the day of the Lord, take comfort in knowing God reigns over every evil power.**

How do we know that? Paul gives us at least three reasons in these verses. First, we know God reigns over evil powers because...

### **1) GOD SOVEREIGNLY ORDAINS THE RISE OF EVIL POWERS (verses 1-4)**

When Paul writes in verse 1, “Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him,” he begins addressing one of his greatest pastoral concerns for the young church in Thessalonica. Evidently, they thought the day of the Lord had already come. Exactly why they believed as much, Paul doesn’t say, but the resulting dilemma is understandable. Our entire hope of deliverance from persecution and suffering on account of our faith depends on the judgment King Jesus will mete out when he returns.

Don’t lose heart, the Lord will vindicate you. That’s Paul’s point in 2 Thessalonians 1:5-12. However, if in fact Jesus has already returned (unbeknownst to them) and they’re still suffering, that raises all manner of doubt and confusion as to whether their faith has been in vain. 2 Thessalonians 2:2 suggests they were “shaken in mind” and “alarmed.” No joke. I would be too. False teaching, no matter the topic, causes untold damage to the people of God.

Paul doesn’t want them to be “quickly shaken in mind or alarmed” when someone says the day of the Lord has already come. Why not? Because he knows the day of the Lord has yet to come! So how does he comfort the Thessalonians? “Trust me guys, I’ll let you know when Jesus comes back. In the meantime, get off Facebook and stop believing all the fake news.” No. Like a good pastor, he equips them with God’s Word so they can know what is true and discern what is true long after Paul has left the scene.

Through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he tells them two things that will most certainly happen before Jesus returns. Therefore, until these two things happen, you can rest assured the day of the Lord has NOT come. Verse 3, “For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction...”

Paul is light on detail here, which has prompted no shortage of speculation throughout church history, so I remind you, friend: Wisdom lies in heeding what

God has revealed, not in guessing about what he has kept hidden. Deuteronomy 29:29, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law." The Lord reveals exactly what we need to know about the future in order to pursue godliness in the present.

In this case, Paul's not alone. Biblical authors from Daniel and Ezekiel to the Apostle John join him in telling us to expect a universal, climactic rebellion against the authority of God at the end of the age. The trajectory of mankind apart from God isn't onward and upward to glory. It's further and deeper into sin. Yet the simple fact God says as much is comforting. He knows the future. Why? Because he has ordained the future, conforming it to the unsearchable perfection of his will. Isaiah 46:9-10, "I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning..." He never does evil, yet he sovereignly ordains the rise of evil.

No act of human rebellion, however great, escapes the sovereign will of Almighty God. Remember that, friend, when you experience acute suffering at the hands of evil men. God is not surprised or taken off-guard. He is not dialing up a plan B for your life. You may never understand why he permitted something so painful to happen. Yet there is a world of comfort in knowing the rise of evil is not a threat to the purposes of God. It is part of the purposes of God, even when we don't understand why or how.

His sovereign will includes the rise of the "man of lawlessness," who will come to power on earth before Jesus returns. Verse 4 tells us he will be the personification of evil, demanding the worship that is due God alone by "proclaiming himself to be God." Here again, Paul is not alone. His words in verse 4 are clear allusion to Daniel 11:36 where he reports the evil God revealed to him would happen in the future.

"And the king shall do as he wills. He shall exalt himself and magnify himself above every god, and shall speak astonishing things against the God of gods. He shall prosper till the indignation is accomplished, for what is decreed shall be done."

Apocalyptic literature in the Bible is full of symbols. Where those symbols repeat in similar ways, it's usually because the biblical authors are describing the same thing from different angles no less than you might if you described your home or car from different sides. By the time you finish describing the fourth side, a careful listener will recognize you're talking about the same house or the same car.

The way Daniel describes “the king” who exalts himself in the vision of Daniel 11 sounds a lot like the “king of bold face” in Daniel 8, and the “little horn” from Daniel 7. Jesus picks up the same imagery in Matthew 24 when he talks about the “abomination of desolation,” which sounds a whole lot like the activity of the “antichrist” John describes in 1 John 2 and is nearly identical to the activity of the “beast that rises from the bottomless pit” in Revelation 11 and 17.

Does all of that mean we should expect a little horn, a king of bold face, a king who exalts himself, an abomination of desolation, a man of lawlessness, an antichrist, and a beast to literally enter human history in some sort of demonic parade? No. They’re symbols and together they tell us two things.

**FIRST**, the recurring nature of the symbolic language in verse 4 points to a pattern of wicked rebellion against the Lord that is present today and will continue until Jesus returns and makes all things new.

**SECOND**, the distinct title and chronological character of verse 4 (the day of the Lord will not come until the man of lawlessness is revealed) indicate the present pattern of idolatry will culminate in a future appearance of a figure who takes rebellion against God to an unprecedented height before Jesus returns.

Before Jesus returns, we should expect wickedness to increase until it is personified in a final act of rebellion against the Lord. Why? Because that’s precisely what God has sovereignly ordained will happen. We don’t know everything we might want to know about the future rise of evil before Jesus returns. We do know the day is fixed and certain because it will come after certain events and not before them.

What does that tell us? God knows the future because he has sovereignly ordained the future, including the rise of evil powers. The very fact he reveals as much to us in advance is intended to comfort our hearts. You don’t know all that will happen. Jesus does. It’s all part of his sovereign plan. And he will intervene at just the right time.

In a sense, the way Paul comforts the Thessalonians here is akin to the way I cared for my son, Ethan, during his first backpacking trip last week to Mt. Pleasant. “Buddy, the trail will be pretty flat, then it will get a bit steeper, then really steep right before we get to the top.” Did my words answer all his questions? No. But what did they do? They helped him know what to expect so he wouldn’t think we had missed Mt. Pleasant or would never make it to Mt. Pleasant when the hiking

got really tough. Dad has a plan. Dad knows what's going to happen. When my legs really start to hurt, I'll know we're almost there.

Of course, the analogy eventually breaks down. Why? Because as his dad, I have absolutely no control over the hardship, the physical pain and suffering, that stand between him and the top of Mt. Pleasant. I can tell him what to expect. I explain the plan. But I'm just as much along for the ride, at the mercy of every massive rock and fallen tree along the way, as he is.

Not so with our God, my friends, and his relationship with the power of evil arrayed against us, past, present, and future. Does God sovereignly ordain the future? Absolutely. That's the first reason we take comfort in knowing he reigns over every evil power. But there's more.

## **2) GOD MAINTAINS COMPLETE CONTROL OVER EVIL POWERS (verses 5-8)**

Sometimes I fear we carry around the muddled notion that in the cosmic conflict between God and Satan, good and evil, the only thing we know for sure is that in the end, God wins. My friend, we have a far better assurance. Listen again to verses 6-7 as Paul reminds the Thessalonians of what he taught them previously. "And you know what is restraining him (the man of lawlessness) now so that he may be revealed in his time. 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."

We shouldn't expect to fully understand everything to which Scripture references or alludes as if our frail minds were sufficient to grasp the mind of the Lord. We should expect, on account of the sufficiency of God's revelation and the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit, to clearly understand all we need to understand in order to glorify God and enjoy a growing relationship with him. In that regard, while we don't know everything Paul told the Thessalonians when he visited them, the main takeaways are crystal clear. Remember, the divinely intended effect of these words isn't speculation. It's comfort.

**FIRST, the man of lawlessness does not have final authority. Jesus does.** In verse 6, Paul refers to "what" is restraining him. In verse 7, he speaks of "who" is restraining him. We need not know how he is being restrained or who is personally restraining him in order to take comfort in knowing he is presently being restrained. What should that tell you? Even the climactic personification of evil, the very worst wickedness imaginable, isn't in control.

He, no less than every other principality and power in the universe – evil and good – cannot move or act until their time. Why not? Because every power in the universe – past, present, and future – is ultimately subject to the authority of God.

There are innumerable situations in this life, long before the end when the coming man of lawlessness is revealed, where we experience the power of the wickedness he personifies. Trouble without and trouble within, the “mystery of lawlessness is already at work.” Marriages are broken by infidelity. Hearts are shattered by sexual abuse. A lifestyle of joyful, sacrificial service as followers of Christ is replaced by a quiet greed that fights to achieve our best life now. We deny our fellow image-bearers the simple expressions of kindness and love the image of God within them justly calls forth. And the list goes on. It can feel like we’re all being carried along in a raging sea of evil.

Verses 6-7 remind us that’s not true. Both the man of lawlessness in verse 6 and the mystery of lawlessness in verse 7 are restrained, subjected, governed, and controlled. Their power is not supreme. The power of God is supreme and the authority he exercises over every evil power through the victorious reign of his Son, Jesus Christ, cannot be thwarted.

Psalm 2:1–6, “Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying, ‘Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.’ He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, ‘As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.’”

Brothers and sisters, the ascended Christ sits on the throne of the universe. The powers of evil do not and will not. The man of lawlessness does not have final authority. Jesus does.

**SECOND, the man of lawlessness will not last for long. Jesus will.** When evil personified is finally allowed to make his entrance, it will not be because Jesus failed to anticipate his arrival or lost his grip on some far-off corner of the universe. He will be revealed, he will rise to power on earth, so that the Lord Jesus (verse 8) might kill him “with the breath of his mouth” and bring him to nothing “by the appearance of his coming.” Thus, Paul refers to him back in verse 3 as the “son of destruction.”

He will not exalt himself against the Lord forever. Good and evil will not be locked in an eternal struggle where evil is mercifully “restrained,” as if the best God can do is keep evil under wraps. No, God will ultimately prevail because he has always been in complete control. Notice it’s not a violent struggle, as if Jesus and lawless one are going at it hand to hand at the end of a Jason Bourne flick. What will Jesus do? He will simply speak. He will speak an authoritative word of judgment and the most wicked power of evil imaginable will be completely destroyed by the breath of his mouth.

Your life, Christian, may play out in the midst of a cosmic struggle, but you are not a pawn battered about by two equal powers. The Lord holds you in his hand, will not let you go, and will give no quarter to all who oppose him. No evil will befall you today, at the end of the world, or any point between that is not under the complete control of King Jesus. As you wait for the day of the Lord, take comfort in knowing God reigns over every evil power because he maintains complete control over evil powers.

### **3) GOD ACCOMPLISHES HIS DIVINE JUDGMENT THROUGH EVIL POWERS (verses 9-12)**

Of all the reasons we know God reigns, the one that comes into clear view in verses 9-12 may be the most stunning. His reign over evil is so extensive, so pervasive, so total and complete that he isn’t accomplishing his will despite evil activity. He is accomplishing his will through evil activity. To see how that works, let’s ask three simple questions.

#### **Question #1: Who is deceiving those who are perishing? Answer: Satan is.**

Verse 9 tells us Satan, the archenemy of God, is ultimately behind the activity of the man of lawlessness. The lawless one’s activity is Satan’s activity. He’s not a rogue agent. He’s a front for the father of lies. From the fall of man onward, Satan has been at work, seeking to undermine God’s kingdom and stealing for himself the worship God alone deserves. So it comes as no surprise that he presents the lawless one as an evil messiah, an antichrist of sorts.

Notice in verse 9 he too has a “coming” just like Jesus at the end of verse 8. He appears to wield tremendous power no less than Jesus and proves as much with signs and wonders of his own. But there’s a problem. They’re false. They’re real signs, real wonders, but the one they appear to authenticate is a total pretender.

He acts like he's god, but he's not. His mission isn't to bring life. His mission is to bring death. It's the complete opposite of what Jesus came to do. Everything he's doing is an act of "wicked deception" (verse 10).

Though we're still waiting for him to be revealed, remember the "mystery" the principle of lawlessness is "already at work." What does that tell us? The "life" sin appears to offer us is a total lie. Anything you or I choose to worship, to live for, to chase after to satisfy our soul instead of Jesus will never delivery as promised. It will only lead to death and that by Satan's design. Financial security will not save you. Sexual exploits will not save you. Chasing a body image, earning the approval of man, or a life of ease and relaxation will not save you.

What did Satan promise Adam and Eve in the garden? If you eat of the fruit, you will be like God! What actually happened? The image of God they already bore was completely corrupted and they were justly condemned to death by their Creator. Rebellion against God's authority isn't just wrong. It's fatal. The entire enterprise of sin is an exercise in deception and always has been.

**Question #2: Why are those whom Satan deceives perishing? Answer: Because they refused to love the truth and be saved.**

Our deepest spiritual problem isn't ignorance. It's idolatry. The "truth" Paul references in verse 10 isn't a body of knowledge that exist apart from God and by which everything in the universe is tested, God included. God is truth. He's the standard. The only way we know what is true is because God has revealed what is true by revealing himself, first in creation and then in an even greater way in Jesus.

1 John 5:20, "And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life." That means when Paul says, "they refused to love the truth," he means they refused to love Jesus.

Friends, if you're wrestling on an intellectual level with the claims of Christianity, I'm glad you're here. I hope some of what you've heard this morning helps answer some of your spiritual questions. I would welcome the opportunity to talk about any objection you may have to embracing faith in Christ. But know this. The greatest obstacle between you and life in Jesus doesn't lie in your mind. It lies in your heart.



Is believing the truth about Jesus Christ necessary? Absolutely. Romans 10:9, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." There's a reason Paul describes those who are perishing in verse 12 as those who did not "believe" the truth.

But he also describes the exact same group of people back in verse 10 as those who refused to "love" the truth. So are we saved through belief or love? Which one is it? The answer is "yes" because it's two sides of the same coin. Believing the truth, genuine faith in Jesus, is not a mere posture of the mind. It doesn't just acknowledge Jesus or agree with Jesus. It's a posture of the heart. It prizes Jesus.

Saving faith believes he is true and loves him accordingly. There's only one alternative to loving the Righteous One. Loving unrighteousness, or as Paul says at the end of verse 12, taking "pleasure in unrighteousness." Understood together, verses 10 and 12 guard us from thinking all is well because we assent to a set of religious facts in our mind when we really love something more than Jesus in our heart. There is no such thing as genuine belief in Jesus apart from supreme love for Jesus. If you don't delight in Jesus as your Savior, you will perish under the righteous wrath of God.

**Question #3: Why does Satan deceive men and women who are already perishing? Answer: Because God is using Satan to guarantee their condemnation.**

With this question we finally arrive at the heart of the third point – God accomplishes his divine judgment through evil powers. Look back at verse 10. Those who are headed for eternal death under the wrath of God are perishing "because they refused to love the truth and so be saved." Verse 11, "Therefore, God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all (all those who are perishing) may be condemned."

There is both a sober warning and an incredible encouragement in that verse, friends. The warning is that if you harden your heart toward the Lord, God will harden your heart toward him. It's an expression of his righteous judgment. The encouragement is that even the wicked deception of evil personified, the Satanic work of the man of lawlessness, is fulfilling the purposes of God despite the fact that there is nothing Satan hates more than the purposes of God.



Think about it. Who is doing the deceiving? Satan and all who serve him, the coming lawless one included. But why is he deceiving them? (Verse 11) Because God sent him. The “strong delusion” he works and effects is exactly what Satan wants to do because he is wicked. But in an even greater way it is exactly what God wants him to do because he is righteous, which is why I say God accomplishes his divine judgment through evil powers.

Friends, we shouldn't be surprised when God uses the greatest evil imaginable to accomplish something exceedingly good. It's what the cross of Christ proves. The murder of the Son of the God was the greatest evil imaginable. Yet what did God do? He used that unspeakable act of wicked rebellion to accomplish a glorious work of righteous salvation. His reign over evil powers is that great and that good.

## **CONCLUSION**

Friend, I don't know how aware you are on a daily basis of the cosmic conflict in which you live. Every moment of your life is a moment of spiritual warfare – you are either fighting for Satan and against God or for God and against Satan in all you think, feel, and do. If you are fighting to believe and love Jesus, longing for his return, you have a cause for great comfort – God reigns over every evil power. He sovereignly ordains the rise of evil powers. He maintains complete control over evil powers. He accomplishes his divine judgment through evil powers.

If you are not fighting to believe and love Jesus, if you're not longing for his return, you have cause for great alarm – God reigns over every evil power. As it stands, you are living in opposition to him. You might not feel wicked. But the posture of your heart toward your Creator is wicked, and God will not allow the wicked to go unpunished. The day of the Lord is coming, friends. Whether God's coming triumph over evil powers is a cause for unspeakable joy or unspeakable sorrow in your heart on that day is up to you. Do not try to oppose his reign. Submit to his reign. You will not be disappointed.